

COMMUNAL JOURNEYS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCE
OF LIVING AND WORKING IN L'ARCHE

by

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Abstract

In spite of the frequent usage of the word community to describe various groups and social networks in our society, the nature of the experience of community living has been largely unexplored. As a response to this lack of research, this inquiry attempted to answer the question of what community meant to six members of the residential communities of L'Arche, an international network of communities where people with and without disabilities live and work together. L'Arche was selected because it represents an extreme effort to establish a whole way of life based on communal values. The phenomenological research method incorporated twelve in-depth, open-ended interviews. Analysis of gathered information revealed six themes and 17 subthemes. The themes describe the participants' experiences of making a purposeful decision, adopting a communal way of life, deepening their spiritual and religious orientations, enhancing personal growth, facing personal limitations, and being involved in conflicts and disagreements. Each of these themes contains from one to four subthemes which are dynamically interdependent and revelatory of the complexity of the shared experience. The pattern described is a more complete picture of the meaning of the experience of living and working in L'Arche than previously available in the research literature.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"Plants have roots, spiders have webs and people have relationships."

William Blake

In an account of his experience of loneliness one of my clients asked, "Will I ever find a place where I belong?" Counsellors hear similar statements regularly from clients who feel anxious, lonely, or discouraged: "I feel as if I am all alone in this world... I'm not important to anyone... I don't fit anywhere..." These statements are often associated with a number of psychological conditions, including depression, lack of personal meaning, and low self-esteem (Sarason, 1974). However, upon closer examination such statements also appear to reflect a common phenomenon of modern life: the loss of a sense of community.

The loss of a sense of community or of communal relations is a major theme in our modern culture. In fact, Sarason (1974) claims that "the absence or the dilution of a psychological sense of community is the most destructive dynamic in the lives of people in our society" (p. 96). This loss has been associated with many contemporary problems: social anomie, isolation and loneliness, loss of local autonomy and personal involvement in one's community, increasing prevalence of personality and emotional disorders, and perhaps most seriously, a growing inability to enter into cooperative, authentic, and interdependent relationships with other human beings (Cushman, 1990; Glynn, 1981; Maher, 1992). This erosion of a sense of community has been attributed to several causes, and notably to the rise of industrialism and mass consumerism, the growth of a mobile society, the anonymity of city living, the weakening of

traditional institutions, and to centralized bureaucratic structures (Maher, 1992).

Many authors (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985; Lasch, 1978) have described how the hyper-individualism of North American society and the emergence of a self-centered "me-istic" worldview have undermined our ability to relate to one another and to make sense of our lives. As Hargrove (1984) argues, "While it has become a duty to develop the self, the very concentration on the individual has precluded the possibility of developing the social character of the self, thus maiming and crippling what is understood to be the essence of humanity" (pp. ix-x).

According to McKnight (1987, 1994), Schwartz (1992), and Taylor, Bogan, and Racino (1991), our widespread reliance on professional and social services has also dramatically contributed to the weakening of our associational ties. McKnight (1987) argues,

As we think about ourselves, our community and institutions, many of us recognize that we have been degraded because our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded in for the right to clienthood and consumer status. Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbours to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians, we lost much of our power to be vital center of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and, instead, made some of us into the objects of good works -servants of those who serve. (p. 58)

As the power and influence of institutionalized service systems have grown, our communities and their associations have declined. Yet they need not necessarily be in opposition and cooperative initiatives are not only possible but much needed, for as McKnight (1994) states,

To build a healthful society we need two tools. One is a system. The other is a community. Neither can substitute for the other, but systems can displace communities or enhance them. To enhance community health, we need a new breed of modest health professionals, people who respect the integrity and wisdom of citizens and their associations. They will understand the kinds of information that will enable citizens to design and solve problems. They will direct some systems resources to enhancing associational powers. And, above all, they will focus upon magnifying the gifts, capacities, and assets of local citizens and their associations. (p. 25)

With our society becoming less affluent and increasingly failing to meet our basic needs for relationships, work, and physical security, "community building" may indeed soon be recognized as among the most crucial issues humans have to face in this decade and in the next century. Echoing this concern, Poplin (1972) believes that "the answer to many of our deepest problems is to restore the common bonds which seem no longer to typify the social life of modern communities" (p. 7). But is it possible once again to achieve a sense of community, belongingness and emotional security in our communities or is it merely wishful thinking? Is our belief in the strong "common bonds" of the past only a metaphor for a deep-seated need for full and open emotional relations with others? Have they even ever existed? And what do the social sciences have to tell us about community phenomena and communal living experiences? Unfortunately, studies of community development processes are rare (Heller, 1989). In comparison to the 1970's when social scientists made important contributions to the study of communal phenomena and processes (e.g., Kanter, 1972, 1973; Zablocki, 1980a, 1980b), there has been very little systematic research in that area in the last 15 years. Psychology, in particular, appears to have chosen to overlook community

as a research topic in spite of its crucial importance for individual and societal well-being, for with the exception of a few journal articles and a few brief discussions in longer volumes, community has not been part of its conversations, its literature, or its research.

As a response to this lack of research, this study will attempt to answer the question of what community means to a number of members from a community of L'Arche, an international network of spiritually based, intentional communities where people with and without developmental disabilities have chosen to live and work together. L'Arche has been selected because it represents an extreme effort to establish a whole way of life based on communal values. In addition, whereas few communal ventures in North America last longer than a few years (Zablocki, 1980a), L'Arche has been remarkably stable and successful since its inception in 1964 and has since developed into an international network of "service communities" spread over the five continents. The potential significance and the complexity and richness of the L'Arche model also extends beyond a mere service to the disabled; the lifestyle of L'Arche with its emphasis on the creation of intimate ties, on helping individuals who are disabled develop their abilities, on enhancing social responsibilities, and on translating personal values and beliefs into concrete shared goals and actions, is very much in tension with most of our utilitarian post-industrial and bureaucratic culture (Risse, 1981). It represents not only an alternative to traditional services and domestic arrangements, but, more importantly, seeks a radical restructuring of the entire lives of its members. Consequently, it may provide a unique laboratory in which to investigate how to institute a community vision and how far we can stretch interpersonal and psychological boundaries in

a natural social environment. It may also afford us a window into the malleability of the human personality.

The communal household is no doubt the rare exception in the mid-1990s. Although there are no polls or government statistics to guide us, it is safe to estimate that these households represent a very small percentage of the population. So why would researchers want to bother looking so carefully at a small, unrepresentative corner of our society? There are several reasons to study community living. First, a socio-psychological understanding of communal relations and organizations could benefit those currently involved in this way of life. Second, such research may also guide efforts to adapt communal living principles and structures to non-communal or partly communal organizations. Although the conditions required to facilitate the intentional creation of a sense of community in communal groups unmistakably differ from those of other organizations, they may nonetheless be adapted to professionally administered institutions (e.g., nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals) that have traditionally overstressed organization and structure, and so often hampered participation, involvement and a sense of self-development among their clients.

A third reason to study communal living is that it may benefit the growing number of residents and workers of shared housing programs for various demographic groups (i.e., people discharged from psychiatric hospitals, the developmentally disabled, adolescents in trouble, elders, or single parents). While shared housing is often advocated for these groups, there is still a dearth of information about how to make shared living work, and intentional movements such as L'Arche could provide useful knowledge and guidance in this area (Schwartz, 1993). This information

may also assist those who are intentionally creating community through cooperative household, personal and professional support groups, and collaborative projects such as communal gardens, electronic networks or neighborhood improvement programs to name but a few.

A fourth reason to study communal groups is that research may act as a safeguard against the excess and abuse that can take place in a communal setting. Throughout history, there has been many instances of the negative effects of strong communal identity. When group rights and group identity are threatened, the emotional power to belong to the group can easily be distorted or exploited, and has led countless people throughout history to fight and even die for the sake of their various group distinctions. The tragedies of Jonestown, Waco, and more recently of the Solar Temple, are only three horrifying reminders of the potential destructiveness of group thinking when fueled by fanaticism, greed and intolerance. This "dark" side of human nature and human communities underscores the crucial importance for any group (of any size for that matter) to know itself, and especially to recognize its tendency to scapegoat or marginalize those who are different, if it does intend to build communities that enrich rather than harm its members. The study of cooperative and communal ventures that have endured over time and are recognized for their abilities to articulate and sustain a set of social and moral values would add to the limited available information about the functioning of such small groups in the natural social world. It could also identify factors that contribute to safety and growth in these settings.

The personal "beginning" of this study has its origin in a three year period during which I lived as assistant at L'Arche in the late 1980's. This involvement was a profoundly valuable, demanding, and formative

experience that made me fully aware of the greatness and difficulty of living in close relationship with others. It also reinforced my conviction that the weakening of our principal institutions (e.g., nuclear and extended family, educational system, health care system) and the resultant disintegration of cultural/moral traditions and socialization processes, make groups and associations uniquely important today as sources of experience, meaning, and empowerment, and as a key to social and moral development. Because they focus on individuals as relational beings and rely on relationships for growth, learning, and change, groups and associations in general (and group living in particular) may point to alternatives to the rootlessness of much of urban life. They may teach us important lessons about what may be done to enhance greater cohesiveness in our natural neighborhoods and relational communities.

This study did not intend, however, to demonstrate the superiority or effectiveness of community living as a lifestyle, nor did it intend to focus on its deficiencies or failures. Rather, my aim was simply to illustrate as accurately as possible the phenomena studied. It was my hope that this would enable the reader to get a clearer understanding of community living at L'Arche and of the complex and elusive phenomena of community.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In this section I shall seek to describe and discuss intentional communities and the L'Arche movement. For our purpose an intentional community will be defined as "a group of persons associated together [voluntarily] for the purpose of establishing a whole way of life. As such, it shall display to some degree, each of the following characteristics: common geographical location; economic interdependence; social, cultural, educational, and spiritual inter-exchange of uplift and development" (Zablocki, 1980b, p. 19). In the literature, L'Arche communities are occasionally referred as a network of intentional communities in that they have been established with a precise purpose or intention in mind (Dunne, 1986; Schwartz, 1992; Taylor, Bogan, & Racino, 1991).

Intentional Communities

Intentional communities have a very long history, and some scholars believe communitarianism has been a recurrent social phenomenon for over two thousand years in the West (Bennett, 1975; Zablocki, 1980b). The Bruderhof and the Amish in the United States and the Mennonite Brethren and the Hutterites in Canada are among the best known formal groups for having practised communal living in North America (Miller, 1990; Redekop, 1975). Although these collective settlements have differed greatly in their philosophies, they have shared a deep-felt concern about the social ills of the larger society and the need to establish a cultural alternative to it. As Kanter (1973) states, "Practically all utopias [intentional communities] have attempted to substitute cooperation for competition, mutual support for hostility,

meaningful solidary [sic] relations for fragmented, nonexpressive relations, and involvement for isolation" (p. 5).

More recently, the 1965-1975 period witnessed a renewed interest in communitarianism as a lifestyle. This period saw the formation of thousands of (mostly short-lived) communes, and drew a great deal of attention to this alternative lifestyle. This communal movement derived in large part from the hope brought about by the counterculture for the creation of a new way of life significantly different, in many ways, from those of the dominant culture (Zicklin, 1983). The following quote by Kanter (1970) captures something typical of the idealism of the movement of the time :

The communal experience offers a provocation to conventional modes of organizing collective values, sharing cooperation rather than individual ambition or achievement. It promises a heightening of intimacy and closeness, instead of distance, impersonal and competitive relationship. It promises a return to the land, and to the natural and spiritual components of life. (p. 60)

In a longitudinal study of 60 communal living groups, Aidala and Zablocki (1991) lent support to the commonly held notion that the decision to join a commune was, at least in part, a young adulthood life cycle effect, with 78 % of their sample joining between the age of 20 and 30. The authors also emphasized the crucial importance of the historical and social-cultural circumstances of the 1965-1975 decade to explain communal participation. The most common motivation reported for choosing to live communally was "consensual community" - the desire to live with others who share similar ideals and values and to work cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared common purpose.

Although communal groups have been in quantitative decline since the 1970s, the 1994 edition of the *Directory of intentional communities* (Fellowship for Intentional Community and Communities Publications Cooperative, 1994) indicates that the search for "genuine community" is still very much present. The directory provides a description of more than 300 communities in North America, including more than 50 new communities started in the past five years. (In the absence of a comprehensive census of intentional communities, however, these data cannot form the basis of a reliable estimate of prevalence.) In his extended surveys of social trends and public attitudes, Yankelovich (1981) reported that the number of Americans searching for community stood at 47 % at the beginning of the 1980s, a significant jump of 15 % since his firm's previous survey in 1973 (p. 248). The publication of numerous popular books on community life and community development in the last decade (e.g., Peck, 1987; Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993; Whitmyer, 1993), as well as the emergence of the "Communitarian movement" in the United States (Etzioni, 1993), may also reflect a growing concern for deeper personal relationships and the reaffirmation of a set of values that we as a larger community can endorse and more actively affirm.

The nature of intentional communities. Among social studies that have focused on intentional communities, the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1972) has been particularly influential and deserves special attention. Kanter conducted intensive research on American utopian communities of the nineteenth century and on numerous contemporary communes. She investigated differences between various types of communities and discussed various issues that confront all communities.

Kanter (1972) claims that important differences exist between what she calls *retreat* communities and *service* communities. In retreat communities communal living is its own purpose; the groups live together simply in order to live together and friendship is generally the basis of solidarity between members. These communities characteristically lack a shared ideology and are usually held together by a common rejection of traditional values and traditional patterns of family and work. Usually, they do not survive for more than a few months or a few years. According to Kanter, this type of community was characteristic of most of the small hippie communes of the counterculture movement.

The service communities, on the other hand, are defined as "communes with missions" (Kanter, 1972, p. 191); they have a strong sense of common purpose, create well-developed structures, impose direction and discipline to their members, and most importantly, see their main goal as that of serving a specific population. The members' shared conceptions of community is worked out not only in the ongoing interactions and everyday routines of members, as in retreat communities, but also out of the altruistic foundations of the ideology that serve to structure and restructure the definition of community. One such community is the Windhorse project (Podvoll, 1990), a therapeutic community that cares for people with severe mental illnesses, and which is based on principles arising from the practice of meditation and Buddhism. Likewise, one might include the L'Arche communities, or inner-city groups that live communally (e.g., the Catholic Worker movement; Murray, 1990), and whose "missions" are to care for the homeless, AIDS

patients, battered women, people with disabilities or other neglected minorities, in the category of service communes.

In her study of utopian communities, Kanter (1972) thoroughly analyses the social practices of those communities that lasted the longest (33 years or more). She calls these practices, "commitment mechanisms," sorting them according to the way in which they bring the motivations of the members in harmony with the needs of the community. By adopting these practices, these utopian communities were able to socialize their members in accepting their worldview and value system, and secure relatively complete commitment. According to Kanter, service communities are much more likely to implement commitment-building practices than retreat communities and tend to have a much longer life expectancy as a result. These commitment mechanisms are mortification (e.g., resocialization, development of a new identity); transcendence (e.g., community or spirituality as a transcendent source of meaning); renunciation (e.g., rejection of relationships that weaken ties to the community); communion (e.g., high levels of communal sharing and group rituals); sacrifice (e.g., giving up certain things, such as money and privacy, as condition of membership); investment (e.g., investment of resources in the hope of personal improvement). Kanter emphasizes that no community need to adopt them all and that only a combination of these practices is necessary to insure participation of members. In a study of contemporary communes, Gardner (1978) lent support to Kanter's classification. He found that, of communes that had been in existence for three or more years, there was a consistent positive association between duration of the commune and five of the six commitment-mechanisms.

Since the early 80's, theoretical discussion and empirical investigation of communal living have been very limited. A computer-aided search of the psychological literature on this topic since 1980 identified less than 30 articles and books that concentrated on communal living as a topic of analysis and research. Much of this scholarly literature has only indirect bearing on the topic at hand: the experience of communal living in an intentional community. These reports emphasize other aspects, such as the situation of parents in communal households (Ferrar, 1982), the therapeutic efficacy of communal social structures (Francis, 1992), the motivations which lead people to live in communities (Chauchat, 1980), the use of communes as a vehicle for studying various social processes (e.g., Aidala & Zablocki, 1991; Bradley, 1987; Zicklin, 1983), or a general descriptive nature of communes (Miller, 1990). There is only one in-depth investigation of a single communal movement (Borowski, 1984).

L'Arche

The majority of books and articles written on L'Arche (e.g., Clarke, 1974; Spink, 1990; J. Vanier, 1989) are an interesting mixture of spiritual reflections, psychological insights, and anecdotal material. The work of Jean Vanier, in particular, is recognized for its depth and the richness of its reflections. He has evolved a philosophy of active spiritual life, embracing numerous aspects of human affairs: community, work, sexuality, religion and culture, social action, prayer, rituals, relationship and human development, and more. All have received his attention and Vanier writes, as Harris (1987) remarks, "with a wisdom that provokes examination of the meaning of our lives" (p. 323).

Although these writings contain significant insights, they also lack psychological concreteness, and are not based on a systematic examination of members' experience of L'Arche or derived from "objective measures". These writings were useful, however, to review the history and ideology of L'Arche. I also consulted a number of theoretical articles on L'Arche published in educational and psychological periodicals. In this review of the L'Arche literature I drew upon the works and writings of scholars (Adler, 1975; Coopersmith, 1984; de la Selle & Maurice, 1986; Downey, 1982; Dunne, 1986; Harris, 1987; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Shafer & Anundsen, 1993; Shearer, 1976; Schwartz, 1992; Sumarah, 1983/1985, 1987a, 1988; Wolfensberger, 1973) and of members of the L'Arche communities (Clarke, 1974; Egan, 1989; de Miribel, 1981, 1992; Nouwen, 1981, 1987, 1988; O'Donnell, 1990; Saint-Macary, 1981, 1987; Spink, 1990; Standley, 1983; J. Vanier, 1975, 1988, 1989; T. Vanier, 1989).

In the following sections I 1) present a brief historical overview of the movement, 2) provide an introduction to its philosophy, spirituality, and ecumenical orientation, 3) describe the common cycle of experiences that many assistants undergo in L'Arche, and 4) summarize the findings of three empirical studies on L'Arche.

The Story of L'Arche.

To speak of L'Arche and understand its history, one must first mention its founding member, Jean Vanier. Thirty years ago, Jean Vanier gave up prominent social status as the son of the former Governor-General of Canada, the late George P. Vanier, and a promising career as a university professor to live communally with Raphael and Phillippe, two men with developmental disabilities, who had been forced to live in institutions, cut off from families and the larger society. He called this

first home, "L'Arche", which is French for "the ark" or the place of refuge. Vanier did not have any formal knowledge of mental retardation but he knew they needed an alternative to the institutions in which they were living. When he welcomed these two men into his house, he somehow knew he was making a life-long commitment. His basic desire was to create a community based on the Beatitudes - declarations made at Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6: 20-49), and to work for peace in a spirit of sharing, openness and profound acceptance of one another (Spink, 1990). His small community soon increased in number, not only of people with disabilities but also of "assistants" (as those who accompany, help and live with the residents, at home or at work are called) who were prepared to share their lives with them. L'Arche communities were soon started elsewhere in France, Canada, India and England. Today there is a federation of over 97 communities spread over 25 countries (de Miribel, 1992).

L'Arche has proven to be an innovative alternative to traditional residential care and "a movement of qualitatively vast importance for the future" (Wolfensberger, 1973, p. 14). It also represents a unique attempt to create a more humanizing lifestyle, and can be seen as a countercultural alternative to the ethos of the larger culture (Dunne, 1986).

The Philosophy of L'Arche

The L'Arche communities are of the type of intentional, ideological social entities. They are designed and constructed for the fulfillment of their aims and principles, which are formulated in the Charter of L'Arche (see Appendix D). Each community is a legal autonomous entity, has its own organizational rules and is more like a loose-knit association of

people who share a common philosophy than a rigid organization; yet the communities of L'Arche have a great deal in common and their vision has been greatly inspired by the life, thought, and writings of its founder.

Sumarah (1987b) identifies four dimensions to its philosophy. These are: (a) the value of the person with disabilities, (b) the importance of positive personal relationships, (c) the importance of a sense of community, and (d) the spiritual dimension. Based on the writings of L'Arche, I will examine each of these dimensions in greater details.

The value of people with developmental disabilities. In modern society, where strength, competition, individualism, success and materialism are valued, people with developmental disabilities may appear futile. There is no cure for their condition. They are "the archetypically useless members of society" (Shearer, 1976. p. 358). Caring for them challenges our values and the values of the society in which we live. What Jean Vanier (Downey, 1982) discovered soon after living with Raphael and Phillippe was that there was more to the person than the head (the intellectual dimension) or the hands (the productive abilities). More important in the person was the heart (the affective and spiritual dimensions). They revealed to him that not only had they something to receive from him but also something to give.

This view is representative of the belief of L'Arche in the uniqueness and dignity of people with developmental disabilities; that beyond any handicap there is a person who has something very unique and precious to contribute to the lives of others (Shearer, 1976). They are often called the "core people" suggesting that they are essentially the heart of their communities. Their qualities of openness, hospitality, and simplicity are a direct appeal to the affective dimension of those who live

with them and a unifying force within the community. Speaking of his experience with "wounded people", J. Vanier (1975) states:

I have learned more about the Gospels from handicapped people, those on the margins of our society, those who have been crushed and hurt, than I have from the wise and the prudent. Through their own growth and acceptance and surrender, wounded people have taught me that I must learn to accept my weaknesses and not pretend to be strong and capable. Handicapped people have shown me how handicapped we all are. They have reminded me that we are all weak and all called to death and that these are the realities of which we are most afraid" (p. VIII)

The importance of positive personal relationships. Our concept of therapy is frequently very restricted. It is perceived as what happens in the consulting room, in the counsellor or psychiatrist's office . In L'Arche, it is believed that the therapeutic dimension can be present in every aspect of life. "As distinct from many other caring groups with a more professional stance, our challenge is to take the risk of relationships, with all its consequences" (Saint-Macary, 1987, p. 3). This acknowledgment of interdependence goes hand in hand with a willingness to find meaning through intense and lasting relations with others, to learn to cooperate and share intimately, and to eventually encounter one's own vulnerabilities and limitations, as well as those of others (Dunne, 1986). As O'Donnell (1990) remarks "Living together" is the charism of L'Arche. We live well and we live badly together, but day by day, imperceptibly, bonds are created, which often last a lifetime" (p. 6).

The literature on L'Arche stresses not only the value and dignity of human beings, with or without disabilities, but also the need for genuine relationships in which there is reciprocity. Most assistants, for instance, do not work shifts; they come to offer their presence and skills and to

form meaningful ties with the residents, usually for a small stipend and with little personal privacy (Harris, 1987). The expression of hospitality and periodic celebrations (e.g., sharing a meal, accepting visitors, honoring important times) are significant to members of L'Arche and indicators of the way they support one another. According to Coppersmith (1984), a well-known author in the field of family therapy:

It is this focus on the natural growth that can occur via relationships in all its aspects, including cognitive, affective, physical, and spiritual, that frequently obliterates distinctions between a care-giver and care-receiver and [which] sets L'Arche apart as a larger system. (p. 152)

Harris (1987) likens the relationships formed between assistants and residents to counsellor-client relationships in which the person with a disability is approached with respect, acceptance, and empathy. He believes that the "L'Arche movement offers fertile ground for research" (p. 323), and suggests that the effects of living at L'Arche be investigated through empirical research.

Shearer (1976) claims that L'Arche's most important contribution lies in its recognition of the importance of "gift relationships", a phrase she borrows from Titmus (1970). Gift relationships refer to our social and biological need to give of ourselves and contribute to others' well-being. The development of social and professional services has reduced opportunities to have helping and giving relationships in our daily lives. Shearer contends that we must search for ways to protect and encourage the expression of our natural ability to give, and this particularly for people with developmental disabilities or with a mental illness who are often seen as having little or nothing to contribute.

The importance of a sense of community. There are not many catchall terms used as frequently today as the word community. We speak of our neighbourhoods, our professional associations, our churches, our ethnic groups as communities regardless of the way we communicate with each other or what we mean to one another. It appears to give the comforting illusion of living in a "community of communities" to contemporary men and women who "in [their] private lives live most often in hermetic isolation within sound-proof people-proof walls" (Fernandez, 1978, p. 23). Community is unfortunately one of the most overworked terms in our vocabulary. The following description of community by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) illuminates much that might seem obscure in the notion of community:

Community is a term used very loosely by Americans today. We use it in a strong sense: a *community* is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participates together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain *practices* that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past. (p. 333)

The definition of sense of community proposed by McMillan (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) may provide insights into this elusive but important construct as it is experienced in L'Arche: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by their commitment to be together" (p.11). The renewal of society through communal living and the experience of a strong sense of community are recurrent themes in the L'Arche literature.

As L'Arche expanded throughout the world, the need to create flexible structures enhancing this sense of community became crucial. This was met with some apprehensions as so many organizations have been stifled by heavy structures where they have become an end in itself and have led to an inevitable institutionalization of the system. Structures needed to be consistent with L'Arche's value system and purpose, while at the same time remaining flexible and responsive. They also needed to gradually evolve away from the authoritarian and leader-centered model of governance that typified the first years towards more collective decision-making processes (Saint-Macary, 1981). Although this evolution has been gradual and not without inconsistencies, the structures developed have largely reflected the elements identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) to describe the dynamics of the experience of sense of community. They claim that a sense of community develops among group members who have a common history, put shared beliefs into practice, develop emotional closeness, and whose group membership conveys a recognition of common identity and destiny. (You will find a detailed summary of McMillan and Chavis's model in Appendix E.)

The experience of communal living , however, is not uniformly positive; the "flip side" of community is the constant day-to-day struggle that automatically comes with people living together. The awareness of others is constantly present not only at the physical level but also at the interpersonal level where one may experience considerable difficulty communicating, working, or simply living with others. Some members, whether residents or assistants, may therefore seek an escape from community living when it imposes too many constraints on their personal freedom or their ability to cope. The "we-ness" of community may indeed

become too confining or constricting for some, and it may explain in part why there are so few long-term assistants living in L'Arche households.

The spiritual dimension. Any discussion of L'Arche needs to take the spiritual meaning of the community experience in consideration. (In this review, spirituality is understood "as the inner dimension of religiousness [of the human person]" Eck, 1993, p. 150) Much of the L'Arche literature (and particularly its charter) is embedded in religious metaphors and beliefs; Jean Vanier, as well as Henri Nouwen (1988), a Catholic priest living in one of the communities, are regarded as two of today's foremost spiritual writers, and some of their books have become among today's great classics. For most members their commitment is therefore lived within an acknowledged religious frame of reference, usually Christian in North America. This does not mean that religious belief is an obligatory part of life in L'Arche. L'Arche is founded on a liberal ecumenical ideology, and it welcomes members of various denominations and religions (or with no or little religious background) (Vanier, 1989). Some would not lay claim to any particular beliefs, though most people who stay for any length of time, because of the very quality of relationships this lifestyle entails, acknowledge a deepening of the spiritual dimension of their lives. "The emphasis is, however, on creation of communities, not conversion of souls, and this emphasis seems to attract people to L'Arche" (Harris, 1987, p. 323). Life in L'Arche is often described as a journey towards experiencing wholeness and interconnectedness, and as discovering that the individual, communal and spiritual dimensions of human life are intimately interwoven and essentially interdependent (J. Vanier, 1988).

The recognition of the spirituality of the people with developmental disabilities is central to the philosophy of L'Arche. It is rooted in the belief that they are complete human beings who, even as adults, have maintained some of the characteristics of youth. They can be spontaneous, simple and trusting, and these qualities may lead them, and those who live with them, to a profound spirituality (Phillipe, 1988). Their disabilities are "not so much a problem to be handled with sensitivity, but a wound, even a grace, to be lived and shared with people together" (Standley, 1983, p. 189).

Jean Vanier's understanding of the human person is central to an understanding of spirituality in L'Arche. Downey (1982) identifies six aspects to Vanier's conceptualization of the human person. It is first inclusive of a wide variety of people, regardless of their race, religion, status, intellectual or social abilities, and is especially sensitive to the person with developmental disabilities whom he sees as perhaps the most oppressed and defenseless of all people. Second, it posits the primacy of the spiritual dimension of the person, particularly in times of distress and suffering. Third, it refers to the "heart" as the foundation of the person and as a faculty to grasp and intuit the spiritual in our very being, apart from thoughts, concepts or images, and to which the person with a developmental disability is often uniquely open. The fourth aspect is his conviction that human beings need a personal and human kind of togetherness to give meaning and purpose to their lives, hence his concern for a more humanizing collective life style. Fifth, is the importance he assigns to the affective dimension of the human person and his yearning for human relationships, and finally, the last aspect is his perception of

the person as mystery, which for Vanier, as a Catholic thinker, refers to the Christocentric nature of the human person.

As a spiritually based community the members will make decisions on certain issues or appoint leaders through a process of "discernment" (a form of prayerful attentiveness and group attunement) and discussion meetings. Members frequently talk about being "called" or "led" to a specific course of action. Community discernment is an important factor contributing to cohesiveness and commitment to the group. It "is essentially a way of enabling people in a group to come to a common decision where each one has internalized the decision and made it their own" (J. Vanier, 1989, p. 292).

Ecumenism in L'Arche

From early in its history, L'Arche has welcomed persons with developmental disabilities and assistants who belonged to various faith traditions and has encouraged them to be rooted in their specific religious orientations. While about half of the communities are predominantly Catholic, the other half are either inter-denominational (particularly in North America and some European countries) or inter-religious (mainly in India, Africa, and the Middle East) (Egan, 1989). The inter-religious or inter-denominational character of many communities has led these communities to the gradual emergence of a new tradition in L'Arche where priority has been given to the creation of a non-dogmatic, ecumenical community over the older confessional bonds, and where members have been encouraged to seek a deeper understanding of others' beliefs and traditions. The practical implications of living this orientation has been a source of dialogue and learning, but also of tension and division at times as marked differences can exist in ecumenical attitudes regarding such

matters as intercommunion and rituals (T. Vanier, 1989). As mentioned earlier, the aim of L'Arche is, however, to build community with disabled people, not to profess a particular faith or to promote an ecumenical project. In that respect, the presence of the disabled individuals at the "core" of the communities has been instrumental in fostering unity among various groups, including Christians. "However deeply rooted are the historical divisions that separate Christians the thirst for communion in the hearts of handicapped people is deeper. They bring to us the conviction that what binds us together as Christians is deeper than what divides us" (O'Donnel, 1990, p. 5). The tradition of evening prayers developed in L'Arche has been of particular importance in contributing to greater harmony, mutual respect, and understanding between members of different faiths. Thérèse Vanier (1989) describes it as follows:

This feature of life in our communities corresponds to a simple and profound human need, a need to stop and reflect, integrate what has happened in the day, express concerns and fears and thanks for the past, the present and what is to come. It is a time of worship, of acknowledging our dependence on God and on each other. It draws the dailyness of our lives into the transcendent. It is expressed most obviously by people with a handicap, the directness and relevance of whose prayers draws assistants into a time of quiet, reflection, silence, singing. ..It is a time where it seems that usually no one is threatened by any particular church tradition. (p. 5)

The Communal Ethos of L'Arche

According to Jean Vanier (1989), the ethos of L'Arche differs greatly from the worldview of the broader culture and its social and moral values are a direct challenge to the values held in the larger social order. Everything in our post-modern era is telling us to be competent, attractive, influential. As Nouwen (1981) states so eloquently:

Our whole way of living is structured around climbing the ladder of success and making it to the top. Our very sense of vitality is dependent upon being part of the upward pull and upon the joy provided by the rewards given on the way up (p. 13).

Choosing to establish a whole way of life around the values of care, material simplicity, and interdependency outlined in this review of the L'Arche literature is in direct opposition with the dominant values of competition, acquisition of wealth, and consumerism, as well as with the North American belief in "rugged individualism" (or as Lasch (1978) may today add "narcissistic and acquisitive individualism"). Speaking of North Americans, Alexis de Tocqueville (cited in Bellah et al., 1986) wrote more than 150 years ago: "Such folks owe no [one] anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (p. 37).

The principles of "normalization" that have led to the deinstitutionalization of hundred of thousands of people with disabilities over the last two decades often reflect this belief in autonomy and self-determination. As with many bureaucratic reforms and programs, those who design these new policies have a tendency to regard people with disabilities as socially and culturally decontextualised subjects and tend to overlook their vital needs for genuine associational ties (Schwartz, 1992). The same could be said of many of our schools of therapy which usually reflect the individualistic ethos of American democracy (Sue & Sue, 1990); a tradition that, according to Taylor (1994), does not give enough recognition to the "dialogical" (or communal) character of human life. Although it is true that the process of human development is one of

becoming fully individual (Jung, 1933), we are fundamentally social creatures who need one another not only for sustenance or company but also for meaning and guidance in our lives (Adler, 1927).

Hence the importance of a communal vision in L'Arche, of a shared confidence in the possibilities of social and personal change through fellowships where individuals are learning new ways to face conflicts, cooperate and build relationships, and to live in solidarity with the most vulnerable ones of our society (J. Vanier, 1989). No less essential is the emphasis put on the inner resources required to successfully live in a caring community: the ability to nurture, to open oneself up to emotionally demanding individuals, to develop a deeper awareness of oneself and each other, to learn to understand, accept, and forgive one another, and the capacity to develop an integrated sense of oneself, and to stay committed to one's communal relationships.

Communities such as L'Arche, Nouwen (1987) claims,

[call] for a movement from an issue-oriented life to a person-oriented life... L'Arche is there to remind us that the intimate personal relationships developed over months and years of faithfulness allow us to be in the world without being destroyed by its countless urgencies and emergencies... Issues are not going to save us, people do. (p. 32)

These communal values are part of the transcendent frame of reference that L'Arche has constructed (what in the movement is referred to as "the vision of L'Arche"), and which gives meaning to the aspirations of its members and to the difficulties of its lifestyle. It is part of what Becker (1973) calls a creative illusion or heroic myth, that is, a "fictional" dimension that one adds to one's own experience of the world in order to bring coherence and order to it. The "myth" of L'Arche informs the life of

its movement and helps its members make sense of their own existence. It brings them security by helping them to face up to the reality of community more fully. In this respect, it is in sharp contrast with a modern world that lacks a sense of common vision.

May (1991) attributes many of our present day problems to "the lack of myths which will give us as individuals the inner security we need in order to live adequately in our day" (p.9). Rohr (1991) goes further stating:

I am convinced that much, if not most, of the modern neurosis is a direct result of a lack of a common, shared story under which our individual stories are written. As a result, our tiny lives lack a transcendent referent, a larger significance, a universal and shared meaning. (p. 15)

May (1991) identifies four ways in which myths provide meaning (and which are particularly relevant to this discussion), a) they contribute to our sense of personal identity, b) they make possible our sense of community, c) they support our moral values, and d) they help us deal with the mystery of creation.

The vision of L'Arche and its communal ethos have been strongly inspired by Jean Vanier who has embodied the characteristics of a man of profound compassion, courage, and humility. To a certain extent, Vanier's role in L'Arche can be likened to the notion of *hero* in mythology as he symbolizes the highest aims of the movement. For our heroes, as May (1991) suggests,

carry our aspirations, our ideals, our hopes, our beliefs... In the profound sense the hero is created by us as we identify with the deeds he or she performs. The hero is thus born collectively as our own myth. This is what makes myth so important: it reflects our own sense of identity, our combined emotions, our myth. (p. 58)

In this project, I investigated how each research participant constructed his or her experience of L'Arche and within this subjectivity perceived L'Arche both as a personal project and as an external or given reality. The data analysis allowed me to assess the extent to which the philosophy of L'Arche and its particular vision have influenced each participant's given set of world views.

Phases in Community Life at L'Arche

Small group theoreticians (e.g. Borgen, Pollard, Amundson & Westwood, 1989) have posited various developmental sequences to explicate the stages of adaptation and growth that members undergo in group settings. In a similar manner, Peck (1987) and Shafer and Anundsen (1993) have each proposed phase models of community development. Shafer and Anundsen's model, in particular, derives from their observations on intentional residential communities. They posit five phases: 1) excitement: getting high on possibilities; 2) autonomy: jockeying for power; 3) stability: settling into roles and structures; 4) synergy: allowing self and group to mutually unfold; and 5) transformation: expanding, segmenting, or disbanding. The authors chose the term "phase" rather than "stage" to convey the circular nature of community development. This is in contrast to most small group models, which take a linear approach to group development. To my knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted to validate those phase models.

In a different field of research, cross-cultural psychology, Adler (1975), in his efforts to understand the dynamics of the cross-cultural experience, presented a model that may partly apply to the communal living experience in that a long-term involvement in an intentional

community involves significant cultural and psychological changes (Zablocki, 1980b). Furthermore, we may note that for a North American living abroad, a cross-cultural experience will often involve, as for newcomers to L'Arche, an adaptation to a foreign culture where community and social consensus are foremost and where the individual is primarily defined as a social being rather than as a psychological being. Adler noted that individuals going through significant changes experience something akin to a culture shock. He further contended that such "transitional experience" (p. 13) can be experienced in one's own culture. He delineated five phases which are, (a) contact, (b) disintegration, (c) reintegration, (d) autonomy, and (e) independence. A clear description of each phase in terms of its perception, emotional ranges, behaviors, and interpretations can be found in Appendix G.

Most new assistants living in L'Arche seem to undergo a common cycle of experiences which could be described in the first three phases as a culture shock, and requiring cultural adaptation (de Miribel, 1981). The last two phases apply to assistants who have lived longer in L'Arche. This cycle of experiences appears to bear interesting similarities with Adler (1975) and Shafer and Anundsen's (1993) phase models. In this section, I will mainly draw from the writings of de Miribel (1981), Dunne (1986), and J. Vanier (1989) to describe this cycle.

The first phase has often been referred as the "honeymoon period", and has many of the characteristics of the *contact* phase of Adler (1975) and the *excitement* phase of Shafer and Anundsen (1993). The assistants are enchanted by the warm sense of togetherness they discover in L'Arche. They are fascinated by their new environment and tend to see only positive values to the communal lifestyle (J. Vanier, 1989). This period

which usually lasts a few months is frequently succeeded by a second phase that can be very difficult. As de Miribel (1981) describes so accurately:

You step into a world whose values are the opposite of those current in the society where you have been living. You move from a world of efficiency and productivity into a world where the essential values are people's relations and personal presence one to another. From a world where everything is to be had here and now, you enter a world where the essential element is time: the time required to create personal ties, to win each other's trust to grow. Leaving a society based on individualism and personal success, often won at other people's cost, you discover a community where no one does anything alone. And coming from a world whose essential motor and important yardstick is money, you find yourself in a world where what is essential can only be given free, and where money is no more than a means in the service of the community. That other world expects you to be big and strong, and to hide any weaknesses as something to be ashamed of, whereas here each person's weaknesses are brought to light and shared, and in this sharing is the foundation of unity. (pp. 76-77)

This phase which requires " a total reorientation is a painful experience" (de Miribel, 1981, p. 77). These difficulties can be compounded by the fact that many new assistants come from another region or country, may speak English as a second language, are often young and lack some maturity, by the disapproval of their parents and family, and a loss of interest in old friends (de Miribel, 1981). (It is worth noting that five of the six commitment-mechanisms identified by Kanter (1972) are included (or at least suggested) in de Miribel's quotation: that is, mortification, transcendence, communion, sacrifice, and investment.)

During the second and third phases the assistants will repeatedly be confronted to their own limitations. The demands of community become at times unbearable, and cause a deep tiredness; residents may reject or

dislike some assistants, tension between assistants may increase, or assistants may be continually changing.

This disillusionment with self and/or community can give rise to anger and a sense of entrapment. To survive, new assistants must reconcile themselves to a realistic sense of what it is they are involved in, accepting the community's shortcomings as well as their own. (Dunne, 1986, p.47)

These difficulties at L'Arche are compounded with a difficult aspect of adapting to any form of communal living: "the collective behaviour experience and the resocialization process, both of which are essential to the model, [and which] put individuals in touch with intense and often long-buried primal feelings, often with disastrous results" (Zablocki, 1980b, p. 325). The second and third phases contain both the sense of disorientation and frustration of the *disintegration* and *reintegration* phases of Adler's (1975) model and the disillusionment of the *autonomy* phase of Shaffer and Anundsen (1993). The L'Arche literature, for example, J. Vanier (1992), frequently refers to the inevitable tensions and disappointment that punctuate community life and views these personal and collective times of trial as essential steps towards growth and maturity. As Dunne (1986) states:

The L'Arche experience suggests that the capacity to commit oneself to others and to celebrate that life in common is dependent on the willingness to acknowledge and somehow transform the darker side of human nature, individual and collective, through a humanizing response that deepens community through the very difficulty that could otherwise be its destruction. (p. 53)

The fourth phase is described as a passage to maturity, to commitment. Through this phase takes place a transition from "the community for myself" to "myself for the community" (J. Vanier, 1989, p.

55). The assistants feel a deep sense of commitment to those with whom they live which help them put down roots in the community.

[Assistants] may spend several heart-searching years until the day comes when they take the step of accepting that L'Arche shall be the community where they are being called to live. For some, the path to this acceptance is a long one as though they were resisting themselves, holding off from this sense of commitment they can feel taking root in their heart. (de Miribel, 1981, p. 82)

This phase bears interesting similarities with the *autonomy* phase of Adler's (1975) model and *autonomy* and *synergy* phases of Shaffer and Anundsen's (1993). Through it, assistants develop greater assurance in themselves and deepen their faiths in the vision of the movement.

The final phase which is usually reached after years in L'Arche, is called "the covenant" (L'Arche International, 1989). It is a deepening of one's commitment to the spirituality of L'Arche, and particularly to people with developmental disabilities. During a specific retreat, the assistants "announce their covenant", which is regarded as a formal expression of commitment to the ideals of L'Arche and recognizes their intention to live their lives in relationship with the "poor", that is those who are oppressed and vulnerable in this world. It is not a promise to live in a community household indefinitely, but rather a recognition of the spiritual bond that they have developed during their years of living with people with disabilities. This phase is very much one of *transformation* as Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) describe their fifth phase, in that it validates a new identity and symbolizes a new openness to the world.

The Camphill Communities

It is worth mentioning that there is another worldwide network of intentional communities in the field of mental retardation, the Camphill

villages, which has existed for over 50 years (Pietzner, 1986, 1990). This movement has been partly inspired by the work of the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Schools and Antroposophy. Today there are more than 80 communities in over 18 countries. In North America, there are seven Camphill communities; five in the United States and two in Canada (Smart, 1993). Unlike L'Arche communities, which are mainly located in urban areas and integrated in the broader community, most Camphill communities are small self-sufficient agricultural villages, comprised of farms, craft shops, and occasionally of a school and stores. The largest Camphill village in the United States, for example, has over 200 people on 600 acres of land. Although this movement differs in a number of ways from L'Arche, it also bears important similarities to it. Particularly notable for our purpose is the fact that these communities do not see themselves as rehabilitative *per se*, but rather as a way of life that all human communities should strive for. Impressed by the richness of the lives of people with disabilities in the Camphill villages, Schwartz (1992), a respected author in the field of mental retardation, identified a number of factors contributing to the safety and well-being of the residents in this environment. These factors appear identical to those that characterize daily life in L'Arche (e.g. people with disabilities as having equal human value, philosophy of shared living, importance of personal growth), and are congruent with the philosophy and values outlined in this section.

To my knowledge, there has been no systematic research done on those communities, at least in the English and French languages.

Research on L'Arche

Formal research on the L'Arche movement has been very limited. I am aware of only two dissertations (Sumarah, 1983/1985; Webb-Mitchell, 1988/1989), and one study from France (de la Selle & Maurice, 1986). Sumarah (1983/1985) examined the therapeutic dimensions of L'Arche's way of life. It took the form of an eight month ethnographic inquiry through the participant observation and interviewing methods of investigation. Sumarah (1983/1985; 1988) provided a descriptive account of the community's way of life from a participant observer's perspective, and autobiographical accounts of a resident (Sumarah, 1983/1985; 1987a) and of an assistant's experience in L'Arche. The author identified three general themes from these accounts which pointed to significant therapeutic components of this way of life. These themes were: (a) a personal sense of agency, (b) a psychological sense of community, and (c) a personal and social sense of religion. The author mentioned that the conceptualization of these themes originated primarily from the work of the philosopher John MacMurray. While this study provided interesting insights into the understanding of L'Arche and identified relevant themes, the results can only be tentative because of its limited sample and because the author provided limited information on the strategies of data analysis. This study primarily used the situation of L'Arche for illustrating a certain theory about the nature of the human person.

Webb-Mitchell (1988/1989) conducted an ethnographic study of an English community over a nine month period. The purpose of this study was to explore, understand and articulate the nature of community, the role of friendship, trust, ritual, and language in this specific setting. The conclusion of the study indicated that this community operated somewhat

like a "mini-institution" in that the assistants fulfilled traditional role of providing care and exercising authority, and residents depended on assistants for directions and leadership. The author stressed that this specific community needed to improve communication with professionals and learn to play a facilitative role rather than a controlling one. The effort to reduce the differences in status and hierarchy between the residents and the assistants was more of an ideal than an actual description of how this community operated.

De La Selle and Maurice (1986) conducted an evaluation research in France to determine the degree to which residents of L'Arche benefited or not from their communal experience. Two key concepts in this study were "enracinement" and "deracinement", two French words that do not have adequate equivalent in English, and which roughly mean "rootedness" and "uprootedness". The authors were particularly interested in assessing the role that these two constructs played in the personal development of the residents. They combined qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data on 244 residents of L'Arche Trosly-Breuil (the very first community of L'Arche which has nearly 300 members). They outlined a statistical profile of those who left the community (83) and those who have stayed (161), and presented six short case studies to illustrate the role that their respective involvement has had in their lives. Various reasons led people to leave, including intensity of emotional and relational life of community, difficulty of working and living in the same organization, medical and psychiatric problems, and desire for greater autonomy. Members stayed for a variety of reasons as well, namely, sense of belonging, inclusion in a larger network of human relations, personal growth, and sense of connection to other communities. In their

conclusion, the authors stressed the importance of providing a safe and well-structured environment that allows the residents to progress toward more adaptive skills and to a greater degree of integration within the mainstream of society.

In spite of the length and importance of this study (250 pages), I found it somewhat disappointing. The study does not follow the sequence of scientific inquiry typical of evaluation research in North America. The language is also notably vague, often philosophical or anecdotal, and results and potential benefits are not stated clearly. It is unclear whether this lack of coherence must be attributed to cultural differences in conducting research or to a lack of rigor on the part of the researchers.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed a body of literature on intentional communities and the communities of L'Arche, most of it published between 1970 and 1994. Some of the works cited were specifically concerned with intentional communities (e.g., Kanter, 1970, 1972, 1973). In these studies, the authors gave special attention to different types of communal living groups and identified the social processes employed to sustain commitment among their members.

Most of the materials reviewed pertained to the L'Arche movement (e.g., Dunne, 1986; J. Vanier, 1989). This literature provided information about the views of their authors on the history, ideology, and lifestyle of the movement. Although this literature often revealed a tendency to reflect different versions of the official philosophy of L'Arche (and often painted in overly positive and idealist terms), it did afford many useful insights about what it means to live at L'Arche. Most of the works cited were written by members of a community of L'Arche and were often based

on their experiences and those of others living at L'Arche. This body of work therefore came at times close to the subject matter of the present study, which is an examination of the experiences of assistants as to what it means to live at L'Arche. This main theme, however, remains implicit rather than clearly investigated in the literature. The present research attempted to add to this body of information by more systematically interviewing and eliciting from a number of assistants their descriptions of their personal experience.

As noted earlier, there has been little research done on L'Arche. In addition, the three studies that were reviewed have primarily viewed L'Arche as an alternative residential care service to the disabled that warranted study as an innovative approach. Consequently, the focus was either on the philosophy, or on the disabled members and their relationships with other members, or community practices that were contributing to the well-being of the residents. In these three studies, the authors provided limited information about the shifting clientele of assistants at L'Arche -- their social characteristics, their motives, their hopes and expectations, their sense of the community in which they lived, the reasons for their personal involvement, or the extent to which that involvement gave meaning and purpose to their lives and affected their self-understanding. Further studies will be needed to identify the conditions under which members join and live, and describe the experience of community as lived by the assistants. The aim of the present inquiry was precisely to examine the meaning of this experience.

The sparseness of literature on intentional communities, and especially on the L'Arche movement, underscores the potential usefulness of the present research. Such information could be helpful to a variety of

people who are living or working at L'Arche or in other communal or cooperative housing and working arrangements.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the subjective experience of participants living in L'Arche and understand the underlying patterns of meaning that characterize this experience. While it is possible to study some aspects of the experience of community in L'Arche from an experimental or survey research perspective, the subjective, intrapersonal, and interpersonal processes that define it are not easily observable and to be fully explored require a qualitative approach.

This chapter presents an overview of the qualitative methodology used in this study. It first presents the phenomenological research design and the research questions. It then describes the data collection and procedures and presents the strategies used to increase its reliability and validity. It continues with a description of Hycner's (1985) method of phenomenological analysis. It then discusses the selection of the participants and includes condensed demographic information about the research participants. It continues with an introduction to the community of L'Arche Shiloah, its residents, assistants, and regulations. Finally, this chapter concludes with a definition of terms used in L'Arche and in the present study.

Overview of Research Method

The phenomenological method of research in psychology was employed in this study. In this qualitative research perspective, researchers systematically examine experiential phenomena as they are lived concretely and personally by the participants. Its field of concern is "the subjective, interior landscape (including of course the experience of

others) that one lives in and constructs in a totally unique fashion" (Margulies, 1989, p. 148). This method is therefore mainly concerned with the *personalized* and *meaningful* dimension of experiences and human behaviour, and by their structures and essential constituents (Giorgi, 1975). It requires, at first, a systematic and meticulous description of what is perceived in the lived experience, and, secondly, an identification and elucidation of the salient themes or recurrent patterns of the phenomenon.

This project also used the critical incident technique as a supplemental procedure for the study of incidents having special significance to the research participants. Although this method has been mostly used to obtain factual reports with respect to specific activity and work requirements, it has also proven to be very flexible and to have many types of applications, including the study of individual subjective experience (Flanagan, 1954). In this project, this technique facilitated the collection of specific and detailed descriptions of the participants' experience of L'Arche. Reports of specific factual incidents representative of what has been particularly positive or difficult for the participants provided a sound and concrete basis for understanding the complexity of the phenomenon investigated.

Formulation of the Research Questions

In this study I examined the way in which members of L'Arche "construct" their experience of community living. The central question that the current research attempted to answer could be formulated either as "What is the experience of living at L'Arche?" or "How do assistants experience, describe, and understand their experience of living and working at L'Arche?" The essential criterion for this method was that it

leads to a better understanding of the meaning of community as lived at L'Arche.

In addition to this central question, a number of questions have emerged as I have reflected on my own experience of community and from the discussion of this topic in the literature review. These questions touch upon the nature of relationships between assistants and residents ("How do the participants perceive people with developmental disabilities?"; "How do they describe their relationships with them?"), commitment practices ("How do they sustain their commitment to this way of life?"), and development and learning taking place in a communal setting ("What kinds of learning, developments or changes in behaviour result from this experience?"). In spite of their importance, these questions are, however, only peripheral to the phenomenological approach --that is the use of subjective and first-person experience as a source of knowledge -- and were only partly answered in this study. However, these questions guided my reflections and facilitated my understanding of some of the common patterns of meaning that ran through the narratives of the research participants.

Data Collection and Procedures

In-depth interviewing. Since the intent of the study is to examine subjective experience, in-depth interviewing was used as a method of data collection. My intention was to interview a range of assistants of different ages and backgrounds. Each of the research participants was interviewed twice and the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed (as narratives). During the first interview, my objective was to elicit as much information as possible about the person's experience of community at L'Arche. In the follow-up interview, the

participant was asked to respond to my summary of the preceding interview, and whether they would like to make changes to it. The interviews were open-ended and unstructured, requiring enough time to explore the topic in depth. My main goal in the interviews was to help the research participants provide a detailed account of their personal story and move toward nontheoretical descriptions that reflect the experience.

Kvale (1983) has outlined various aspects of the interview-situation which further explained why this is the method of choice in phenomenological research. The focus of the interview is on the life-world (or subjective experience) of the research participant and is theme-oriented not person-oriented. It seeks to describe the meaning, the attributes and characteristics of central themes of the experience being investigated. It aims at obtaining a qualitative and nuanced descriptions of the phenomenon that are precise and stringent in meaning and interpretation. It seeks to obtain nontheoretical, specific, and extensive descriptions that accurately reflect the experience. The interviewer strives to remain as open and "presuppositionless" as possible and does not reduce the experience to ready-made categories. It is the task of the interviewer to clarify ambiguities and contradictions. Finally, the descriptions and meanings of the themes may become richer and clearer in the later portions of the interview.

First interview. After orienting each participant to the study and assuring him or her that all information shared in the interviews including the fact that he or she is participating as a research participant will be held in strict confidence, I used the following sample introduction to begin the interview:

I am doing a study to understand the meaning of community life in L'Arche. I am interested in what your experience has been as an assistant in L'Arche. I would appreciate it if you would describe your experience in as much detail as possible, as if you were telling me a story; that is, how it began, what occurred in the midst of it, and how it ended (if it has). I would like you to feel that you can be frank with me. I will carefully listen to your story and may be asking you some questions of what it has been like for you to be in L'Arche but before I do, I would like to hear about *your* experience in L'Arche - how *you* feel and think about life here. Can you tell me how you got involved in L'Arche and what were your initial impressions.

The assistant was then encouraged to provide a detailed account of his or her personal story. Following this account, the assistant was asked to report two critical incidents, one that stands out as positive and one that illustrates what has been challenging and difficult for him or her in L'Arche. I used the following sample to introduce the critical incident questions:

1. Now that you have told me about your experience, can you describe the most critical incident that is indicative of the positive experience you've had of L'Arche.
2. Could you now describe to me the most critical incident that illustrates what has been particularly difficult for you.

My primary purpose was to elicit experiential (rather than conceptual) information and to facilitate the uninterrupted flow of the story with active listening, empathic attunement, evocative responding, and probes. In a fashion similar to the process-experiential approach to counselling, I attempted to enter my research participant's frame of reference, try to see L'Arche from his or her subjective perspective, listen from the inside as if I was the research participant, and focus "on the moment-by-moment shifts in [his or her] experiencing and manner of

processing" (Greenberg, Rice & Elliott, 1993, p. 14). The questions asked of each participant were a natural outgrowth of the content of the interview and consisted of my requests for clarification and/or the discussion of life experiences related to the topic of community at L'Arche. When the research participants began to philosophize about their particular experiences or about L'Arche in general, I gently asked them to return to their personal experience and to be as deeply immersed as possible while carrying out the narration of their journey in L'Arche. In many ways, this inquiry was an account in the oral tradition of people telling their own stories. If questions were asked, it was done in order to bring out unexpressed elements of the experience rather than in an attempt to standardize the narrative accounts.

Second interview. The follow-up interview was arranged within a month of the first interview. During this interview, I read the summary of the first interview, ask them to reflect upon the meaning of their experience, and assess whether the descriptions fit their experience. The research participants were also invited to make corrections or additions as they saw fit. The following questions were asked as part of the follow-up interview (adapted from Sankey, 1993, p. 73):

1. Since we have last met you have had a chance to think about what we spoke and I was wondering if you had any other thoughts or feelings that you would like to add to your story?
2. (As I read the summary of the first interview) Do you feel that this summary captures your experience of living and working at L'Arche and the influence it has had in your life?

3. Is there anything in this summary that you feel is inaccurate; anything that you would like to take out or change? Is there anything that you don't understand?

Overview of the Interviews. Three participants chose to be interviewed at their homes. One selected her own bedroom as the location of the interview; two were interviewed in common areas such as a living or dining room (though with no other housemates present). The three other participants elected to be interviewed at my home to ensure greater confidentiality.

Each participant was interviewed twice. The first interviews varied in length from about an hour to an hour in a half (not including the time spent on answering questions from the participants). The second interviews were shorter, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. Each first interview yielded a transcription which ranged from eighteen to twenty-three single-spaced pages. Once the narratives were divided into meaning units and themes, another twenty pages were added; condensed summary added another six to eight pages, yielding an average of forty-seven pages of data and analysis per participant. Although I expected the transcription and analysis to be lengthy, I was surprised by the amount of work involved.

The range of people's speaking and thinking styles and personal stories were broad, and I felt privileged to hear and reflect on those very personal accounts.

Reliability and Validity

Validity has traditionally referred to the degree to which an instrument measures what it is designed to measure, and reliability to the consistency of test measurement. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contrasted

those definitions to four alternative standards termed the trustworthiness criteria, which they believe to be more appropriate to assess the adequacy of both qualitative and quantitative studies. The criteria of the qualitative approach are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to an accurate description or interpretation of the phenomenon or experience investigated. Transferability is the degree to which the descriptive data is adequately presented so that other researchers may use the study to extend and compare the findings to other studies. Dependability implies that the researcher attempts to account for change in the phenomenon studied and in the design. Finally, confirmability pertains to the objectivity of the data.

The following strategies were used throughout the study to increase the trustworthiness of the interview-method. First, my substantial involvement in the community in the past facilitated establishing rapport in the interviews and built the trust necessary to uncover recurrent patterns and facilitate understanding of the community's culture. It also lessened the potential threat of social desirability. To help ensure that my involvement did not interfere with my understanding of the data, however, it was important for me to be aware of and to reflect on the influence that my past experience may have on the way I lead the interviews and on how I interpret the data. Following Husserl's (cited in Bachelor & Joshi, 1986) process of "bracketing", I attempted to temporarily suspend any consideration and preconception regarding the facts presented, so as to let the research participants describe their experience of L'Arche as it essentially presents itself to them. I needed to suspend what I knew so that I could discover what I did not see before.

Merleau-Ponty (cited in Margulies, 1989) described this process as follow: " This reduction is not the decision to suppress but to place in suspense, or out of action, all the spontaneous affirmations in which we live [regarding the phenomenon investigated], not to deny them but rather to understand them and to make them explicit" (p. 9). In Appendix F I outline biases or presuppositions that I had about the experience of living at L'Arche and that I needed to put in abeyance while conducting the inquiry. Review of interviews and transcript analysis by my thesis advisor also contributed to greater rigour in this area.

Secondly, it was possible to enhance credibility within the interviewing process itself. Interviews allowed me to make sure the participants correctly understood what was asked, to follow up incomplete answers, to probe and search for depth of response. They also revealed nonverbal responses which facilitated data analysis.

Finally, my investigative and counselling skills, which have been developed through review of selected literature on the research topic, methodology courses, and practical experience, also contributed to the credibility of the study. Dense background information about the participants and formal check with participants to review summary of the previous interviews were useful in identifying whether data were accurate and increased the credibility and the transferability of the study. The precise description of the data collection strategies and analysis clearly enhanced the dependability and confirmability of the project as well as the supervision of the research proposal and implementation by an experienced researcher (Dr. R. Young). (Please note that direct quotations from the interviews are used extensively in reporting the results. Ellipses are occasionally used to indicate that there was either a pause in

the conversation or that a few words or sentences were omitted when the meaning of a particular segment could be understood without them. Three dots indicate a pause and four dots indicate an omission)

Analysis and Interpretation of Narratives

In the phenomenological analysis of research data the researcher starts with one description of the experience investigated (a transcription or narrative), and analyses each additional narrative, one by one, till he or she formulates a description that conveys the essential constituents of the experience (van Kaam, 1969). Following the first interview, analysis proceeded in the fashion outlined by Hycner (1985). (I chose to follow Hycner's procedures rather the most often used procedures of Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975) because I found them easier to understand and much more clearly delineated and explicated.)

It includes the following steps:

1. *I listen to the tape, transcribe it (including significant non-verbal and para-linguistic communication). (The data of the first interview contains the narrative account and the critical incident technique report.)*
2. *I "bracket" my presuppositions in order to approach the data with as much openness as possible (see Appendix F for a list of these presuppositions).*
3. *I listen to the interview several times and read and reread the transcription to get a sense of the whole context of the interview.*
4. *I elicit the discrete units of general meanings. (Hycner (1985) defines these units "as those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning (irrespective of the research question) clearly differentiated from that*

which precedes and follows" (p. 283). At this early stage of the analysis, the meaning of the segments are captured as much as possible in the words of the research participants themselves.

5. *I delineate units of general meaning relevant to the research question.* (In this study the research question addressed to these units of meaning was: "Is this an essential constituent of the experience of L'Arche as experienced by this participant?" This is a step whereby I looked for statements in the text that were particularly revealing of the experience.)

6. *A member of the research committee verifies the units of relevant meaning and validate, modify, or invalidate these units.*

7. *I eliminate these units of relevant meaning which are clearly redundant.*

8. *I determine whether the units of relevant meaning naturally cluster together.* I obtain these clusters by gathering statements that are conceptually similar.

9. *I determine if there are themes which express the essence of the clusters of meaning.* Themes are what researchers often call the core meanings or the fundamental constituents of the phenomenon.

10. *I write up a summary for each individual interview incorporating the themes that are representative of the experience and send an abbreviated summary to the participant.*

11. *I return to the participant, read the written summary and themes, and ask him or her to comment on the presence or absence of these themes in his or her experience.* I also invite the participant to communicate further information on issues that may not have been covered in the first interview and that he or she may wish to address.

12. *I analyze the second interview following the same procedures, and themes and summary are modified if necessary.*

13. *I identify themes that are common to all or most of the participants* (also described as metathemes by some phenomenologists (cf. Tesh, 1987)). Verification by the research committee is again sought at this stage of the analysis.

14. *I place these themes within the context from which they have emerged.*

15. *I write a condensed summary of the experience of L'Arche (or narrative) as experienced by the research participants.* (pp. 279-294).

Selection of Research Participants

The people in this study were selected from the community of L'Arche in Burnaby. (Letter of contact to the community, letter of contact to the participants and consent form can be found in Appendices A, B, and C.) The size of the sample was determined by the depth and richness of the data collected. I ended data collection when it became apparent that additional research participants contributed little or no new information or when the final description of the phenomenon studied appeared to be a valid one. Based on the sample size of most theses, I expected to interview between six and eight assistants.

The selection of assistants as research participants was crucial in providing rich descriptions of the experience investigated and in enhancing the value of the data collection method. The following requirements outlined by van Kaam (1969) guided me in the selection of research participants. They had: (a) the ability to express themselves linguistically with relative ease, (b) the ability to sense and to express inner feelings and emotions without shame and inhibition, (c) the ability

to sense and express the organic experiences that accompany these feelings, (d) the experience of the situation under investigation at a relatively recent date, (e) a spontaneous interest in their experience.

From among the volunteers, participants were selected so as to ensure the inclusion of persons with the following four characteristics:

1. the participants were able to express themselves fluently in English;
2. they had been members of L'Arche for at least two years;
3. they had between 20 and 65 years of age;
4. the ratio between female and male participants was two to one to reflect proportion of male and female assistants in the community.

Apart from the fact that thesis research cannot cover all of the diversity of lifestyles in L'Arche, I chose to concentrate my inquiry on the assistants rather than on the residents (or on a combination of both populations) for several reasons:

1. Assistants have chosen to come to L'Arche and usually have a vastly more attractive range of outside possibilities open when they want to leave than the residents. For instance, marriage or an intimate relationship is a remote possibility for most of the people with a disability and the only alternative to L'Arche may be a large institution or a group home. These differences are not without influencing their perception of community.

2. As noted earlier, previous studies have mainly focused on the residents and on L'Arche as an innovative alternative to residential care. For instance, in both dissertations, the researchers were particularly sensitive to giving voice to the disabled members, and, when needed, to be

their advocate by commenting on beliefs and practices prevalent in the community which limited their autonomy and sense of agency.

3. My intention to look at the experience of L'Arche from the assistants' viewpoint is twofold. First, very few of us have lived in a communal setting and very little is known about the impact it has on its members and the social skills necessary to live in it. Secondly, interactional competence (the ability to take the role of others), emotional sensitivity, and general linguistic and symbolic mental abilities are vital to integrate and communicate insights about one's interpersonal and inner psychological experience.

The Research Participants. The participants in this study were four women and two men, all of whom were white. They all spoke English, although as a second language for some of them. The age range was approximately 25 to 60, with three of the participants in their thirties. The length of time that participants had been living and/or working at L'Arche ranged from 4 to 17 years, with a mean of 10.5 years. At the time of the interviews (winter or spring 1995) three participants lived and worked in the community, and two participants worked for the community but did not live in a household. One participant worked on a part-time basis for L'Arche and spent a month each year in a L'Arche Shiloah home. All but one of the participants had previously lived for at least a year in a household community. Also, four of the participants had lived in another L'Arche community in the past.

All names of participants, and their housemates, co-workers, and friends, in this report are pseudonyms. The pseudonyms given to the research participants are Carmen, Vivian, Gabrielle, Ella, Nigel, and Lucas. Incidental details may be disguised to protect their anonymity. No

vignettes will be provided in order to protect confidentiality. However, much will be learned about the participants in the following chapter.

Site Selection

L'Arche Shiloah. In this section I will describe L'Arche Shiloah, the community from which the research participants came. L'Arche Shiloah is located at the south end of Burnaby. It consists of a large building accommodating three residential units, three additional houses in Burnaby and one in Vancouver. The households accommodate approximately 30 residents as well as 14 live-in assistants. A similar number of assistants and part-time employees live outside the community. Its ratio of assistants and employees to people with disabilities is therefore almost one-to-one.

Residents. Residents are all adults, ambulatory, capable of basic self-care (although very limited for some), and their home is close enough to encourage contact with family, friends, and neighbourhood. Over half of the residents work at L'Arche Wood Products where they engage in assembling bookshelves and a variety of other wooden products. Many of the other residents commute to one of the surrounding shelter workshops where they engage in light manufacturing, packaging handicrafts and other vocational activities. Some residents also attend retraining programs for the disabled or work at nearby stores and industries. Older residents and more severely disabled members attend Emmaus Center, a day program located in Shiloah's main building. These residents are involved in a number of recreational, craft, and vocational activities during the day. Both L'Arche Wood Products and Emmaus Center have their own premises, work teams, and accountability structures.

Assistants. In order to be admitted as an assistant, applicants must meet specific requirements regarding community behavioral and work standards and express a wish to form personal relationships with individuals in the community. The decision to accept potential members is usually up to the directing team. Recruitment takes place very spontaneously. A few years ago, however, the community had to advertise for assistants for the first time in nearly 20 years. Assistants come from different regions of the country and from many different countries. They usually have quite a wide variety of backgrounds, professions, experiences, and perspectives. Assistants work either in a house or in one of the work areas of the community. They are therefore referred to as *house assistants* or *work assistants*. The house assistants are responsible for the care of the residents. They assist them in the activities of daily living, attend various meetings, and take part in the planning of activities for the whole community. They have one day off a week, and one week-end off each month. Work assistants may or may not live in a household community, and work either at L'Arche Wood Products, Emmaus Center, the administrative office or on building maintenance. Assistants attend different types of meetings each week. At the assistant meeting (the largest and most important meeting), everyone takes turn sharing significant events, struggles, and concerns. The community uses these meetings to work out disagreements, regenerate commitment, and create a sense of intimate involvement. Over the years, as new members joined and old ones left, a core group of assistants has remained, providing stability and continuity. It is from this group, called the long-term assistants, that I selected the research participants. L'Arche Shiloah has the largest percentage of long-term assistants among

the six communities of the Northwest region. In an effort to extend itself to the outside community, Shiloah has welcomed a number of associate members in the past years as well as a continued number of friends, family members, and volunteers. They also plan monthly social events that are chiefly attended by disabled members from other residential services.

Regulations. L'Arche Shiloah is funded, licensed, and certified as a residential service for the developmentally disabled by the provincial government. It is a complex system involving several levels of accountability, e.g., government funding source, religious institutions, board of directors, and the family of those who live there. In contrast to Shiloah's beginning in the early 1970s, human service organizations are now highly regulated and must meet specific health, safety, work and training requirements. While the Shiloah community abides by the provincial regulations, its approach to human services is still largely inspired by its philosophy. It has also adopted certain practices that enable the community to review and reflect on its efforts (e.g., annual assessment of disabled members). At times, Shiloah has struggled against pressures to become more bureaucratic and "professional". For instance, each household is now subject to a thorough annual review by the Ministry of Housing and Social Services, and provincial regulations may soon oblige assistants to be trained and licensed. In addition, the governmental authorities have set a provincial mean for salaries a few years ago. This has allowed assistants a higher degree of flexibility with regard to their financial planning but is presenting a challenge to an organization traditionally committed to material simplicity and interdependence. Income levels also differ according to length of service.

Higher and discrepant wages reflect the values of the larger economic system and may eventually introduce a stronger individualistic and hierarchical note into the social fabric of the community.

Definition of Terms

Accompanier: A person providing accompaniment.

Accompaniment: A model of helping relationship developed in L'Arche and in which a long-term assistant is assigned to listen, support, and guide another assistant.

Assistant: A person who assists the residents in the activities of daily living. Assistants work either in a house (*house assistant*), or in one of the work areas of the community (*work assistant*).

Core people: Members of the community with a developmental disability. Core people are also referred as residents in this research.

Covenant retreat: A retreat during which participants make a formal commitment to the ideals of L'Arche.

House responsible: A person who coordinates the planning of responsibilities of the residents and assistants of a household.

Long-term assistant: Assistant who has been in a community for at least two years.

Residents: See core people.

Retreat house responsible: A person who is responsible for a house of prayer and silence in some of the communities of L'Arche. (Shiloah does not have such a house however.)

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the data from the twelve interviews. The direction of this research has been guided by the following questions: "What is the experience of living and working at L'Arche?" or "How do assistants experience, describe, and understand their experience of living and working at L'Arche?" These questions, posed in Chapter III, asked about the possibility of qualitative differences in the meaning and experience of L'Arche. Drawing upon the information that has been gathered, this chapter presents the story themes or core commonalities identified in the formal analysis of each participant's narrative.

Thematization: The Phenomenology of Living and Working in L'Arche

Six themes were identified from the stories collected. Each has from one to four subthemes. These themes and subthemes are outlined below:

- I. The experience of L'Arche involves a purposeful decision-making process.
 1. Constancy of decision
- II. The experience of L'Arche involves a communal way of life.
 1. Congruence with personal values
 2. Alternative approach to work and service
 3. "A place to call home"
- III. The experience of L'Arche involves a religious and spiritual dimension.
 1. Faith
 2. Spirituality

3. Conversion
 4. Ecumenism
- IV. The experience of L'Arche promotes growth and learning.
1. Discovery of a unique gift
 2. Process of self-discovery and self-development
 3. Difficulties as milestones of growth
- V. The experience of L'Arche confronts participants with their own limitations.
1. Adjusting to an extensive workload
 2. Interpersonal stress in relationships with core people
 3. Interpersonal stress in relationships with assistants
 4. Personal limitations
- VI. The experience of L'Arche involves conflicts and disagreements.
1. Repercussions of an unresolved conflict
 2. Disagreements and hurts

These themes and subthemes will be introduced and illustrated with quotations and descriptions showing how each manifested in the individual accounts. As the analysis progressed, these themes and subthemes were modified and refined numerous times until a satisfactory organization emerged.

Although no specific request was made *per se* for a life review, the participants chose to describe their stories chronologically because it seemed to them to be the best approach to understanding the meaning of their journeys in L'Arche, and because focusing on present experiences seemed somewhat confusing to them. The exploration of life events preceding their coming to L'Arche and the consideration of past important life issues provided a narrative context to understand their choices of

"career" and the present meaning of their lives and actions. It also provided a transition to the more intimate discussion of personal and communal issues.

(Please note that people who are developmentally disabled will often be referred to as "core people" in this chapter, since this was the term used by the participants.)

Theme I: The Experience of L'Arche Involves a Purposeful

Decision-Making Process

It is apparent in the data that the decision to come to L'Arche is intimately link to the meaning of the lives of each participant and takes place within a personal "journey". For all but one of the participants, an initial motivation was central to their decision of joining L'Arche (i.e., discovery of an alternative approach to caring for people, search for community). This decision was also associated with positive and hopeful expectations. Although four of the participants experienced some dissatisfaction with work or their personal lives prior to L'Arche, all joined for positive reasons rather than as an attempt to escape their previous difficult situations. Each in their own ways was searching for either an alternative to a lifestyle that was not particularly satisfying or to a "social movement" that could embody some of their hopes and beliefs. Coming to L'Arche seemed to give concrete expression to this "quest" or search for an alternative. In some cases, it was also intimately linked to the spiritual meaning that the participants ascribed to their lives. No one, however, had considered joining L'Arche before their first contacts with a community, nor had they known much about the movement (if at all). In that sense, encountering L'Arche was somewhat of an accident or a surprise to all of them.

Prior to coming to L'Arche, Vivian worked seven years as an occupational therapist for a long-term care facility. While working for this institution, she found that their approach to human services reduced residents to the status of objects, devoiding them of their humanity, and greatly limiting their ability to enjoy life and make personal choices. She increasingly felt she had to leave that institution and seek a valid alternative in order to eventually come back and establish an approach based on better care, growth, and shared living. As she was engaged in a process of reflection regarding what direction to take, she attended talks given by Jean Vanier, and what he said about his own relationships with people with disabilities deeply resonated with Vivian's own values and experience. She said:

When I heard him talk about the core people, it really, really corresponded to what I was thinking. These people, what they bring in my life, what I want to share with them. Like, he said something about "Love is ...", I can't remember but I wrote it somewhere. For me, it was.. "Yes this is what I believe, and this is what is supposed to be here in this institution, this facility". And so I thought I have to go and see what L'Arche is, and, as I told you, when I left I didn't leave the people behind; I was leaving to bring something back.

After a short stay in a community in Eastern Canada, she then decided to join L'Arche Shiloah in order to learn more about L'Arche's alternative approach to care and service.

In 1987, Nigel went to England and lived in a Christian community for six months. The focus of the community was on personal and spiritual growth and involved a high level of personal sharing. This stay had a profound impact on him, and when he came back to Canada he felt very depressed because he did not think he could live this kind of experience in Canada. As he said:

When I came back to Canada, I was very depressed because I had lived that intense community experience... So I came back and I felt very lost, very disappointed in the church, because the church was not community. There was no community in the church.

After many months Nigel considered going back to school and thought of volunteering as a way of renewing himself. That's when he came across a notice asking for volunteers at L'Arche. When he first visited Shiloah, he was astonished to discover people living communally in Burnaby. He was at once interested in living in the community and joined soon thereafter. He stated:

I remember walking away from Shiloah and just being astounded that community existed in Burnaby. A kind of community existed in Burnaby, you know, where people lived together; what I thought I was looking for.... I was really surprised. Outside of monasteries and convents I didn't think there was much.... I knew from the moment I went in there that I'd like to live there. I went away with that."

At the time, he felt very much that God was leading him to L'Arche and to this way of life: "It seems that I was directed towards L'Arche, and I felt very much that way, you know, spiritually".

For Carmen, her first encounter with L'Arche answered a deep felt yearning for a way of life and a mission which were perceived intuitively as very rich. On her first visit to L'Arche Trosly in France, Carmen identified very strongly with something that was sensed and perceived to pervade the "lived context", the atmosphere, or the lifestyle of L'Arche. Although unclear, this felt sense confirmed or answered a yearning or a sense of vocation already felt in her adolescence for a similar way of life. The effect of this first encounter was such for Carmen that she likened it to "being thrown off my horse" (as St-Paul on his road to Damascus). When

asked to describe what had touched her so strongly during this first visit, she answered:

I was identifying with something that was going on. It was the peace and the joy that was in all these people who were, you know, quite badly handicapped. And I remember it was a rainy day. In my mind, I had the impression the sun was just bursting. It was something, an energy that was going on there. I could not identify what, but this is what I was looking for when I was a teenager.

For several years Gabrielle worked as a coordinator for a Women's Center and was actively involved in the women's and peace movements. While she was greatly inspired by issues of social justice, she felt that something important was missing in her life, and she very much yearned for greater openness and depth in her prayer life and in her spirituality. At the time Gabrielle first encounter L'Arche, she was in a process of reassessing the nature of her prior social involvement. She made the following realizations:

I discovered at that time in my own journey what I had been involved in. Not so much the topic area, the areas of peace and justice and the women's movement, but the groups that I was involved with because they didn't have a spiritual component to them. I think there was a feeling of being lost somewhere in that, and I was spiritually dying in that. I had become so, so passionate about it and so much yearning for change, but it was all, you know, "we're going to do it", and God wasn't in the picture.

Gabrielle's husband first became a member of the community, and a few years later, after much hesitation, Gabrielle, in turn, accepted to become a live-out assistant. She hesitated because she was concerned that her involvement would interfere with long-term family goals (i.e., moving back to the countryside, her husband's studies). Throughout those years, however, she yearned for a faith perspective on life and social actions and

believes that God gradually led her (and her family) to the community. As Gabrielle remarked:

I believe that if we are open, if we are deeply in touch with what we most long for on a spiritual level, that those doors will be presented to us, and then we always have the choice.... It was the spirit leading and we were open to following it by the grace of God, you know, it wasn't conscious.

At the time of her first contact with L'Arche, Ella was divorced and had very few friends in the Vancouver area because she had recently moved to this region. She first came to L'Arche Shiloah with a friend of hers who was involved as a volunteer. During her first visits she was struck by the sense of family life, the attitude of genuine acceptance, and the lack of pretense of the people, particularly the core people. It reminded her of the family atmosphere she had known in her family of origin in Europe when she was young; relationships that she had lost once she immigrated to Canada.

Prior to coming to L'Arche, Ella also worked as an occupational therapist and held a position of executive functioning. Although there was some satisfaction in this position and in helping people who had been ill or injured regain skills and autonomy, she very much questioned the meaningfulness of her work involvement and felt that she did not truly matter as a person. At L'Arche, in contrast, she very much felt valued, wanted, and appreciated for who she was. When her youngest son left home, it was therefore clear to her that she would become an assistant. Being at L'Arche satisfied Ella's needs for the creation of meaningful bonds (based on deep caring, acceptance, love, and belonging) and for personalized work. The following quotation summarizes well Ella's initial impressions:

And that's what brought me, the sense of relationships, that people were just who they were, the sense of belonging, of being part of a clan, so to speak. And in that I found very quickly that I was accepted for who I was, that my skills were needed, that my presence was wanted, and that I was appreciated and loved. And, you know, in that I decided to stay. There was just no question in my mind that I belonged here; it's my home life, my family life."

Lucas first learned about L'Arche at a retreat led by the priest/director of a rural L'Arche community in 1978. At the retreat, he was touched by the personal stories the retreat leader told about the core people of his community. He accepted his invitation to spend a month in the community, and after this stay decided to join the community. Lucas was eighteen years old at the time and stayed in that community for more than three years as a house assistant. Several elements contributed to making this first experience significant to him: he gained freedom from his family-of-origin; he was entrusted with responsibilities very soon; he experienced a deep sense of fellowship with the core people and the assistants; and finally found the experience of community deeply spiritual and religious. Although Lucas did not specify as such why he chose to join L'Arche, it is fair to assume that some of the elements outlined above played an important role in his decision.

Subtheme: Constancy of initial motivations. For all the participants, the reasons for coming to L'Arche have remained central motivations throughout their involvement with L'Arche. Both Vivian and Ella, for instance, started their first interviews with a very similar statement. Ella said "I will start by telling you how I came because what brought me is basically what keeps me as well", and Vivian, "I'll start by explaining why I came because I think it's *the* motivation, and one of the

motivations I still have". For Ella, therefore, experiencing a meaningful position within a larger and more personalized setting has continued to sustain her over time, and, for Vivian, discovering an alternative approach to work based on relationships, dialogue, and love has remained a strong source of encouragement and a dominant theme. Similarly, the search for community ran through Nigel's personal account and served as the ultimate measure against which he assessed the quality of his community experience. As for Vivian, she has felt much more fulfilled in her work because of the overall meaning of her commitment and has come to see her involvement in L'Arche over the years as a way of life. Carmen is still involved with L'Arche 17 years after her first contacts. Finally, Lucas has continued to take important responsibilities and remains very much inspired by the vision and spirituality of L'Arche.

Theme II: The Experience of L'Arche Involves a Communal Way of Life

Closely related to the previous theme and implicit in all six accounts, is the experience of a way of life that has a strong source of meaning and fulfillment to the participants. The experience of this way of life was related to three areas which constitute the subthemes: congruence with personal values and beliefs, alternative approach to work and service, and "a place to call home".

Congruence with personal values and beliefs. The communal lifestyle of L'Arche appears congruent with personal values and goals and embedded in the personal philosophy and religious faith of the participants. It reflects a "lifestyle choice", where values of cooperation, dialogue, respect, acceptance, sharing, mutuality, and compassion, to name but a few, are seen as contributing to the creation of a sense of

shared commitment and community. However, the acceptance of the value system underlying L'Arche may not be total and may require some compromises on the part of the assistants. (The third subtheme, a place to call home, also illustrates how L'Arche's way of life is congruent with personal values and beliefs)

At the time of the interview, Vivian saw L'Arche as contributing very much to her happiness because of its way of life and its emphasis on cooperation, care, and "lifesharing" (as opposed to one based on productivity, competition, and hierarchy). Not being in L'Arche would mean the loss of a profound sense of "rightness" for her and the peace and sense of relational belonging associated with it. She described it in those terms:

If there were no L'Arche I wouldn't be so happy. I would miss this very important thing in my life, like this peace, and that I am feeling at the right place. I feel here I can live my values, the values that my family taught me. I am not able to be in a society where you have to be productive rather than focus on the quality, where you have to beat everybody and fight. I am not able to be in a place where you have to be individualistic. I want us to live in cooperation together. I am not able to be in a place where there are powers issues, a power that you can't say anything against. Even though here there is power, you know, but in the structure there is always a place to be listened to. I can always feel free to tell people, and I always feel that we are working together. Even in the conflicts, it could be hard but I am not going to destroy you. We are going to work together. And do that for the best.

During her first years in L'Arche Carmen was impressed by the simplicity and honesty of life which corresponded to personal values she held. She said:

What struck me was the simplicity of life, the truthfulness of everything. Yes, that's what I mean, it was not pretentious. It was

living the values or the kind of life that corresponded to what was in your heart, you know, like the respect, the love between people, the simplicity of everything, the joy of every simple move.

Lucas mentioned that the value system of L'Arche has been strongly influenced by Christian teachings. As people live in L'Arche, he stated, they increasingly identify with this value system. However, assistants do not necessarily fully agree with the entire value system, and usually have to make some concessions to accept some of its values and beliefs. He said:

They are certain things that we know about L'Arche, it's living with people for example, it's a Christian community, the roots are Catholic. There is a certain way of being that you discovered during the first years. And you live with it, and it becomes part of you, of the way you think, the way you live, being with the poor, the way we worship. There is something that is there, like the way of L'Arche, the Spirit of L'Arche that we talked a lot about. And this, you choose it, often not totally though, like "I could live with that".

Later in the interview, he added:

When you enter L'Arche you enter into that mold that you say yes to, and you don't live it perfectly, nobody lives it perfectly. Everybody has some reservations with it.

An alternative approach to work and service. The way of living and working of L'Arche provides an alternative model of caring for various populations in need. The social, political, and spiritual dimensions of the model reflects a different view of work, relationships, and social action, and appears to be a strong source of hope and inspiration. As work often stems from a sense of vocation, the distinction between work and leisure dissolves, and the spiritual meaning of the experience generates a holistic sense of "integration".

During the previous three years, Vivian has discovered "a totally different way" of doing her previous work, one that reflects her concern and love for the core people and her desire to contribute to their well-being. Vivian mentioned:

I think what L'Arche has been for me during these three years is that it has been a place where I can do the work I have chosen to do as a professional in a totally different way.... And here I am not an occupational therapist, I'm just me doing what I think is good, to help people grow.... It's like to be able, not to be able, ..it's because I love these people, I love these people and I want them to have the best quality of life. Here, I can do the things I would do for someone I love.

For both Vivian and Gabrielle the principles that underlined the vision and mission of L'Arche, that is, service, community living, and solidarity with people who are in needs or who are rejected are very significant because their relevance and applications go well beyond the movement of L'Arche itself, and could be applied to different groups in need, such as the elderly people or the street people. They find it inspiring that L'Arche is not only a concrete example of people living and working together according to these principles, but that it also points out to this larger social vision. Moreover, Vivian intends to eventually establish a small home promoting the same approach when she returns to her country, for she sees the need for such an alternative in the care of the elderly.

L'Arche's mission to change the world "one heart at a time" satisfies Gabrielle's longing for social change, although small in scope. This approach has an "organic" quality to it for her, as it develops slowly in natural communities and is shaped by the spiritual meaning of the vision of the movement. Finally, the intentional creation of small communities

with handicapped people is for her a telling sign of inclusiveness, hope, and peace-making. For these reasons she sees her involvement in L'Arche as a "lifestyle choice" whereby she experiences an integration of beliefs and actions. Gabrielle said:

I'm so keenly aware of how different it is to work, to be at Shiloah, than it is at another job because, you know, the spiritual aspect of it is completely integrated. There is the overall covenant. L'Arche is about changing the world, it satisfies that longing in me. It's very small, it's one step at a time, one heart at a time. It's just a sign, not a solution. It's very different from the way I was going at it before, kind of an urgency and just kind of driven. This is more... there is an integration of what God is, part of the organic process of calling into being these communities. It's not just L'Arche. Like I am not saying L'Arche is really the way to go at all. I'm saying for me that I never had that experience before. It's a lifestyle choice, a choice to live in a certain way that is much more integrated and has integrity because the spiritual is so much a part of the whole thing.... And it's not just this little community, but that there are little signs all over the world gives me so much hope. I'm so hopeful.

Ella added that the alternative lifestyle of L'Arche has strongly contributed to her spiritual journey and made it possible for her to gain greater insights into the human condition. In L'Arche her main concern has been the well-being of the people who live in her household, including her own well-being. She remarked:

All these insights have come about because I live such a different life here, I don't have to worry about the phone bill, the light bill, I don't have to be worried about being laid off, the rent, you know, any of those things. Upkeep of the house, it's all taken care of, but I do have to worry, if that's the proper term, about the well-being of the people that are giving to me and my own well-being. So that's a very different way of life.

Working at L'Arche has never felt like "work" to Lucas. He attributes this to the diversity of the roles he held, the belief that he was called to L'Arche and to these positions, and maybe in part to the fact that he lived where he worked. As he stated:

Even though I have had all these roles, I have never felt I was working. Like I feel I have no work experience yet (laughter). Because it has always come from a sense of being called or being a servant and I never felt like "Oh I don't want to go to work". Like I never felt like that.

Seeing the work of L'Arche in poor countries greatly inspires Lucas and resonates as deeply in him as it did when he first came to L'Arche 17 years ago. He declared:

The beauty of L'Arche still inspires me a lot. When I think of what L'Arche lives in Haiti in the crisis, when I read the letters by Mary Egan and all of that, "God, it's so powerful, it's so crazy, and it's so fragile". That part of L'Arche still echoes in me, it just touches the same thing it touched when I came to L'Arche the first time.

A place to call home. The need to belong, with a sense of social acceptance and contribution, is a core life motivation for the participants. In the following quotations the willingness to share oneself, mutuality in relationships, and wholehearted acceptance from the core people contributed to the experience of a sense of belonging or of "a place to call home".

At L'Arche Carmen felt accepted for who she was, regardless of her physical handicap or of personal strengths and weaknesses. (Carmen was partly paralyzed by polio in her early twenties.)

You know, you read about it in the textbooks, "unconditional acceptance". So there it was not an intellectual concept, it was something we lived. Therefore it seems to reveal the best of me.

The profound sense of acceptance that she experienced in L'Arche was illustrated by the impression she had when she first came to L'Arche that her physical handicap wasn't noticed by others, that she almost needed to state it overtly to have it acknowledged.

Would you believe that for the first few months I had the impression that people didn't notice that I was handicapped. I had the impression I would have to sit down with some people and say, "I wanna share something with you. You know I have a handicap too". And my handicap is visible, eh, but that's the impression I had. It makes me laugh when I think of that.

Because Gabrielle had never been a house assistant she felt she had somehow "come to the community through the back door". In addition, having worked mostly with assistants rather than with core people, Gabrielle felt a nagging sense of incompleteness with regard to her experience. Being in daily contact with the core people for six weeks during the last fall, however, deepened her bonds with them and validated the contribution she made to the community. Feeling accepted and loved by Noel and Saul, two non-verbal core people, was particularly significant to this change. She recounted:

Something that was really significant for me, in terms of a turning point in believing and trusting in my place, because you know being part of a community is wanting to belong... It was when, and it's gonna sound funny, but it's like... I can remember Noel's first kiss. Yeah, that gesture you know, Noel pulling my nose, kissing my forehead, I could have died you know (laughs). Because it was his "Thank you, I see you, I accept you and I like you and you're important to me, you're important enough to me that I'll do that". And that was so moving for me. And the same thing with Saul... I forget what had happened but I had had a really really hard morning and was very close to tears or they were just right there, anything could have triggered it. And I walked in the woodworking shop and Saul took... I

was standing in there, he took my head and pressed it into his chest and just held me there. He had never done that before. It was just like he knew I was really hurting. He took me and he held me. And it was so gentle. The gestures was just "Aaah!" (to express appreciation and beauty of the moment). And all I could do, you know, was just not cry at that point (laughs). It was so beautiful.... Experiencing that in Emmaus this year too, for six weeks in Emmaus. It was really significant for me. I think it's a piece that had been missing somewhere for me. Kind of a longing, really loving what I was doing with the assistants, finding so much life in that too, believing it was really important. But then, yeah being accepted and feeling I really had a place in my heart for those wonderful people.

After having been a member of two teams that lacked cohesiveness and trusting relationships, Nigel moved to a new household where assistants were able to share personal feelings and were willing to work through interpersonal difficulties and disagreements. He experienced understanding between assistants for the first time and it contributed to the creation of a sense of community within his team. Here is how he described it:

I think it's the first time I really began to experience community in the house too. Because Jacqueline had been at Terra Nova and was very much a person who wanted to talk about her feelings; in fact to the extreme end of it, from where there had been no vulnerability to now there was a lot of vulnerability, sometimes too much vulnerability. And then April came and there was really a sense that we were welcoming this person to live community. It's not just somebody arriving who, "OK we will think about community", but there was a real sense of "OK we are going to live community here, you know, like the three of us. We are going to work through things". And we did, we worked through conflicts, we worked through insecurities and anxieties, and you know, things came up...

Nigel saw the possibility of sharing feelings, struggles, and experiences with his team members as essential conditions to this

greater openness. He spoke about the importance of speaking at a level of "vulnerability", and described it as the ability to "express emotions". He added:

There was vulnerability I think for the first time since I was in a team, like real vulnerability. It was possible to express your emotions. That was the first time that I experienced... resolution or understanding I think is more... you know, understanding between people, understanding where people are coming from.

Reflecting on his four year-long stay in this household, Nigel remarked that he experienced a sense of mutuality in his house in that he gave a lot of himself and received a lot in return:

It was a good place to live, like I enjoyed living there. So it provided something for me. It wasn't a one-way thing where I gave, gave, and gave. It was very much a mutual thing in which I received a lot and I enjoyed my home.

During her interviews, Ella shared numerous reflections on herself, spirituality, and life in general. She believes that this honest process of reflection and self-examination is closely related to the attitudes of openness and sharing that is promoted in L'Arche.

And that sort of opening up of my awareness is promoted through my life in L'Arche. It's an environment that invites openness, invites sharing, and in general you're not punished for it, but you're rewarded by it. Not in any material sense but in the sense that people appreciate when others share whether it's a struggle, whether it's something good. Especially, I think when it's a struggle because you say "I know about this, I know about it". So when somebody says publicly something that I'm struggling with, I feel a greater affection for that person, a greater compassion, whatever, you know. And so that feeds the whole cycle of personal growth and interrelationships.

For Lucas, being in daily contact with the core people during the last year have helped him rediscover the importance of his relationships with them and the profound value of these people for him. Prior to our first interview, Lucas had just led a core people retreat and had very much enjoyed his time with two core members, Frank and Charles. He mentioned:

Frank came for the week-end too and I haven't been with Frank for a long time. I just had a blast with him. I just fell in love with him again. I saw myself when I was 18 again. This is one of the gifts of this last year. I have these moments of rediscovering the core people and it is so deep in me. Frank, this week-end, just awakened something very young, very silly. It's very therapeutic in a way. Charles, the way Charles loves me, the way Frank was with me this week-end. This part, it just sets fire to my love for L'Arche.

Theme III: The Experience of L'Arche Involves a Religious and Spiritual Dimension

Religious beliefs and spirituality are core elements of the meaning system of the participants and fundamental dimensions of their experience of L'Arche. Analysis of the theme revealed four subthemes or subthemes: Faith, Spirituality, Conversion, and Ecumenism. Spirituality and religious beliefs were experienced in slightly different ways by the participants depending on which subthemes surfaced in the interviews.

Faith. The belief in the providence and presence of God in life appears to be a unifying dimension in the lives of the participants. They have faith in a divine dimension guiding them and feel the need to deepen a personal relationship with this mystery. Faith enables them to deepen the meaning of their lives, and most relied on their faith to make important decisions or discern the right courses of action. For Gabrielle, Nigel, and Lucas, faith played a key role in their understanding of self, others, and

community life. Vivian did not directly refer to God, but faith appeared to be nonetheless an important dimension in her vision of life and L'Arche. Finally, for Ella, at the core of her experience of L'Arche and life, lay an awareness of the love of God at work in her and in the world.

Gabrielle personally experiences God in most aspects of her life and has a strong belief in divine providence. Reflecting on major life decisions, she stated "But the thread is that there was God in me and I thought that's what God wanted me to do." Similar statements were made in various occasions during the interviews. For instance:

I mean in terms of spiritual journey there has always been that part of me, I think since I was a child, very much aware of it, of God.... This is my feeling, that God really wanted me to make up these connections, really wanted me to see the big picture.... I believe God will be with me wherever I go.... It's about God being there and doing the best we can in front of that.

During her interviews, Vivian did not refer to God or to religious beliefs. However, she chose to describe the circumstances of the following incident as indicative of her positive experience of L'Arche. At a parking lot Vivian was given a free parking ticket on a rainy day when she and Fred (a core person) had no money. She found that incident strange and puzzling, particularly in light of the fact that it was offered to her at the precise moment she needed it (and that three similar incidents involving money had happened in the previous six months). Vivian drew a certain comfort from these unusual coincidences which gave her a sense of being provided or guided when needed. As she said: "I think it's symbolic of somebody, maybe, bringing me here and continuing to take care of me".

As seen in Theme I, Nigel felt "directed towards L'Arche" at a time when he was very much longing for community life. The faith in God's guidance remained a central element of Nigel's journey in L'Arche, and was particularly crucial during his first year in the community. During this period Nigel lived through a series of very dramatic incidents, including the attempted suicide of an assistant and the violent attacks of a core person who had a severe mental disorder. He attributed his remaining committed to L'Arche during those difficult times to the support he received through "accompaniment" (a model of helping relationship developed in L'Arche and in which a long-term assistant is assigned to listen, support, and guide another assistant), and to the strong inner certainty he had about his decision of living in L'Arche. Here is how he described it:

After about a year in community I was at a place of thinking "My God, what the hell is this? This is like torture. Why would I continue to live this?" you know. And then we welcomed Greg who was equally difficult. So it seems it was one experience after another that was difficult. I think it was recognized also that I really lived a lot of really difficult experiences. And I think the only thing that really kept me through that was that I really felt accompanied, that I really felt strongly about being there, that it was really right, that I was really supposed to be there.

Gabrielle is convinced that unity and solidarity in community life could not be achieved without God's grace and guidance. She stated:

Community is about peace-making... It's not about separating handicapped people and normal people. It is such an inclusivity that touches my longing for what I want this world to be. And there is such a desire to make that happened. And it's from God there is no doubt in my mind, because it would be impossible otherwise. The human frailty, the human inability to accept differences. And yet it's happening, not that it's easy, it's really hard work.

As a community director, Lucas also had a deep trust in God's guidance. He stressed:

My experience has been really trusting. I had a deep faith that I was led or that we were led as a community. And that was my safety in a way, even though I used my knowledge, my logic, and my wisdom. But somewhere what was carrying me a lot was a deep faith that we were a community of God. Like I operated a lot from that place.

As Ella listened to the summary of the first interview, she realised she had overlooked one essential element, namely, the central importance of the grace of God in her experience of L'Arche. She remarked:

As I was listening to you, what I thought I did not convey, and I don't know if I could, is how important the grace of God is in all of this. And I really feel the reality of that, and the beneficence of God toward me in particular, but I mean it's just not me, it's the whole world that benefits from that.... As I was listening to it, I thought "I am making a lot of statements there, but it sounds very much like coming from the head", but what I have learned in life has been revealed to me rather than discovered by me.

Spirituality. This subtheme includes the narration of three vivid experiences by Nigel, Lucas, and Gabrielle. These narration revolves around the spiritual meaning of community life, ritual, and God. In those experiences the participants felt intimately connected with one another, the world around them, or God.

During his first years in L'Arche, Lucas felt such an intense joy and sense of fulfillment that he wished at times of prayer that his friends and family members could know and feel what he was living. He declared:

To say how powerful it was for me and how much I loved the experience, at times of prayer I wanted my friends and family to experience a part of what I was experiencing; it was so beautiful that I thought "Just come for half an hour, just to feel what I am living".

Gabrielle was very touched by her first community prayer service in L'Arche. The utter simplicity of the gathering, the lively and joyful participation of the core people in the music and singing, the genuine sincerity of the prayers expressed, the small gestures of kindness between people, and the heterogeneous composition of the group, all contributed to make this first meeting an intensely real experience of community life for her. It felt intensely inclusive and conveyed a sense of God welcoming all. For Gabrielle, it was indeed a concrete embodiment of the ark (L'"arche" in English). Here is how she recounted that encounter:

That whole prayer, you know, that whole gathering of people, just the way they prayed together; I was so touched by that. There was just no pretense. There was just such a simplicity in how they came together. I mean there was just the reading of the word, a few reflections, and people prayed out loud from the heart in a way that doesn't happen in church. And then the music and the way the core people participated in the music; it was such a discordant sound for a musician to listen to. I am a person that loves fine music of all kind, but there was such a joyful, beautiful sound in the music too that was coming from the heart, yeah. And these people were really close to God, you know, just (inaudible).

JC: There was a genuine sincerity in the prayers, in the faith, and in the music.

Oh yeah and it was wherever they were, I mean there were people crying, people laughing, like Donna expressing with her hands, Stacey just keeping the beat, you know just everybody being there with the Lord. Yeah, just incredibly rich. It's something I have never experienced in any other worship circles, in a church for example, you know. So it was just a hodgepodge of people, all different kinds of people, just a variety of people there. And such a welcome in that, a richness of spirit. (sighs) And yet it touched something really essential I guess with my beliefs....(silence).of God welcoming everybody, you know, into the kingdom. It was a microcosm of that... I mean I experienced it at all different levels,

just in the way people were sitting beside me, in the way they were together, in how they helped each other find the pages in the book, just assisting and an awareness of each other. Even the core people helping one another, just like friends. That was very evident too. Yeah, it was water for a thirsty soul, you know. (Tears)

When asked to describe an incident that stood out as very positive, Nigel chose to recount his first covenant retreat. He was very touched by the beauty of the spirituality of the retreat and had an intimate sense of God being present. He related it in those terms:

I would say that I had a real deep appreciation of the spirit of it. And particularly there was Adoration.... And I had a real deep sense of God within that. And then there was at night a vigil, overnight vigil when people took a block of time, prayer over the night, and I just found that to be an amazing experience.

JC: Can you tell me what was amazing for you?

Well, it was a spiritual experience. There was just a real deep sense of peace. And I remember just one day laying there, and this is gonna sound funny, but I had the impression we would have cream of celery for lunch, and then I went downstairs for lunch and we had cream of celery soup. Just a sense of God being very close.... This was really an experience of "Yes, there is a communion here, a real communion, something very powerful between us in what we live".

Conversion. Being in L'Arche led some participants to a "conversion" or to a transformation in how they saw themselves and others, and to a reassessment of some of their core "spiritual" values.

Having felt deeply accepted in L'Arche enabled Carmen to see the essential intrinsic worth and beauty of others, and particularly of those with a handicap. She stated:

They were looking at me for what was in my heart, not what I looked like, not with my handicap. They looked at me and they accepted me the way I was, and I think it revealed to me "I'm O.K. the way I

am". I was able then to look at the others and also discover that in spite of what they have as a handicap, you know, whether it's an emotional or physical or intellectual handicap, it's the human being that's behind that external appearance that we want to go and reach. You know that place where God is.... The Beauty of the person, the real Beauty of the person.

Over time Carmen developed a sense of gratefulness as a result of her handicap and of her involvement with L'Arche because it led her to greater compassion in life. She declared:

I told you the two things that changed my life: my own illness and my encounter with L'Arche. So those were two drastic life changes, and I'm grateful for both because even now I am grateful. Would you think that possible? But sometimes I really reflect upon that and, the more I grow old and the more I think, even my physical handicap has been a gift from God because it allowed me to become probably a more empathic human being.

Several of Ella's reflections revolved around Christianity and the meaning that its teachings had for her. She believes that the essence of the Christian faith is healthy, but requires a thorough examination as to what is fundamental and what is arbitrary and based on a faulty understanding of service. Whereas the traditional teachings of the Church taught people to give of themselves and be humble and self-effacing, Ella believes that the gospels rather invite people to give to others out of their own goodness and true generosity. She stated:

What we are taught in childhood in the Christian faith is that you have to be generous and kind and giving to other people. You've got to be meek and mild and gentle and not be selfish. That's what we are taught but this is not what Christianity teaches. It teaches to be kind to others, yes, but out of what? Out of the goodness, because this is a good person or this is a person in need, but I am too a good person and a person in need. And therefore if I give more than I can, I end up giving nothing because I am not being true to myself and I do

more than I can.... But in order to share your life out of generosity, there has to be generosity and joy there. And that can't be if you don't love yourself, if you don't feel you're a good person.

Her views of Christianity have been strongly influenced by Jean Vanier's philosophy, the retreats she attended, and the lifestyle, mission, and identity of L'Arche. She added:

That is basically what Jean Vanier talks about, that's what I hear, that's what gets preached in retreat, that's what is promoted in our lives together, the mission and identity of L'Arche, the Charter, all these things are based on that. That we are good people, that all of us have something to bring, whether we are handicapped or not.

The following incident proved to be a turning point for Ella in her relationships with the core people. In this incident, Dolores, a core person who suffers from a severe mental disorder, injured herself badly when Ella prevented her from throwing a mug at another core person. When Ella bursts into tears the next day, Dolores quickly came to her assistance and begged her to stop crying for fear that she may herself lose control again. Ella was very touched by this gesture and by Dolores's fundamental dependence on her for safety and emotional stability, and this in spite of the injury Dolores had suffered because of her intervention. This incident was somewhat of a watershed for Ella because, for the very first time, she felt that it was truly OK to be vulnerable and powerless with the core people, and also realized that they wanted a genuine contact with the human and tender side of her person. On this last point she said:

There was something very significant for me happening there. Somewhere I broke through having to be capable and on top of. It was just taken away for me in a sense. And Dolores was a tool in that. Somewhere I discovered in the living that even when I am not in control, that's OK with the handicapped people. They want the

real me, not the capable me. The fixing, competent, managing. You know they want the real me, so Mama Ella, even so that she called me that or "Grandma Ella, Don't cry because I need you to be capable, because I need you to be safe with me", and at the same time really accepting that that whole event of the day before when she was really bleeding like a stuck pig, to the point that we had to replace the carpet, it was OK somehow, it was OK, she didn't hold against me what happened because somewhere she knew that she was responsible too. We are in it together sort of. I can't describe, I can't really put words, what was so significant in that particular event but it's a major event in all the years in L'Arche.

Ecumenism. A few participants touched upon the ecumenical aspect of living in L'Arche. Nigel spoke about some of the tensions inherent to community life in a multidenominational setting, and Gabrielle and Lucas stressed the importance of this element for them.

During his first year, Nigel was aware of the wide range of ethical and religious beliefs in the community, and was particularly concerned that he may be stereotyped or misunderstood because of his very conservative Evangelical religious background. He mentioned:

I also discovered that a lot of people in the community seemed to have different... their beliefs were not the same as mine. Morality was not the same as mine. Spirituality was not the same, and I felt even, maybe somewhat judged in my own spirituality by people in the community, not understanding where I was or not even being comfortable with my faith or where I was coming from in that. And not wanting to be mislabeled or labeled, you know, fanatic, whatever. So I felt very sensitive around all of those things.

For Gabrielle, L'Arche's openness to various denominations, faith, and cultures, and its international composition, are sources of much inspiration and hope. She stated:

For me it's very important that L'Arche is inclusive of other faiths, you know, there is not just the Christian faith. That's what is so

appealing to me, that it's open to... and trying to live something impossible, you know, the Catholic and the Anglican, the different people from the different Christian churches. Trying to working it out, living it out, different faiths and different cultures, and that it is a world wide network, that it is a federation.

Lucas's on-going contacts with people from the Protestant tradition has strongly influenced how he sees himself as a Catholic:

After 16 years of involvement [in L'Arche]I have changed. I am not the same at 35 than I was at 18. I am the same but I am not the same, you know. I came to L'Arche as a Catholic person. I had never met a Protestant in my life. Now I have lived mostly with Protestants from different churches. So my thinking as a Catholic person, or maybe who used to be Catholic, has changed.

Theme IV: The Experience of L'Arche Promotes Growth and Learning

Growth and learning is a theme clearly present in each account. The patterns of growth in the narratives are recognized in the ability of the participants to go out to others, to care for them, to exercise a reasonable self-sufficiency, to set realistic goals, to make decisions, to accept their limitations, flexibility, adaptability, and emotional stability.

The theme is constituted of three subthemes: discovery of a unique gift, process of self-discovery and self-development, and difficulties as milestones of growth.

Discovery of a unique gift. This subtheme refers to the discovery and development of a "gift" by Gabrielle and Carmen. By gift, they implied a special feeling that they were especially suitable to fulfill a particular role in life. As they lived in community and expanded their awareness of who they were, they gained new insights into what they felt particularly gifted in terms of talents and abilities and into what they

could uniquely contribute to others. It clarified a new vocational role for them and led them to develop their potential in that area.

During a regional retreat Gabrielle was asked to reflect on the meaning of her life and try to identify a "basic thread", that is, a consistent, unified pattern of actions and motivations running through her life and that was indicative of a central life theme. During her reflections Gabrielle came to the realization that her dominant lifetheme was "to walk with others", or to share intimately in people's journey. The realization of this basic life orientation was very significant to her and felt very much like she had uncovered a "gift". Here is how she described it:

So we all went away and did our own little reflections. And it came really clear to me and it was really profound and it was really a gift. It was very significant, kind of a turning point for me, that the thread in my life has been to walk with others. Like accompaniment is something I have done since I'm a little girl. I've been drawn to be with people in that way. To name it was really... it was so tender, I didn't tell anybody. I just "Aaaah..." it was a gift. How that might look and that might unfold, it doesn't really matter in a way... Yeah that was a gift that was given to me just through the resources and richness of L'Arche because fundamentally the spirituality, the spirit is at the heart of it.

At that same retreat, Gabrielle was asked for the very first time to provide accompaniment at an upcoming retreat. She interpreted this surprising coincidence as a confirmation of the insight she had just gained and accepted to volunteer.

As a result of her involvement in L'Arche, Carmen discovered abilities and talents that she was not aware of having and decided to acquire the knowledge and training necessary to become an art therapist.

And it's about my stay in Solames that I decided to go back to university to train as an art therapist, because there, in Solames, I had learned with my previous art experience that I could use that as a way of interacting with the people, especially the ones who were non-verbal, but I was just doing it out of instinct, you know, I had no specific training.... So, you see, once again L'Arche was instrumental in identifying a gift that I had that I used only for my own pleasure, but now that gift was used to help people develop and grow... L'Arche revealed to me this gift that I had not expected to have.

Process of self-discovery and self-development. Process of self-discovery and self-development, by far the largest subtheme, includes various learning experiences in which the participants took risks of thinking and acting in new ways, reexamined their positions, gained new insights, deepened interiority, considered new possibilities, and accepted personal responsibility.

At L'Arche Vivian learned to see positive value in the interpersonal stress and conflicts that unavoidably surface because they generate new learning and growth, including the ability to forgive which she has always found difficult. On this last point Vivian stated:

I can tell you that something that is very difficult for me is to forgive. This is ... I have a lot of difficulty with that. But here, step by step I'm learning to do it. I'm not at the point "Yeah, it's easy for me to forgive". That's not right, but, you know what I mean, I see myself making steps. And I am happy about that. It's like "Wow, they teach me that..."

Closely related to Vivian's experience of forgiveness, is the recognition that what others did to her is something she has done or could well have done to others. Acknowledging this prompted her to state that she discovered, thanks to her experience in L'Arche, that her choice of

profession involved a larger meaning, that of a vocation, an overall orientation in life.

And I told you the first six months at Shiloah were very difficult. But we're still human beings, and the things done to me that I found difficult, I did it to another person.

JC: You found yourself sometimes not necessarily welcoming.

That's right, I did that too. And realizing that helps me change things in my life. To want to be better.... So, as I told you, at this point right now, I know that when I chose my profession it wasn't a work that I wanted to do but more of a vocation.

Nigel's growth as a House Responsible was illustrated by how he learned to handle responsibilities and deal with Monty, a core member who had on-going behavioral problems. Whereas in his two first years as a House Responsible he had felt overly responsible, in his subsequent years he came to the realization that he was unable to control most of Monty's behaviour and chose to adopt a different approach. Here is how he described it:

There was an evolution in me from feeling like I had to be in control, I had to be completely responsible, that if people were at risk that I was somehow responsible for that.... I think the biggest change occurred when I slowly started to back off.... So slowly as we began to back off, I began to realize he was much happier, and he was actually living much healthier, and he was taking responsibility for things.

To be effective with Monty, Nigel learned he had to set limits, permit choices, and allow him to experience the consequences of his decisions and actions. He put it in those terms:

Really learning to have very natural consequences for people rather than you being the authority and the law or whatever. But helping

them to realize that when they don't clean, when they don't shave and shower and go to work, that they'll get told off by their bosses and other people, that other people, society won't tolerate this. So it's not a power struggle, but it's social standards that people follow.

Holding executive positions required that Lucas become more assertive, decisive, and self-assured. It developed the "male" or "father" side in him as he said. Although it was a difficult work he found it very stimulating and growth-enhancing and it fostered "a lot of healing" for him. He said:

Being a leader in L'Arche called the male in me, the father, the male. It very much called that in me. As a house assistant it was more the mother, the care, you know, bathing... But when I became director there is still the aspect of the female, (JC: the motherly aspect), the mother, but there is more the male that has to stand up, and make strong decisions, and meet people from the boards and the governments.... How I feel about it is that it was difficult but quite a lot of fun to live too. You know kind of new discoveries... It really did a lot of healing for me in that way.

One important learning for Ella in the past year revolved around the meaning of money. Having a substantial increase in salary triggered feelings of guilt as she did not think she ought to get this increase. It took her over six months to acknowledge that her contribution to the community was certainly worth her wage. She put it in those terms:

There used to be a feeling in me at first that I ought to be doing more, you know. I'd be sitting and doing my reading or my petty point or sewing or writing or whatever, and I'd be thinking "I have taken advantage of this situation. I am not putting out value for the money", sort of say you know. And it has taken me about six, seven, eight months, ever since June that I came here, to come to a point, "No, I'm giving value for money", if that's the criteria I want to use as being the valid criteria. And that is, I allow this community to include X and Y by my being here. They can't live in another house

because they create a total mayhem there. And other groups of core people would be very distressed if they [X and Y] were included in another house. So for everybody around it's a good deal for them to be here. It's even a good deal for me because it forces me to face my own anger because of who X is, and forces me to face my own anti-social withdrawal, if that is the terminology, which Y does. And it also forces me to reach out to other people in finding community because that's what I'm here for.

A very important element in Ella's life is paying attention to her "internal life". For many years she has spent an hour in silence early in the morning. This period has been a time of silent prayer or of in-depth reflection on her subjective life or on a particular topic. This process has helped her uncover personal prejudices and bias, and has led her to greater freedom and openness. She declared:

Paying attention to what is going on in my life is very important to me. Like for a long time I've had a habit of sitting for an hour every morning in just sort of being there, put myself in God's presence, and sometimes I read the daily scripture, sometimes I read a passage in a book, and then my internal life takes over... It tells me of where am I, what is really happening in me, how many blind spots I can uncover so that I'm more of a source of life for myself and the world around me.

Carmen felt privileged to live or work in an environment where she was able to develop the affective and spiritual dimensions of her person. She likened L'Arche to a "university of the heart".

Sometime I joke and I say "I went to university to get intellectual training but I went to the university of the heart to get another training.... I think it's a privilege to live that experience because there are not many places in life where you can really develop that part. It seems a lot of life goes on, either below the belt or over the shoulder, and it's that part that is a bit neglected. And it's the most important one because what did the Bible say, you know, "When everything is gone, love will not come to an end".

When asked at the end of the first interview if there was anything she would like to add to her story, Carmen said:

If I want to sum it up Jean-Claude, I would say what is extraordinary is how I've grown as a person in L'Arche, I mean that's what amazes me. It's like God allowed me to live that experience and he had allowed me to grow to a point I thought I never could. And it's an ongoing process.

Lucas mentioned that L'Arche provides many opportunities to grow and take on new challenges. For him, this is what leadership has provided: it has also been his "university" in some ways. If challenges and growth are not present in an assistant's life, he doubts whether it is healthy for this person to stay in L'Arche. Lucas stated:

It's very important to know that there is something for you because you give a lot. Like for me, there has always been something because I've been called to leadership.... I mean it has been my university in L'Arche throughout all those years. So there's been something in it for me. If it's not there I don't think it's good to be in L'Arche, it's not healthy.... I came to the point where I think L'Arche is good for a person who comes for two years, to experience community, two or three years. If you stay beyond that you need to have some leadership role. You need to have a sense of that.

Recently Lucas has seriously wondered whether L'Arche and its value system can accommodate the changes that are taking place in him. Lucas recognized that L'Arche has strongly contributed to his own personal development and that this development may now lead him in a different direction. He said:

It's very much for me to see if the changes in me, my evolution, owning myself, and realizing who I am today, fits the model of L'Arche, and what to do with that. And at the same time, L'Arche has led me to be where I am today. I mean the whole journey of becoming a man, of owning my life, the experience of L'Arche, the

confidence it has given me in my life, all of this are gifts of L'Arche to me, which has led me to be where I am today. At the same time, it may lead me away from L'Arche. It's a very interesting kind of...

Difficulties as milestones of growth. In the third subtheme, difficulties as milestones of growth, Ella, Nigel, Carmen, and Lucas each described in which way they approached a difficult situation as an opportunity for learning and development, rather than as a definite obstacle to growth.

Looking back on his first year in L'Arche, when a string of very difficult incidents occurred, Nigel stated that he believes that this difficult period did contribute to his growth and development. He said:

It's interesting in a way, you know. I'm sure that it helped me grow as a person. At the time, it feels like hell, you live so much fear and anxiety around it. I'm sure that it helps you to grow somewhere. I seemed to mature.

Being in close contact with core people who often experience much distress and little control over their emotions can easily trigger difficult emotional reactions in assistants. For these reasons, Ella stated that honesty, learning, and self-knowledge, are very important aspects of her psychological life in L'Arche. She said:

You know living in that kind of situation with people who have always lived very much in touch with their distress, and people who don't have much ability to control or hide their emotions, you can go up and down the merry go round, you know, in a range of emotions in one day that is very broad, and it wakes something up in me. Unless I know what has been walking up in me, how I am in front of it, I go nuts, I burn out. So I have to face my own devils, my own pains, my own agonies, and my own inadequacies. And partly that's done through the daily contact with the core people and also with assistants, but also through a lot of retreats that happened, the reading material that comes my way, the people I'm in contact with,

and there is always an invitation to grow, to be honest to who I am, and to discover who that really is so that I can be honest. Because honesty is a big issue with me, and I try to be as honest to myself as I can be, but I can only be as far as I know myself. And so the invitation is always to know more, to know more, to know more.

At the time of our first interview, Carmen was finding it extremely trying to live with an assistant who was exhibiting the same dysfunctional behavioral patterns as those displayed by patients with whom she worked. However, as the interview progressed Carmen gradually reframed this difficult situation as an opportunity for personal growth and self-understanding. She said:

It's very difficult, it's very difficult. It's going to be a growth experience, you know, I'm going to work it through. Certainly, it's like a mirror is in front of me and I am seeing myself like you know "Boy, you have a lot of work to do still"

Further in the interview she added:

You know, now I'm beginning to look at this as a gift, the fact that I could live with a person who has a mental illness, and, in spite of the fact that it has been very difficult at first, it turns out that it's going to be a gift because it's going to be for me an occasion to go deeper into, you know, self-acceptance and acceptance of others.

Before Lucas and another assistant became respectively director and assistant-director, they both lived in the same household and found it very difficult to live and work together. They both entered those new roles with good faith and trust, however, and were able to work very well together. Their common vision and goals prevailed over their differences or what could have interfered with their working relationship. In this situation, something that at the onset seemed impossible turned out to be a very positive experience.

Lucas commented:

We were able to really work well together. This has always stayed with me. Something impossible was... The things is that we both knew what we could trigger in each other. We knew that the whole time we worked together. And we were always able to go beyond that, and to mean it, and to know what we had said yes to, and to go from a place of what we had chosen rather than.... And that was always a very positive experience for me.

Retreats and "accompaniment" relationships may encourage assistants to revise the meaning of a particular situation, and may assist them in "reframing" difficult circumstances as opportunities for growth. This shift in meaning was highlighted in Lucas's interviews. Whereas in the first interview, Lucas expressed confusion and frustration at not knowing what role he could eventually hold in L'Arche, in the second interview he felt a renewed sense of hope and purpose. During the one-week long retreat that Lucas attended between our interviews, the retreat leaders strongly acknowledged his vocation to L'Arche. This affirmation helped him rediscover the meaning of his commitment to L'Arche, of his "calling" as he put it. This, in turn, enabled him to find the patience needed to accept his present working situation and to wait for a more challenging situation. Here is how he described it:

What I said to you before the retreat was from a place of pain and doubts, and I could then say that I will leave L'Arche from a place of anger. "I don't need L'Arche". I could say that, but when I am centered, when I am affirmed, when I go back to the calling, it is harder to get rid of me (laughter). So the whole question becomes more like "it is my right as a long-term person to say that L'Arche is there for me too". It would be almost a lie to just stay in the workshop and vegetate there. I have to either find meaning in a role I can say yes to or I question if it would be right to stay in L'Arche. But I will leave sooner if I doubt my calling. I would then take it more like "no job, no role, than I go", but feeling a calling, I

feel more open to say "I'll be patient, I'll be in dialogue in the process". So I'm going about it with a different kind of attitude.

Theme V: The Experience of L'Arche Confronts Participants with their Own Limitations.

Living through difficult situations and facing one's limitations are core aspects of the experience of living in L'Arche. The experience of confronting one's limitations as reported by the participants is embodied within four broad subthemes: adjusting to an extensive workload, interpersonal stress in relationships with core people, interpersonal stress in relationships with assistants, and personal limitations.

Adjusting to an extensive workload. Needing or helping others to adjust to an increasingly heavier workload or to new important executive responsibilities was reported by Vivian, Gabrielle, Lucas, and Carmen, and was implicit in the two other accounts.

Vivian has found it particularly difficult to strike a healthy balance between the time needed to perform her wide range of tasks and responsibilities and the time needed for her own self. In her opinion, it is the meaningfulness of the involvement that fosters such dedication on the part of the assistants. However, she fears that these constant demands eventually lead assistants to abuse their health or to leave L'Arche, as the low numbers of long-term assistants seem to indicate. As she commented:

The things that is hard for me in L'Arche is to find a balance between all the responsibilities that you have and also yourself, taking care of yourself. The longer you stay, the more you have to do. Its always, "add and add and add and add", but there are not many ways to give less. And the things that make you do that is that you like it so much that you are more and more open to do more

things. But at one point, I think it could be dangerous too. Why do assistants leave? I feel that there is an incoherence here.

At the time of our interviews Gabrielle felt some grief and weariness as a result of the very high turnover of assistants, her increased workload, and the need to find a balance between her administrative tasks and her work with assistants. She stated:

I mean there is a grieving because there has been so much change. I have been here long enough to see so much change; assistants coming and going, gathering the energy to welcome these new people and teach them about L'Arche and still remaining, you know, being inspired myself so that I can pass it on. I feel a fatigue, there is a tiredness in me with that.... There is also more things to do and I'm not as people oriented so that's a problem. Because the strength is when I'm with people and I've got more administrative things to do pretty much.

Early on in his first mandate as a director, Lucas took a few months off from Shiloah and spent some time at Terra Nova, a community centered on growth and healing. He took this time away because he felt emotionally overwhelmed by the administrative responsibilities of the role. While at Terra Nova, Lucas received guidance and support and learned to rely on the "Adult" part of his personality rather than on the "Child" part. He said:

At the beginning of my first mandate I became very vulnerable and I had to take time away at Terra Nova. And what my memory and my experience of that is is that from one day to the other you have to face the board, face the ministry, meet the lawyer on the board, and with limited use of the language. And somewhere along the way it was often the child in me who was in front of those people, who was insecure. In my time at Terra Nova and in my time away, I had to learn to protect myself, because it was... (JC: Being defenseless) Yeah, because going to a meeting I would be very afraid because the adult in me was not used to be in front of... I don't know how to explain that. It was a difficult time for me, I wouldn't say I was burned out but I was really hurting myself in it. Facing the board

and everything would go right into my guts, without protection for myself.

Carmen has felt a growing sense of disillusionment towards L'Arche because of "the repetitive patterns of overwork and people leaving" and the recurrent lack of assistants that she has witnessed over the years in several communities, including Shiloah. She is becoming increasingly aware that these conditions are chronic in L'Arche and is wondering whether assistants should live under these conditions. She stated:

Right now I am maybe a bit in a depressed mood as far as... not depressed, no, disillusioned is more my mood as far as L'Arche is concerned. It's just that the community in M. right now is going through a difficult time: lack of assistants, and difficulty in getting...(JC: getting support.) getting support. And I come here and it's the same thing. It's again very little and very few assistants, overworked assistants. And it seems to be something constant. I would say, it's the same scenario with different actors.

JC: There is a similar pattern in both communities.

In both communities and over the years too. Because I keep thinking if I look back, in the last ten years, it seems, more or less, it's always "we're short and how are we going to survive". Assistants are tired, they don't know how they are going to carry on. I suppose that's what L'Arche is all about.

Later in the interview Carmen added:

What I fear is that the young people after a while will have the impression that they are used, and they'll leave the community with a sense of anger. (JC: It's not a good leaving.) No, it's not a good leaving. (JC: Because the demands are so...) are so much. They are worn to the bone. And when they leave it's just that they can't take it anymore. They feel angry at the community for having taken advantage of them. And I'm not saying that's a fact but that's the feeling they have.

Interpersonal stress in relationships with core people.

Establishing positive relationships with core people, who may be "incredibly wounded" as Gabrielle put it, can be an important source of stress and tension. Conflicts in relationships, problems forming or changing relationships, setting adequate boundaries for others and self, and understanding of personal difficulties are among the main components of this subtheme.

Vivian identified a complex interpersonal dynamic between herself and a core member as indicative of what has been particularly demanding for her. Vivian lives with someone whose needs can never be satisfied in spite of endless expression of love. Learning to be assertive with this person is not easy for Vivian, but is seen as essential for this person's welfare as well as for her own. She remarked:

What is difficult is to live with someone who is like a bag without bottom. You can put love and love but it's never enough. She'll push you and it's not once but all the time. To push you till you reach your limits, someone who tests you all the time. And push you, and push you, and push you until you have to know your limits.... I think I was hurt a lot and I have to find a way to protect myself to be able to continue to love this person. But it is a tough love, a tough love where you set a limit.

During his first years as a house responsible Nigel got so intensely involved into power struggles with a core person that it prevented him from sleeping. Co-workers stressed to him that he was getting over-involved in this person's problems. Nigel said:

To the point when there were times when I would stress myself out, where I could hardly sleep because I was so stressed by all that was happening. I would get so wound up in a power struggles with him that I would be stressed out by it. Rather than just letting go of it and allowing the person to screw his life up or whatever, you know.

And I think it was a lot of other people telling me over the years, and some did it not very kindly, that I was not dealing well with this, that I was getting sucked into it, that I was getting caught somewhere.

In L'Arche Ella has a sense of encountering life directly, of "not evading it". L'Arche in that respect is a total experience, without escape or partial avoidance. This is particularly difficult when she is resenting being in her household. At those times she needs to "check in", reflect on the causes of her resentment, and look at the situation carefully and critically. In this social environment, Ella is therefore constantly confronted with her own self and forced to consider her intentions towards others. She stated:

I could evade the reality of life if I had a 9 to 5 job... Maybe it looks like evading life by withdrawing in a sense into a building like Shiloah and living with a very small number of people. But I think that life here is very intense.... For me there is no splitting myself when I am this at home and this at work, here I am. And sometimes that's hard because they are time I don't want to be here. When W. goes through his drooling and peeing and all that, I don't want to be here. "I don't want to face your face every morning and shave it". There is this "I don't want to be here", but I am here, so how do I survive? And then I need to ask "What is it that makes me not want to be here today?" And it often comes down to a feeling of "I don't feel loved, I don't feel appreciated, I don't feel wanted, I don't feel like you want me to be here, I don't feel welcomed". And there are days when that is really true. But there are days when I am not welcoming either. I don't want to be here, I'm sure I announce that I don't want to be here. So I'm not very welcoming either. So it's constantly facing who I am and how I am in front of other people.

Interpersonal stress in relationships with assistants. In

this subtheme participants stressed the difficulties of living and working in close quarters with other assistants. As for Carmen below, the perceived weaknesses or problems of other assistants often reflect the

participant's own limitations. The first two quotations described rather exceptional situations, however, in that they involved assistants who had serious emotional problems. The third quotation refers to the interpersonal isolation experienced by Lucas as a result of holding a leadership position.

As mentioned in the previous section on growth, at the time of our first interview, Carmen was finding it very difficult to deal with another assistant who was manifesting evidence of maladaptive behaviour. Her incapacity to "see the suffering person behind the symptoms" prompted a painful reevaluation of personal attitudes and beliefs about self and L'Arche. Describing the behaviour of this person, she said:

I am very familiar with that. I never lived it on a day-to-day basis, you know, 24 hours a day. And I found it very, very difficult... because here I can see only the symptoms, I can't see the suffering person. I find it very, very hard because I'm questioning all that I've said to you before about what L'Arche has revealed to me, about how they accepted me with my shortcomings, and how I learned to accept others, and now that I live with, that I'm not the therapist here, I'm not a full-time assistant. I'm on an equal, equal... (JC: footing) footing with the person, and we share our lives, daily lives, and it certainly questions me about the real sense of the acceptance that I thought I had.

Later in the interview, Carmen realized that her incapacity to accept this person's limitations reflected her own difficulties in accepting her own limitations as a person with a physical disability. She stated:

To be honest with you it's the fact that she, she, that person cannot function as much as she should, and therefore she cannot take as much responsibilities and she is overloading the others, and I feel it's unfair for the team, you know, to have to deal with that. It's like, "O.K., I accept that you are". But you see...look at that, I'm talking to myself now, I cannot do a full load myself, because of my handicap and I'm accepted here. You see how unfair I am? And she

can't do a full load either because she is handicapped and I won't accept it.

JC: So she mirrors expectations for performance, in some ways, that you're not able to meet yourself.

S.: It's good talking to you (voice tearful). It's helping me see... I cannot do a full chore either.

JC: And it's still difficult.

S.: Yeah, it's humiliating (tears flowing). It will be an experience. You see, once again, where else but in L'Arche could I learn that.

Nigel's first team experience in L'Arche was a very distressing and harrowing one. It is while living in that household that a young assistant attempted suicide. This incident was very, very painful and traumatic for Nigel, and a month later it was arranged for him to move to another house. Here is how he described this period:

Things were really unsettled. And I remember feeling a lot of insecurity around what was going to happen. It just seems things were not going well, and yet I couldn't really believe that because I was new to community. Then X attempted suicide. So that kind of pull the bottom from under everything. I lived a month of hell just trying to cope with that, and living in a house where I didn't feel any security anymore, didn't feel any stability or emotionally just felt ripped apart. It was just too close to home, this experience. And then living with another assistant with whom I felt I couldn't relate to at all, so basically felt alone in front of everything... And then I felt incapable of dealing with the core people after that experience. I just felt emotionally incapable of really being there with them, because it affected everyone. People were aware of this horrible thing that had happened. So after a month, then it was arrange for me to move to another house because it was such a hard thing for me to deal with. I just couldn't deal with it. And in that move I felt incredibly guilty for walking away from that house, for leaving the house responsible alone. And so I lived with all that as well.

As a director Lucas experienced loneliness because he could not be "a peer with the assistants" or have equal relationships with them. In addition, whereas core people did not modify their behaviors and attitudes

toward him as a director, assistants often behaved differently. He remarked:

In the role of director what was difficult for me was the loneliness you experience in a role of leadership. I came to L'Arche for community and I lived it quite powerfully.... When you are a director you're not peer with the assistants anymore. So you have to discover what is community for you from a totally different way. With the core people, there isn't a change. The director it's important but it's not. They hug you, they don't stop talking to you or change the way they talk with you. But the community is a support of peers, that was hard to find, to adjust to that. It was really hard to come in a room and people would stop talking because Lucas had come, whereas before I could join in and gossip with them (laughter).

Personal limitations Acknowledging one's limitations when faced to the multiple needs of people in the community, and going through some difficult inner and outer changes in a time of transitions are two examples of participants confronting their personal limitations.

Gabrielle stated that human needs are great in community and far beyond the limited resources of any single individual. This reality forces her to acknowledge her limitations; to do her very best on the one hand, but also to learn to trust in faith that God is present and caring. She said:

It's more me learning how to find a balance and prioritizing for myself. Because the needs, the doing is always there, the relating is always there. It's me coming up against my own limitations, feeling frustrated about that. So what do I need to do about that, and sometimes I need to let go. Yeah, just reassessing and I think that's also a reality of community life because the needs are very great. The core people, some of them are incredibly wounded people. And so there is no way that one person, me, can fill that role that is there. I may long to make it all better for B. I have to be careful not to go back to that place of despair. That says it all, you know. What I do is not mathematics, that's not what it's all about. It's about God being there and doing the best we can in front of that. It's the means it's not the end. That's where it's not a solution.

Gabrielle added that the intentional creation of community is difficult and requires an on-going commitment because of people's "brokenness":

It needs to be brought back to me that in fact it is quite amazing what we are living even as difficult as it is sometimes. And you know people have left the community very hurt, and we don't live a perfectly... You know there is some incredible brokenness that we are... I mean we all bring our muck. We bring our family of origin background. We bring our culture. We bring our biases, and our frailties, and limitations. It's just all there, and the longer you're there, the more aware you are of it, Boy!

Not holding a leadership position for the first time in over a decade, Lucas admitted feeling "lost". He found it very humbling to have gone from a position of power and influence to one in which he is completely excluded from the decision-making process. Intellectually, he is able to make sense out of all these changes, but emotionally it is still very difficult. Lucas lived with a great deal of anger during the past year. He stated, however, that this time of personal transition was also an opportunity to learn more about himself. He commented:

I am living something quite difficult in the transition, because I have been in leadership for I mean... (JC: A decade) Yeah. Today I'm lost. It's quite a humble place to be... It's a really hard place to be where you had a voice, and from one day to the other you don't... Sometimes it would be better for me to be totally out of it so it would be real. Rather than be in and out kind of thing. And I understand all of it, but it's humanly speaking it's not... I don't know, it's a real difficult place. I lived with a lot of anger this year, very angry. But I am not a person who would destroy things. I live it in my own way and I don't make a big scene out of it. It's a real humble place.... But I'm learning in that too because I'm a person very much open to learning and to discover. I mean there are a few good things about it. Helping me understand who I am and certain things.

Theme VI: The Experience of L'Arche Involves Disagreements and Conflicts

Conflicts and disagreements in the experience of the participants took different forms: difficulty in reaching agreements over differences, the inability to find resolutions to particular conflicts because not everyone involved found the decisions acceptable, discrepancy between one's values and the values of L'Arche, and discomfort with the level of authority and influence of some individuals. Participants' experience of conflict and disagreement presented in two subthemes: repercussions of an unresolved conflict, and disagreements and hurts. (In the first subtheme, I describe the participants' reactions to this conflict in some details because this conflict was a matter of serious concern to the participants and because some of them spoke extensively about it.)

Repercussions of an unresolved conflict. Vivian, Gabrielle, Nigel, and Lucas spoke about a very destructive conflict that opposed key members of the community as indicative of what had been particularly difficult in their experience of L'Arche. This dispute resulted in the exclusion of one of the long-term assistants from the community, and led to legal proceedings involving this ex-assistant and the community. The inability to resolve this conflict has been very painful for those participants and for many others. As Gabrielle remarked:

I became involved in trying to resolve it and it was not resolvable and it was excruciating and it continues to be very painful, for many people in the community as well as for the people who left. It's just so sad to me.

Vivian found it particularly difficult to understand how people who were so sincerely committed to the values of L'Arche could end up in such

a destructive situation. She also disapproved of the decision of "expelling" one person, which she saw as unfair for everybody. As she said:

It's just hard for me to see that two people who were carrying the values of L'Arche for a long time could not come to an agreement. What is hard for me in this situation is that we are not supposed to have contact with this person anymore. For me this is not realistic, it's not OK, and it's not OK for the core people.

Vivian's questions and doubts were intensified by the fact that, in her opinion, the assistants had not been properly informed of the causes of the dispute. At times, this lack of information led to gossips. She added:

And a woman came and helped us deal with this conflict. But it was like, you know, not equal because one side was missing. If you have a conflict, if you want to have a good idea, you have to hear both people, their point of views, not just the reason why one is leaving. Not clear enough because all you hear is gossip.

As a result of this conflict, the parties involved stopped communicating, and Nigel felt that the assistants were forced to take side as to who was right or telling the truth. As he said: "At that point it was a matter of "Well, who do you believe?" You know, you had almost to take a side."

This conflict caused anger in several assistants who disagreed with the community's actions, and led to the departure of one of those assistants, E., who was a good friend of Nigel. Nigel felt very angry as well. He commented:

When I came back [from Europe] I was very much feeling caught in-between, because a lot of rational, good people were not necessarily following along with the core of the long-term assistants in the community, and were feeling that there need not be a break between

the community and X and Y. So I felt very much in-between. I was very close to E., and she was very angry, and I felt very angry that she was angry and that she needed to leave the community. And yet I didn't know where to direct my anger, because I had felt very much supported by the director in the past, and it just seemed to be... it was a real mess, and I felt very angry.

Above all, for Gabrielle, this conflict underscored the limitations and fragility of the community and of the people involved in the conflict.

She stated:

It made me realize our limitations. It was just the human brokenness that we're a part of. Again it's not a solution, community is not going to be able to separate itself from that painful part of life that sometimes happen with people not able to come together, understand and look forward. There is too much hurt and that has been very hard for me to accept, that we just couldn't go beyond at that point.

Over the years, Lucas had grown very close to one of the people involved in this conflict, and losing this relationships involved grief reactions similar to those following the dissolution of a marriage. Lucas remarked:

It's almost ten years of our lives, we have lived a lot. And we built something together. And we shared a lot of memories, a lot of stories, and we can't share that anymore. I don't know if it's important for her anymore.... It's like I have understood what it means to live a separation, like a divorce, where there is a breakage and real hurt and you're powerless to do anything about it. And the person who was very much part of your life is out of your life.

Disagreements and hurts. Conflicts were experienced in the households or with those holding authority. Emotional turmoil, anger, resentment, grief, and hurt are among the feelings associated with those disputes and disagreements. In addition, for both Nigel and Ella those

conflicts were exacerbated by poor decisions made by those in authority and lost of confidence in their leaderships.

While living in another community as the retreat house responsible, Ella had to share the house with a woman who had a very domineering personality. After attempting to live with this woman for a while, Ella realized that it was an increasingly unequal partnership, with this person more and more in the dominant position and Ella slowly "breaking down". Eventually, Ella chose to leave this community. This whole situation was very wounding, humiliating and disempowering for Ella, in part because she received no support from the director. It was particularly painful because Ella felt a strong call to the way of life of a retreat house. She also felt very strongly that she was the victim of an injustice.

She said:

As a woman she was very, very domineering and it wasn't very long till we clashed. Although I tried to give her as much space as I could, she wanted to take over what I had as well because she just needed that kind of control. And life got more and more difficult, and eventually I came to a point where I couldn't live with her anymore. She was breaking me down. So I said "I can't live with that person anymore". So then they said "OK, so then we can't live in the retreat house".... In that I lived a lot of trauma, and a lot of pain, a lot of rejection. And it's only thanks to the fact that I had a very capable and very competent spiritual director that I survived the whole experience because I felt an injustice was being committed there.... And dealing with the anger of the whole situation, dealing with what I had lost, what I had hoped for, what I come for, which had gone out in the wind pretty damned fast anyway.

Ella attributed the decisions and the mistakes made to the people involved in the situation, rather than to L'Arche itself. She sees a tremendous power differential between a director and an assistant, and unless a

director is grossly incompetent, she believes it is virtually impossible for an assistant to challenge his or her decisions. She commented:

And that's not L'Arche, L'Arche's fault, it's the problem of the people in the situation. And since then other people have left that community, and again negative because decisions were made that were not thought out, like major decisions.... When it comes to matter of assistants, the words of a director is going to weigh a lot more than the words of an assistant. And unless a director is grossly incompetent, in the long run that person's decision is going to stand. And that's not always comfortable for the assistants involved.

Nigel felt for a long time that there is a small group of long-term assistants in the community holding a "tremendous amount of influence and authority". The fact that some of these people feel entitled to become the next leaders of the community worries him. He said:

You know there is a little clique. And feeling like almost, it's almost too uncomfortable to say there is a clique and power. Not even a power but, well, yeah I may as well say it, like there is a clique of power, there is a core in the community that holds a tremendous amount of influence and authority.... But I almost fear, I fear for the community in that. Are these the people who will be the next leaders of the community? Simply feeling that it's there right to assume the throne in the next years, you know.

Nigel decided to leave the community because he had lost trust in those holding authority. He stated it was impossible to commit his life to people he no longer trusted. He felt a great deal of resentment then. He commented:

If I could just take the house and live with it, I'd be very happy. But I can't just live in a house, I have to live in a whole community and there is just not the ability to be open, I find. The trust isn't there, in me too, you know, I know I no longer trust the authority in the community. You can't give your whole life to something that you

don't trust, that's not possible. You'll resent it, the resentment will come out and people will notice and it will cause a lot of tension. and that's kind of what has happened to a degree. You can only sweep things under so long and then they'll come up.

Narrative of the experience of living and working in L'Arche.

Prior to coming to L'Arche, the participant thought carefully about what really mattered in her career and in her life. She experienced some dissatisfactions with work and in her personal life, and yearned for some important changes. She was looking for an alternative to a lifestyle that was not particularly fulfilling and for a "social movement" that could embody some of her hopes and beliefs, but did not know how to find it. Her first contacts with L'Arche gave her new insights into her motivations. It validated her yearnings for the sense of extended family and emotional closeness that comes with shared living. It also appeared to mesh with her personal visions and values, and with her desires to work for positive change in the world.

Once in the community, the participant became immersed in the problems, discoveries, processes, and joy inherent to living communally. She was particularly struck by the care, honesty, and lack of pretense that characterized life in the community. She saw her involvement as contributing to a community based on shared intrinsic values, values such as honoring diversity, encouraging change, creating webs of mutual connection and support, and supporting the members' sense of agency. She felt strongly in agreement with those values and the lifestyle of L'Arche, which she perceived as significantly different, in many ways, from those of the wider culture. She experienced this way of life mainly through the relationships she shared with the assistants and the core people.

The participant experienced caring and love for those with whom she lived, especially the core people. The sense of unconditional acceptance that she experienced in her relationships with the core people helped her see the intrinsic worth and beauty of her own self and of others. It helped her accept her own vulnerabilities and limitations, and she acknowledged the importance of genuine and mutual relationships with them. The experience of being wholeheartedly accepted also validated the contribution she made to the community, and conferred to her a sense of belonging, identity, and security.

At times, relationships with the core people were also very demanding. They forced her to learn to handle responsibilities without getting exhausted and to set reasonable limits to her own self as well as to others. She experienced much stress and tension in conflictual relationships that involved some forms of power struggles or negative interactions. At times, she ended up feeling emotionally "entangled". Forgiving others was also a difficult but important learning because it forced her to greater honesty and led to reconciliation.

She experienced a sense of community in her house when assistants shared feelings, admitted personal problems, and showed a willingness to work through interpersonal difficulties and disagreements. She also experienced relationships of real reciprocity in the house in that each gave a lot to others. As well, personal sharing contributed greatly to closeness with other assistants and cohesiveness in the community as a whole. At times, she felt a strong joy and an intense sense of fulfillment at being in L'Arche.

The participant's experience in L'Arche was permeated by her faith in the providence and presence of God in life, the belief that L'Arche is "a

community of God", and the intimate sense of being called to this way of life. During difficult periods, her faith provided a strong sense of support and meaning. At times, she also felt a strong sense of the beneficence of God towards her and others in their journeys in L'Arche.

The participant experienced gratefulness in her journey in L'Arche because it allowed her to become a more empathic human being. She also came to see the innate human goodness and the ability to contribute to others as the fundamental realities on which L'Arche is based.

Because of the overall meaning of her commitment, she did not experience "work" and "life" as separate concepts but rather as a continuum of purposeful efforts. The freedom from usual concerns that she enjoyed in L'Arche (such as bill payments, job security, and house maintenance) also enabled her to fully care for those who live with her and deepen her inner life.

In L'Arche, the participant experienced a strong sense of agency. She gained greater awareness of who she was and of what she could uniquely contribute. She discovered and developed new skills, attitudes, and abilities. It functioned as a training ground on which she gained confidence in both supportive and leadership roles. In her various roles she had to learn how to be both firm and fair, assertive and receptive, innovative and supportive.

Whereas as an assistant the participant experienced L'Arche as a community of peers, as a leader she experienced the loneliness that comes with greater authority. When she stepped down from her leadership role, she underwent a difficult period of adjustment and transition.

Because of the lack of privacy and the intense proximity of community life, the participant was regularly confronted by others and

had to face her own limitations. She had to deal with some of the aspects of herself that she was not comfortable with and with interpersonal conflicts. It required periods of self-reflection as well as the counselling of experienced members of L'Arche. In this process, she reflected on her experiences in order to gain some new understandings of her situations and take new actions. She also experienced retreats as a very effective renewal vehicle.

In her experience of L'Arche, the participant found that the greatest challenges presented opportunities for the most growth, such as when distressed core people triggered difficult emotional reactions in her or when the challenges of leadership responsibilities appeared overwhelming.

Occasionally, she became so focused on her wide range of tasks and responsibilities that she found it very difficult to take time to attend to her own personal needs. At those times, she felt frustrated and overworked and needed to reassess her priorities.

At times, she experienced conflicts when her goals and views differ greatly from those of another assistant or of a leader, and it prompted internal questioning and a reassessment of her commitment to the community. When the community faced a major crisis that threatened to split the community apart, the participant experienced a number of reactions including pain, anger, grief, helplessness, and humility.

Although members have diverse levels of influence and authority, depending on the role they hold, the participant saw an openness to compromise and dialogue, and this even in times of conflicts. However, she experienced some discomfort with the occasional autocratic decisions of some of the leaders and wished greater transparency and consultation.

The participant drew much inspiration and hope from the principles that underlined the vision and identity of L'Arche, that is service, community living, and solidarity with people who are in needs or rejected, because these community-oriented principles point to a different value system and to an alternative approach to caring for different populations, such as older adults. L'Arche mission to change the world "one heart at a time", and its openness to various faith and cultural traditions, satisfied her longing for social change and inclusiveness, although small in scope.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of living and working in a community of L'Arche. This study yielded six themes and seventeen sub-themes. On the basis of these themes and subthemes, I wrote a narrative representing a condensed summary of the participants' experience. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the findings of the study, describe the implications of these findings for L'Arche, future research and counselling, and reflect upon the meaning that L'Arche and this study has had for me.

Significance of the Findings

Six central themes were identified as common to each of the assistants participating in this research: a purposeful decision-making process, a communal way of life, a promotion of growth and learning, a religious and spiritual dimension, a confrontation of one's limitations, and conflict and disagreements. The first section of this discussion will compare the results of the present research with those of some of the theories and studies discussed in the literature review. The second will examine the implications of some of the results for L'Arche.

Comparison with Previous Theories and Research. Over the last 25 years, much has been written about L'Arche, its value and philosophy. What has been lacking is an account of the lived experience of L'Arche and its meaning. As was indicated in the literature review there has been very limited research on the L'Arche movement. Of the three research reviewed, only Sumarah's (1983/1985) ethnographic study on the therapeutic dimensions of shared living examined the phenomenon of living in L'Arche in some depth. Following ethnographic observations and

two semi-structured interviews, he described the therapy of L'Arche as "the belief in and practice of agency, community, and religion" (p.194). These three themes were clearly confirmed and clarified by the findings of the present study. However, whereas each theme in Sumarah's research was "chosen" (p. 193) by the researcher himself and originated largely from the thoughts of John MacMurray, each of the themes and subthemes generated in the present research emerged from a thorough and minute data analysis of the narratives of the participants. Thus, the current research provided a more precise description and understanding of the qualitative differences in the experience of community among the participants. Let us look more closely at how the findings of the present study confirm and add to Sumarah's themes.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the months or years preceding their coming to L'Arche, the majority of the participants experienced some personal or professional dissatisfactions. Vivian, Gabrielle, and Ella felt unfulfilled with their careers. Nigel felt depressed and without a clear sense of direction, and Carmen was still adjusting to life with a physical handicap. Those situations seem to have led them to ask questions such as "Where can my needs and values be integrated with the views of others? Where can I receive the warmth and closeness that I need?" and more fundamentally, "Where do I belong?". These questions stimulated the formulation of a theme. It initiated a yearning for community. It made them aware of the human needs for inclusion at a personal, vocational, and social level. The participants' experience in community living provided concrete answers to these questions. It supplied the antidote to their sense of estrangement and isolation. It provided support and challenge, and gave them a sense of

belonging and identity. It was also consistent with Sumarah's (1983/1985) finding that the experience of fellowship has an important therapeutic value in the lives of the participants.

Their involvement in L'Arche was also seen as a desire to reclaim a sense of agency that had been impeded in the past. They discovered in L'Arche an environment where they could be the kind of person they wanted to be. They stressed the importance of building community on values of acceptance, support, and love. And they themselves were encouraged in their agency by developing their skills and assuming more responsibility for the community. As assistants or as a director, they saw themselves as agents of relationship and social change. They invited others to be active in the process of creating community. The well-being of the community resulted not only from their actions but also from all the members who desired to create community with and for others. As in Sumarah's (1983/1985) study, the participants' sense of agency was strengthened by and contributed to the community's notion of agency.

The participants' spiritual journey conveyed strong images of connectedness and solidarity as well. Their sense of connection with a personal God seemed to answer a deep need for a vital and long-awaited Other and provided a sense of security in the making of their decisions. Their spiritual orientation also formed part of the ideological glue that bound the community together, and was bolstered by the vision and mission of L'Arche which emphasizes the importance of living and working together as one body in the spirit of the Beatitudes. The data of the present study supports Sumarah's (1983/1985) contention that "a personal and social sense of religion" (p. 236) provides the unifying element in understanding the communal way of life of L'Arche. For, according to him,

"the creation of universal community, which is essentially a religious project... promotes in persons a personal sense of agency and a psychological sense of community" (p. 194).

These three themes, as lived concretely and personally by the participants, are also consistent with the dimensions of the philosophy of L'Arche reviewed in Chapter II. Given the importance of agency, community, and spirituality in the experience of the participants, the decision to commit themselves to a movement such as L'Arche appear very coherent. For L'Arche both answered their search for "a place called home" (for themselves, for others, and with God) and enabled them to expand their personal potential and make significant contributions to the well-being of others. The participants' narratives emphasized the importance of personal relationships, validated the communal ethos of L'Arche, and asserted the pre-eminence of the spiritual in their lives.

The service-oriented mission of L'Arche may explain why the participants can satisfy both agentic and communal needs. McAdams (1993) stressed that we draw upon both needs when we make a significant investment of time and energy to the welfare of others. The importance of agency and communion in the stories of the participants is also consistent with McAdams's contention that we organize our values and beliefs around those two basic motivational themes.

In addition, the findings of the present study suggest that L'Arche provided an optimal environment to face Mosak's (1977) life tasks or basic challenges in life (which are incidentally a combination of agentic and communal tasks). Those tasks are making a contribution, that is, caring for others and taking initiative; relating to others, that is, interdependence and openness to sharing; getting along with ourselves,

that is, self-acceptance and self-knowledge; achieving intimacy, that is, communal bonds and belonging; and spiritual growth, that is, shared purposes and meaning of commitment.

The findings of the present study are consistent with the four elements identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) to describe the dynamics that contribute to the creation of a sense of community. Those elements are membership, influence, sharing of values with an integration of needs, and shared emotional connection. A detailed summary of this model is provided in Appendix E. Examples will be offered to illustrate the interworkings of these elements in the lives of the participants.

Membership. The community, that is, the larger whole, provided the context in which participants lived, learned, and related to others. They chose to work and live together as they pursued a shared vision. They experienced a sense of belonging, kinship, and connection with other assistants and with the residents. They agreed to a common covenant that spells out the community's primary values regarding relationships, communication, and service. They saw a clear distinction between the way of life of the community and that of the larger society. Participants were held together by the vision of L'Arche and a shared religious faith.

Influence. Community was seen not only as a safe place but also as a on-going "process" that required commitment to mutual assistance, open communication, conflict resolution, and decision making by careful consensus. Participants took initiative, developed their abilities, and when necessary disagreed.

Sharing of values with an integration of needs. Their shared values helped them commit themselves for the long-term to their own, one

another's, and the group's well-being. They saw their needs, values, and lifestyle integrated with the community's purpose and structures. It conferred a sense of wholeness to their lives and boundaries between work and life became permeable.

Shared emotional connection. The participants were willing to open themselves up, to listen to each other's concerns, and honor the feelings of others. They contributed something that they felt especially able to give. They experienced community as a place of emotional support, with deep sharing and bonding with other assistants and the residents. Despite its limitations and pressure, the general impression was that the rewards of living in L'Arche outweigh its difficulties.

The participants' accounts contained a number of examples of the six commitment-building mechanisms identified by Kanter (1973). Those commitments are sacrifice, investment, communion, mortification, transcendence, and renunciation. Here are some examples of those commitment-generating mechanisms in the narratives: sacrifice - participants gave up certain things as condition of their memberships, such as lost of privacy and control over their living space; investment - participants gave their time, money, and effort an on-going basis for the community's sake and this investment promoted personal growth; communion - participants immersed themselves in a continuous round of group activities and identified themselves as something larger than the sum of their individual relationships; transcendence - the alignment of the participants with the common purpose of the community helped them persevere through conflictual times; mortification - participants focused on the needs of others in the community and expanded their sense of self; renunciation - the community provided the main source of emotional

satisfaction to most of the participants and the bulk of their relationships could be found within L'Arche. The presence of those commitment-building mechanisms among the participants may in part explain why those assistants developed a significant identification with the value system of L'Arche and its way of life, as well as why Shiloah has been among the most stable L'Arche communities in North America.

The phase theories (Adler, 1975; de Miribel, 1981; Shafer & Anundsen, 1993) outlined in the literature review are not compatible with the results of this research. The participants' themes are aspects of a complex and multidimensional experience, and are, as such, only indirectly related to the developmental notion of phase. In contrast to themes, phases provide a simplified normative description of what people experience in a given situation. Although the participants' narrative contained references to the phases, such as when participants were repeatedly confronted to their own limitations (phase II or III), or when they recommitted themselves to the community vision after a difficult period of transition (phase IV), it is not possible to assert whether those experiences were clearly indicative of a particular phase. Only a longitudinal study could provide such a comparative understanding of change over time.

The themes and subthemes of the present research are consistent with the philosophical or religious literature on L'Arche. For instance, the commitment of the participants to L'Arche as God-centered rather than as cause-oriented reflects the philosophy of the movement. The same could be said about the communal vision of the participants who stresses the unique values of the people who have a disability and the importance of building community life with them. Growth, self-discovery and self-

development are dominant themes in the literature as well, and authors, such as J. Vanier (1989), have stressed the importance that community remains an open system where people are deeply respected in their personal development. Vanier has also written extensively about the tensions and conflicts that arise in L'Arche and about the difficult but essential process of learning from them.

Implications for L'Arche

What is noticeably missing in previous studies on L'Arche is any direct references to the emotional challenges and interpersonal conflicts that inevitably occur in this communal setting.

Demands put on assistants can be great as the theme on personal limitations indicated. New assistants may be so focused on the group needs that they neglect their personal needs, and end up leaving disillusioned and angry. In addition, as Vivian and Carmen suggested, a heightened feeling of commitment and identification to L'Arche carries with it the danger of workaholism and potential burn-out. Assistants can end up using the compelling mission of their community as an excuse for ignoring their own health, family, and friends. A sense of balance is therefore vital to avoid these dangers and entails personal responsibility. It also requires an environment where assistants are encouraged to give and receive clear feedback so as to make the needed adjustments.

A community of 25 assistants multiplies the potential for differences in perspectives, values, and lifestyles. A certain amount of miscommunication and conflict is therefore inevitable. In addition, personal and interpersonal problems can be encountered repeatedly in relationships with others as the theme on conflict and disagreement attested. When confronted with a major crisis, the community may also

suffer polarization and give rise to distrust. Secret power plays and hidden agenda can arise even in a close-knit community where everyone is supposedly committed to common goals. Those difficulties underscore the vital importance of acknowledging and working with conflict. If a community does not deal with the conditions that gave rise to a particular conflict, chances are that similar disputes will appear or that the lack of cohesiveness of the community will express itself in different ways.

Although J. Vanier (1989) and Nouwen (1981) speak abundantly about the importance of "going down the ladder" of our social hierarchy, a community of L'Arche is characterized by its own social scale. Assistants who stay in L'Arche are inevitably called to "go up" the social scale of the organization. What one may lose in power outside the community, one may gain within the community. As the theme on personal growth suggested, there are undoubtedly beneficial aspects to "going up the ladder" of the community as it contributes to self-development and a growing sense of agency and social responsibility. However, greater power and authority can also be misused, and this perhaps more so in a small community. It can be used to control and exert one's will over another's will as was the case when Ella was asked "unilaterally" by the director to leave the retreat house. This kind of "power differential" between an assistant and a director (or for that matter between an assistant and a resident) underscores the importance of considering how decisions are made and how power (or the capacity to bring about change) is shared in a community.

Because a community is an excellent example of living systems, it may be helpful to see it as a living, organic whole rather than as an addition of separate parts, and this, especially during conflicts or a

crisis. A community operating from a systems view of reality may regard members who cause problems or raise unpleasant issues as messengers of a deeper, system-wide problem. It may provide a more complex understanding of a particular situation, and may open the community to a larger perspective that includes both sides of a polarity.

The health and vitality of community depends to a large extent on its diversity, and since its beginning L'Arche has aspired to be "inclusive" of a wide range of people, starting with people with developmental disabilities. As I have reflected on the conflicts and disagreements reported by the participants, I have wondered, however, how much diversity L'Arche could embrace while still remaining cohesive enough to accomplish its purpose. Although I have no easy answer to this question, it is clear to me that the communities need enough commonalities to ensure a sense of inclusion among its members while avoiding the danger of becoming a narrowly defined affinity group.

Implications for Future Research

Numerous issues were raised by the data in this study which could not be followed up here. Some of these are listed below; they are divided into questions related to the results of the present study and questions not directly related to the findings but nonetheless relevant because they have important connections with the research methodology and with various aspects of community living in L'Arche.

Further questions that could be asked about L'Arche include those which follow.

- 1) As this study demonstrated, relationships between assistants and residents give opportunities for life experiences markedly different from those of most people who have little or no contact with people who have

disabilities. A longitudinal study could examine the ways in which those relationships develop. Would the results of such a study confirm the findings of the present research? For instance, would the relationships with the residents contribute to greater self-acceptance or to interpersonal stress?

2) Cycles of stress, anxiety, and conflicts are core aspects of the experience of living in L'Arche. These findings could be further investigated to provide an understanding of adaptation to stressful situations in L'Arche. What would the assistants' strategies be for coping with their own anxiety in working in difficult situations?

3) The present study showed how difficult situations were used as an opportunity for psychological and spiritual growth through the willingness to take risks, initiate difficult changes, and nurture personal strengths. This finding could be further examined to specify the influence of stress conditions on personal growth in the lives of the assistants in L'Arche.

4) As indicated in the previous section, the findings of the present study lent some support to the elements identified in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of sense of community. This model could provide a useful framework to understand the dynamics at work in purposive communities such as L'Arche, and a thorough examination of "sense of community" based on this model remains to be done. This model could also provide a framework for comparing and contrasting various communal organizations. The Sense of Community Index (SCI) developed by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, and Wandersman (1986) could also be used in those research to measure the sense of community.

5) The present research focused on participants who had made a long-term commitment to L'Arche and who were mostly satisfied with L'Arche. What themes would be obtained from similar research with people who were in L'Arche for a year or two, or who were dissatisfied?

6) How would the results differ if the same method as in the present research was used, but the researcher was not known to the participants as someone who had lived in L'Arche?

7) I chose to interview individuals. What findings would emerge if group interviews on the same topic was conducted in a household, with all the members present? Such research could focus on the group processes involved during the interview, as well as on the content of what was said.

8) As mentioned in the previous section, a longitudinal study could describe how assistants change over a period of time and identify possible phases in their experience of community life. What would be the differences between those phases?

9) L'Arche is an international federation of over 97 communities spread over 25 countries. Would the findings of a phenomenological research differ if the research was conducted in Europe, Asia, or Africa? Would participants construct their experiences differently depending on which country they are from or which faith they hold?

10) The self-reports of participants as elicited in the present study could be compared with either qualitative or quantitative data collected in future community research. In this way one could learn what similarities and differences exist between the viewpoints of participants of different L'Arche communities or of various types of intentional communities. L'Arche could be compared in this respect to other forms of

shared living arrangements - such as congregate housing for older adults or traditional religious communities.

Implications for Counselling

There are at least two roles in which counsellors may find themselves for which this study has implications: those of clinical counsellor or mediator.

Clinical practice. It is important that counsellors working with individuals living in L'Arche (or in other shared living groups) be able to comprehend important aspects of their clients' experience, and particularly to have enough awareness of this lifestyle to see it as a positive option rather than as a negative choice or as an anomaly. (This is not to deny that a particular individual could choose to live in L'Arche for unhealthy reasons, just as any choice may be made for negative reasons.) Thus, a counsellor who intends to work in L'Arche must be committed to a process of knowing its culture, history, group and community dynamics, and in as much as possible from "the inside".

The main contribution of the present study to the practice of counselling is in illustrating as accurately as possible the experience of living in L'Arche. As we know there is always a gap in understanding but it must not be too wide if an individual is to feel understood (Patterson, 1978). The counsellor's ignorance of such elements as the role of faith, personal growth, or interpersonal stress in the lives of his or her clients could greatly undermine the effectiveness of his or her interventions. Occasional participation to L'Arche meetings, attendance to a L'Arche retreat, and reading of material on L'Arche, including this study, would help a counsellor gain important insights about his or her clients' experience and increase his or her credibility with the assistants.

The counsellor needs also be aware of the pluralistic environment of the communities. The communities are made up of people from different nationalities, various social and economic backgrounds, and especially of diverse mental and social abilities. Knowledge of the field of mental retardation and particularly of individuals with a development disability would add to the effectiveness of such consellers.

As mentioned in Chapter II and illustrated in Chapter IV, coming to L'Arche calls for major adjustments. It is a powerful challenge to the closed, separate, individual world in which most people live. The interactions are many and intense. People run into conflicts and tensions because of such factors as personality differences, individual problems, lack of privacy, and fatigue. In addition to being responsible for the welfare of people with disabilities, an assistant coordinating a household, for instance, may have to budget for the house and exercise authority over other assistants which can be a real source of strain. The emotional and relational demands made by some people with disabilities can also be very taxing at times.

Faced with such a complex interpersonal environment L'Arche soon recognized the vital importance of helping relationships (which at L'Arche is called accompaniment). As de Miribel (1981) emphasized, "A community has no right to invite people to risk embarking on community life unless it has the will and the means to stand by them all the way" (p.78). As stated in Chapter IV, L'Arche has developed a system of accompaniment and support in which a few long-term assistants are assigned to listen and guide other assistants. In time of transition, for instance, the "accompanier" may guide an assistant through a difficult passage. She can share her own experience, the difficulties she herself

has encountered, and so help the assistant in discerning how to approach a particular situation or which decision to make. Accompaniment is in several ways similar to paraprofessional counselling which role is to provide sensible supportive assistance. It reflects the desire of the community "that each assistant be given every opportunity for the greatest possible growth in community living" (Mosteller, 1981, p. 3).

The involvement of professional counsellors in this area can be constructive as it challenges the community not to turn in on itself, and because they have other reference points and draw on different experiences. They can offer assistants the freedom they need to make decisions about their lives without feeling pressures from the community. For instance, counsellors may help new assistants struggling in L'Arche discern whether this type of lifestyle is for them at this point in their lives. They can assist them in considering the demands of this communal way of life. Are they willing to delve beneath the surface in their feelings and relationships on a daily basis? Are they open to work on their communication skills, confront personal issues, and engage in conflict resolution? Does the core vision and values of L'Arche match with their own?

A last but important area where a counsellor may be of great assistance is in helping assistants reenter the broader community. When assistants leave, they may encounter the same problems of adaptation as when they arrived but in the opposite direction, especially if they lived in L'Arche for several years. These difficulties can be increased by the fact that they may find themselves alone and with little support. The presence of a compassionate and supportive individual who takes the time to listen to them and accompany them in this time of transition can be invaluable.

The present study has a number of implications for counsellors. First, because the decision to join L'Arche and the on-going commitment to L'Arche is often a matter of deep intuition and thoughtful interiority, counsellors would need to be aware of the elements of subjectivity, sensitivity, and intentionality that may characterize the counselling process with such individuals and the need for a flexible and creative approach. This approach would require that the therapist utilize the nonrational and intuitive side of thinking, knowing, and choosing as well as the logical side.

Second, in working with long-term assistants a therapist would need to remember that not only did the long-term assistants incorporate work and love in their life roles, but have dedicated their lives to a lifestyle where the dichotomies between work and love do not exist. Considering this choice the counsellor would need to place central prominence on the person-to-person relationship. With such individuals, it is not so much the techniques the counsellor uses that would make a therapeutic difference but the quality of this genuine encounter.

Finally, in helping long-term assistants reenter the larger culture and assess their career options, it would be essential to explore the meaning of their commitment to L'Arche and how they incorporated it in their vocations. As for the participants in this study, agency and personal growth would likely play a key role in their lives. Their involvement in community would also indicate that it is important for them to work with people who share a similar vision and who work towards it together. And their deep interest in contributing to the well-being of others is a fundamental dimension of their philosophy of living. Those patterns of motivation give important clues as to what would be fulfilling in the

future. Counselling such individuals would imply assisting them in finding viable, fulfilling, personal vocational options.

Consultation. A L'Arche community may engage a counsellor or other mental health professionals to mediate a dispute (as was the case in the major conflict described in Chapter IV), or to act as a facilitator of house or community meetings. The finding of this inquiry, which comprise the stories and opinions of experienced and mostly satisfied participants in L'Arche, may be instructive to such professionals. A counsellor with expertise in group dynamics generally or in conflict resolution or collective decision-making in particular may also be called to serve as an educator. Such interventions may likely contribute to a more public discussion on matters that affect all assistants and prevent the type of destructive conflicts described in theme VI.

As seen in Chapter IV, adjusting to an extensive workload can be a source of on-going stress for the assistants and can lead assistants to abuse their health. As Vivian stated:

The longer you stay the more you have to do. It's always "add and add and add and add", but there are not many ways to give less. And the things that make you do that is that you like it so much that you are more and more open to do more things. But at one point, I think it could be dangerous too. Why do assistants leave? I feel there is an incoherence here.

Johnston (1987), a psychiatrist who has worked for many years for a L'Arche community, echoed those concerns when she noted "that the pace of life can be unrelenting and addictive to assistants who learn to "burn out". They learn to feel truly alive in a driven somewhat "manic" state of activity and feeling" (p. 9). During a workshop a counsellor may invite a community to look at this reality and help them answer the following

questions from Freudenberger (1975): "What is burnout? What are its signs? What types of personality are more prone than other to its onslaught? Why is it such a common phenomena among alternative institutions? What can we do about burn-out once it starts? And what criteria can we build within ourselves or our working environment to help us to safeguard against this serious occupational hazard?"(p. 73).

A total immersion in community life can be not only an on-going source of stress, but can also isolate people from the larger community. J. Vanier (1989) often mentioned that there is a danger of thinking of the community as a goal, an end in itself. As he stated, "Community must never take precedence over individual people" (p. 21). The difference between a true community and a sect or a cult lies in this respect for the precedence of the individual over the group. Deikman (1990) remarked that "the child's wish for a powerful protective parent waits in the depth of the psyche and express itself [through] cult behaviour even in people who do not belong to cults."(p. 1) Compliance with the group, dependence on a leader, devaluation of the outsider, and avoidance of dissent can all be expressions of cult behaviour present in a community. It is essential for a counsellor to understand the cognitive mechanisms that operate in a totalistic environment, or in "addictive organizations", so as to provide alternative viewpoints when necessary.

A last point neither related to clinical practice nor consultation pertains to the occurrence of dual-relationships in L'Arche. Because of the close-knit nature of the communities, "accompaniers" can easily engage in different kinds of relationship with their "client-assistants", as was revealed in one of the interviews. Nigel stated that he had dual relationships with most people accompanying him. That is, on the one

hand, they held a role of authority over him, such as director or assistant-director, and on the other hand, they met him as trusted companions with whom he shared very personal details. Over time Nigel came to the realization that it was indeed very unhealthy to have "your boss [as] your confidant". Counsellors and "accompaniers" in L'Arche must avoid engaging in "employer-employee" relationships, or any other dual relationships that could cloud their judgment and interfere with the helping process and outcome. During the last years, the Community Council of Shiloah has set new standards in this area (to reduce the occurrence of such relationships), and individuals who hold administrative and/or supervisory responsibilities no longer provide accompaniment.

Personal Reflections on L'Arche and the Research Process

Unsatisfied with my career as a teacher and seeking to incorporate my faith in a meaningful project I decided in 1987 to take a few months off from work and join the community of L'Arche Shiloah in Burnaby. Very soon after my arrival I found the experience of living in L'Arche vastly more challenging, meaningful and nourishing than anything I had ever encountered before. I soon experienced a profound sense of belonging and enjoyed the companionships (and the conflicts!) that working and living closely with others could provide. What began as a three-month trial period turned out to be a three-year involvement that had a profound influence on my life orientation.

During these three years I discovered that L'Arche's particular charisma for me lay in the fact that it was an embodiment of the values of the Gospels. I experienced an intimate sense of Christ being present in the midst of my joys and struggles and in the lives of those who accompanied me in that journey. While at L'Arche I also discovered the

fundamental importance of relationships and felt a strong desire to be close to those who suffer. This eventually led me to apply to the program of counselling psychology.

During my first two years in the counselling psychology program, I actively sought a research topic and, to my surprise, found myself drawn to conduct a research project on L'Arche. Reflecting upon the powerfulness of my community experience, I could not help but think that this experience would certainly be worth investigating in further depth. After some hesitations I decided to submit a short proposal to Dr. Young who encouraged me to undertake such a project.

Conducting this research was a very demanding and humbling experience for me. Reviewing literature on a topic that had hardly been researched, writing in English for the very first time, transcribing one to two-hour long interviews, figuring out the many steps of a qualitative data analysis, summarizing and examining the significance of the results, all those steps were somewhat mystifying for me and, I must admit, source of much stress. I greatly enjoyed conducting the interviews however. Each participant spoke from a place of authenticity (and at times of vulnerability) and it clearly contributed to the quality of the data.

The themes emerged one by one. The subthemes added depth to those initial themes, and I had to review my analysis a number of times. I was critically conscious of my own presuppositions throughout the study and I conducted and analysed the interviews with an attitude of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity. My aim in investigating the experience of L'Arche was to uncover the inherent logic of that experience or the ways in which it made sense to the participants.

Have the themes and subthemes captured the uniqueness of the experience? In a sense yes, in another no. The experience of living and working in L'Arche is indeed a mixture of community, spirituality, growth, pain, meaning, and conflicts, yet it still remains a bit of a mystery for me. The more I know about L'Arche, the more I realize it cannot fully be known by anyone. Yet I believe that this research has clearly identified the core dimensions of the experience. L'Arche was a fascinating topic to investigate, but it remains nonetheless a far more interesting and rewarding reality to experience.

Summary

This chapter discussed some aspects of the findings which seemed to be particularly significant. It began with a comparison of the results of the present study with those of some of the research discussed in the literature review. The results were consistent with the three general themes identified in Sumarah's (1983/1985) research on the therapeutic dimensions of L'Arche, with Kanter's (1973) commitment mechanisms, and with the dimensions of the philosophy of L'Arche reviewed in Chapter II. It also provided some support to McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of sense of community. Overall, the pattern described in this study is a more complete picture of the experience of living and working in L'Arche than previously available in the research literature. This chapter continued with an examination of some of the implications of the themes V (limitations) and VI (conflicts) for the communities of L'Arche. It then described implications of the findings for future research and particularly in connection with the areas of stress, personal growth, and relationships with people with disabilities. The chapter also discussed important implications of the finding for practice in the areas of personal

counselling and consultation. It touched upon several topics, including attitudes of the counsellor, mediation, education, dual relationships, and burnout. Finally, I briefly explored the meaning that L'Arche and this research process has had for me.

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Appendix D

Charter of the Communities of L'Arche

L'Arche began in 1964 when Jean Vanier and Father Thomas Philippe, in response to a call from God, invited Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, two men with mental handicaps, to come and share their life in the spirit of the Gospel and of the Beatitudes that Jesus preached. From this first community, born in France and in the Roman Catholic tradition, many other communities have developed in various cultural and religious traditions. These communities, called into being by God, are united by the same vision and the same spirit of welcome, of sharing and simplicity.

I. Aims

1. The aim of L'Arche is to create communities which welcome people with a mental handicap. By this means L'Arche seeks to respond to the distress of those who are too often rejected, and to give them a valid place in society.
2. L'Arche seeks to reveal the particular gifts of people with a mental handicap who belong at the very heart of their communities and who call others to share their lives.
3. L'Arche knows that it cannot welcome everyone who has a mental handicap. It seeks to offer not a solution but a sign, a sign that a society, to be truly human, must be founded on welcome and respect for the weak and downtrodden.
4. In a divided world, L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of different intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be a sign of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation.

II. Fundamental Principles

1. Whatever their gifts or their limitations, people are all bound together in a common humanity. Everyone is of unique and sacred value, and everyone has the same dignity and the same rights. The fundamental rights of each person include the rights of life, to care, to a home, to education and to work. Also, since the deepest need of

a human being is to love and to be loved, each person has a right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life.

2. If human beings are to develop their abilities and talents to the full, realizing all their potential as individuals, they need an environment that fosters personal growth. They need to form relationships with others within families and communities. They need to live in an atmosphere of trust, security and mutual affection. They need to be valued, accepted and supported in real and warm relationships.

3. People with a mental handicap often possess qualities of welcome wonderment, spontaneity and directness. They are able to touch hearts and to call others to unity through their simplicity and vulnerability. In this way they are a living reminder to the wider world of the essential values of the heart without which knowledge, power and action lose their meaning and purpose.

4. Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognized and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed.

5. In order to develop the inner freedom to which all people are called, and to grow in union with God, each person needs to have the opportunity of being rooted and nourished in a religious tradition.

III The communities

1. Communities of faith

1.1 L'Arche communities are communities of faith, rooted in prayer and trust in God. They seek to be guided by God and by their weakest members, through whom God's presence is revealed. Each community member is encouraged to discover and deepen his or her spiritual life and live it according to his or her particular faith and tradition. Those who have no religious affiliation are also welcomed and respected in their freedom of conscience.

1.2 Communities are either of one faith or inter-religious. Those which are Christian are either of one church or inter-denominational. Each community maintains links with the

appropriate religious authorities and its members are integrated with local churches or other places of worship.

1.3 Communities recognize that they have an ecumenical vocation and a mission to work for unity.

2. Called to unity

2.1 Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all the community members. This implies welcome and respect for differences. Such unity presupposes that the person with a handicap is at the centre of community life. This unity is built up over time through faithfulness. Communities commit themselves to accompany their members (once their membership is confirmed) throughout their lives, if this is what those members want.

2.2. Home life is at the heart of a L'Arche community. The different members of a community are called to be one body. They live, work, pray and celebrate together, sharing their joys and their suffering and forgiving each other, as in a family. They have a simple life-style which gives priority to relationships.

2.3 The same sense of communion unites the various communities throughout the world. Bound together by solidarity and mutual commitment, they form a world-wide family.

3. Called to growth

3.1 L'Arche communities are places of hope. Each person according to his or her own vocation is encouraged to grow in love, self-giving and wholeness, as well as in independence, competence and the ability to make choices.

3.2 The communities wish to secure for their members education, work and therapeutic activities which will be a source of dignity, growth and fulfillment for them.

3.3 The communities wish to provide their members with the means to develop their spiritual life and to deepen their union with and love of God and other people.

3.4 All community members are invited to participate, as far as possible, in decisions concerning them.

4. Integrated in society

4.1 L'Arche communities are open and welcoming to the world around them. They form an integral part of life in their localities, and seek to foster relationships with neighbors and friends.

4.2 The communities seek to be competent in all the tasks they are called to accomplish.

4.3 The communities wish to enable people with a handicap to work, believing work to be an important means of integration.

4.4 The communities seek to work closely with: the families and guardians of people who are handicapped, professionals, government authorities, and with all those who work in a spirit of justice and peace for people who are handicapped.

IV Conclusion

L'Arche is deeply concerned by the distress of people who suffer injustice and rejection because they are handicapped. This concern should impel the communities of L'Arche to do all they can to defend the rights of people with a mental handicap, to support the creation of places of welcome for them, and to call on our society to become more just and respectful towards them.

The communities of L'Arche want to be in solidarity with the poor of the world, and with all those who take part in the struggle for justice.

Appendix E

McMillan and Chavis's (1986) Model of Sense of Community

Only recently has a comprehensive theory been developed to define and study what we mean by "sense of community". McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four elements to describe the experience of a sense of community, they are; (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) sharing of values with an integration of needs, and (d) shared emotional connection.

Memberships has five attributes. It refers to the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. It requires boundaries which determine who is in and who is not. This, in return, provides the structure and the security needed for emotional safety. Also important in providing a feeling that one has earned a place in the group is one's personal investment. Finally, a common symbol system is needed to develop a strong social bond. The second element, *Influence* refers to the finding that members are most attracted to a community in which they feel they can exert directly or indirectly some control, and that, in order for the group to develop cohesiveness, it must as well have an influence on its members to conform to its norms.

The third element, *integration and fulfillment of needs*, could be translated as reinforcement. Among the most important reinforcements are the status of a member, interpersonal interaction, and, particularly, shared values, which help determine and prioritize the needs to be met. A strong community provides an environment in which its members can meet each other's needs. Finally, *a shared emotional connection* is an affective component

that develops because communities offer their members positive ways to interact, important events to celebrate, positive means of resolving conflicts, opportunities to honor members, and to experience a strong spiritual bond with others. A shared story is also an important element in developing this sense of connectedness.

To date, empirical research on this model have been limited. They suggest, however, that the four elements are interrelated and form a relatively cohesive construct (Chavis, Hogge, & McMillan, 1986; Pretty, 1990).

Appendix F

List of presuppositions

The experience of L'Arche is:

- a. living communally (participating in the shared life of the community);
- b. occasionally feeling a deep sense of belonging and inclusion;
- c. drawing significant parts of one's inner life and satisfaction from caring for one another and building community together;
- d. occasionally feeling that the values of the community are an expression of one's innermost self;
- e. occasionally feeling exactly the opposite (of assumption "d");
- f. developing meaningful relationships with people with developmental disabilities and other assistants;
- g. discovering the beauty of people with developmental disabilities;
- h. occasionally being impatient with them (or annoyed by some of their behavior)
- i. experiencing interpersonal conflicts;
- j. at times having to live with assistants that are incompetent or not dedicated (or overly competent and overly dedicated)
- k. having to strike a balance between one's own needs and the needs of others, or of the community as a whole;
- l. having to define and assert one's boundaries;
- m. physically demanding;
- n. emotionally challenging;
- o. encountering one's own psychological fragility;

- p. lacking privacy and space for oneself;
- q. a source of personal and spiritual growth;
- r. leading to a renewed sense of values;
- s. developing a sense of appreciation and compassion for those who are marginalized and vulnerable in our society;
- t. a process, not a fixed state in itself.

Appendix G: Adler's (1975) Cross-Cultural Transition Stages

Contact	differences are intriguing perceptions are screened and selected	excitement stimulation euphoria playfulness discovery	curiosity interest assured impressionistic	The individual is insulated by his or her culture. Differences as similarities provide provide rationalization for continuing confirmation of status, role, and identity.
Disintegration	differences are impactful, contrasted reality cannot be screened out	confusion disorientation loss apathy isolation loneliness inadequacy	depression withdrawal	Cultural differences begin to intrude. Growing awareness of being different leads to loss of self-esteem. Individual experiences loss of cultural support ties and misreads new cultural cues.
Reintegration	differences are rejected	anger rage nervousness anxiety frustration	rebellion suspicion rejection hostility exclusive	Rejection of second culture cause preoccupation with likes and dislikes; differences are projected. Negative behaviour, however, is a form of self-assertion and growing self-esteem.
Autonomy	differences and similarities are	self-assured relaxed warm emphatic	assured controlled independent "old hand"	The individual is socially and linguistically capable of negotiating most new and different situations; he or she is assured of ability to survive new experiences.
Independence	differences and similarities are valued and significant	trust humor love full range of previous emotions	expressive creative actualizing	Social, psychological, and cultural differences are accepted and enjoyed. The individual is capable of exercising choice and responsibility and able to create meaning for situations.

Note. From "the transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock" by P.S. Adler, 1975, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 15, p. 19.