Authority in L’Arche

Colin Maloney

Uneasy Companions: the law and servant authority

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Note: Respectful terminology to describe the people who are at the heart of L’Arche and for whom L’Arche was founded varies from one country to another. We invite you to substitute the terms used by our authors with those that are used and accepted in your country.
The fundamental question about authority is about its underlying source. In L’Arche, the community itself is the source of authentic authority. Let’s explore what this means. Community implies holding things in common: values, shared understanding of the important things in life, a shared history, and a mission or goal. In order to achieve its shared goals and avoid wasting precious resources, the community accepts a degree of organization: This demands investing one or more individuals with authority. It creates the possibility of leadership, the wise use of resources. The community does this in order to avoid the chaos and waste of each person doing their own thing. In short, authority is a gift from the community and authority is held accountable to community.

In L’Arche, to oversimplify, there are two kinds of authority. First, that already described: the members look on their community as their common home, fulfilling a mission with other similar communities around the world, with whom they share values, history, and mission. In order to fulfill the mission, they mandate some members to act with authority on their behalf.

The other type of authority is exercised by the Local Board, L’Arche being a public body recognized by the government delivering social services to people with intellectual disabilities living together. The government - often, the main provider of funds - authorises the Local Board to hire and fire a director and take legal and financial responsibility.

Colin Maloney, long term member of L’Arche Daybreak and former President of the International Board of L’Arche, believes that L’Arche has two streams of authority. The first is the legal variety, sometimes described as ‘top-down’. But a community cannot run on top-down legal authority alone! In L’Arche, the authority of the servant is vital to our identity. It is not easy to get these two streams to work together effectively. But in his article, Colin maintains we have developed a certain wisdom in this, partly by being honest about areas that require ongoing vigilance.
Focus

Dual authority in practice

Beyond the local level, L’Arche communities give authority, through a general assembly, to the International Coordinators to maintain the unity and mutual support of the communities and to give leadership so that they may achieve their mission. The Coordinators are thereby accountable to the General Assembly.

L’Arche also has a legally recognized international board, so that it act as a non-profit organization and receive donations. From a Board perspective, the President and the Board are also accountable to the General Assembly to see that the International Coordinators carry out the General Assembly’s directions. Financially and administratively, the Board is also accountable to the government of France, which is where L’Arche is incorporated.

All in all, this dual authority structure has, in most cases, served L’Arche well. The Boards are committed to L’Arche’s unique identity, supporting the mission agreed by the General Assembly. But as the government becomes more demanding, the downsides to this structure become more apparent. Important questions arise: for instance, how can the community leader find time to think through issues to do with the community’s vision? The community council too can believe it has no significant influence. Again at the local level, who gives direction to the living of the mission? The Board? The International Coordinators? More widely, who has final responsibility to speak for L’Arche and to represent L’Arche with the various churches and religious traditions and other non-profit organizations?

International aspect

Another important question is ‘what kind of authority do the communities give to the International Coordinators regarding appointments to positions beyond the local community?’ In my experience, it seems that the International Coordinators carry out their responsibilities mostly by persuasion and friendship. For instance, they may exert influence in relation to Zone Coordinator appointments, but do not have the final authority. In order to get people to fulfill various tasks and be members of committees, their method is to negotiate.

What does this really amount to? I would suggest that the kind of authority that the General Assembly grants the International Coordinators is servant authority, closely related to discernment. For the International Coordinators enter into a discernment process personally or through their appointee. Mutual discernment is necessarily
servant-authority. It is markedly different from the authority of power exercised by the Board or the Director of the local community.

**A potential minefield!**

So, clearly two streams of authority flow in L’Arche: potentially, it’s a minefield. But I think L’Arche has learned to live with the tension. All communities form a Board, and most people know its and the Director’s authority. However, most community members, especially shorter term assistants, do not have much idea about L’Arche International: it seems to have little bearing on community life. This is a great pity: for the reality is that a local community only exists as L’Arche in the unity of all communities. Think about it: most of the friendships, shared life history, personal identity of the persons with handicaps, their travels and links with friends in other communities would simply not exist without L’Arche. Indirectly, therefore, the absence of L’Arche International would lead to great impoverishment of their lives.

This lack of a sense of belonging and commitment to the larger community of L’Arche has major implications: no clear, shared affirmation of the authority given by all members to the International Coordinators. This means that requests by them to take on a difficult task involving personal sacrifice, are more likely seen in terms of oneself rather than L’Arche’s mission. Perhaps, we misinterpret the meaning of discernment. Commitment to L’Arche pre-supposes this question, for those entering a discernment process: ‘what does the Lord ask of me?’ This seeking after God’s will is clearly in marked contrast to discerning what I want. True discernment processes are ‘Other’ focused. Servant leadership is based on mutual discernment, not on the power to hire and fire! Both parties must discern whether the request is an authentic call from God.

**Representing L’Arche to outside bodies**

One other aspect of authority to touch on here, is the need for clarity who has the authority to represent L’Arche to the churches, other service organizations and religious traditions, etc. (I exclude Jean Vanier, who speaks as the founder of L’Arche.) I think the international board should therefore mostly comprise members from L’Arche who have lived the values and experience of L’Arche. So I welcome the three new board members who have lived in and are committed to the mission of L’Arche.

In conclusion, L’Arche needs to be clear about the kind of servant leadership and authority it needs. As L’Arche’s mission evolves and develops from the ecumenical, to the interreligious, and to those without any relation to religious traditions, it seeks to become a sign that all religions can live in harmony and peace through living with difference and much suffering. This doesn’t mean converting or even explaining too much, but rather creating L’Arche communities of hope that look to the mystery of God.
Encouragement is so vital in community. We all need the encouragement of people we trust, in order to risk something new. In this article Mireille Morin and Jean-Jacques Jaroszewski, members with a disability, from L’Arche de la Vallée and le Carmel (France) share their experience of participating in L’Arche’s film/interview project in Paris and how their decisions changed their lives.

“I was well welcomed”

Jean-Jacques is 56 years old. After 20 years at the Caillou Blanc, he decided to move to L’Arche Carmel, where he has lived since its foundation eight years ago. Following a family breakdown, and a period of instability, L’Arche has allowed him to find his place.

“I discovered L’Arche thanks to Bertrand Figarol, 28 years ago. At that time, I used to attend the APF (The Association for Paralysed people in France) during the day. I was living in Rennes, in a flat that cost too much. I couldn’t remain on my own. I preferred to go and live in the community, to have brothers and sisters. I made my choice. I was not originally from this region, but we did the paperwork and in the end DASS (The office of Health and Social Affairs) accepted my decision.

One day, Bertrand Aupecle spoke to me about the Caillou Blanc. I said to myself that it would be good to go there and meet them. And he told me: ‘come, I need a worker.’ I decided to go to the Caillou Blanc, and with the help of Bertrand Figarol, it worked out. Once there, I was well welcomed by Marie-Francoise. A plate was waiting for me. Someone suggested to me to go to the wood workshop, so I went.

That has changed a lot of things in my life. Now, I have good contact with people. When I was alone, people would look at me differently. At the Caillou Blanc, I have been welcomed by everyone. I felt that I had a family. Of course, it is not my mother, nor my father, but I told myself, ‘it is a family all the same.’ They were all around me, and wanted to know my story. I was well welcomed.”

Today, Jean Jacques is about to move to a second community household in L’Arche Carmel.

A few months ago, he took part in a film which was shown at the 45th anniversary of L’Arche in France. Here is his reaction to that proposal:

“To make a film, to me that seemed a bit strange. I said what I had to say. I spoke about the marriage which didn’t work out. I wanted to share that, so that people outside L’Arche would hear about it. In this way, to make people know what I am living and what I am thinking. I was quite at ease in front of the camera, and looked straight at the person interviewing me. And now, with the DVD, I can show the interview anywhere.”

Asked about the authority Jean-Jacques said:

‘Authority? There are moments when it is easy, and moments when it is not easy. Sometimes, I am angry. I would like to do something my way, and it is not possible. For example, when I see something in the shops and I would like to have it immediately. So, I have to be careful. Authority sometimes make me afraid and that upsets me. On the other side, the authority of the ‘Father’ is something else. I have to trust him! He has, after all, sent his Son to us. Need to trust Jesus. There are struggles with assistants sometimes, but I need to trust them as well.”

Jean Jacques Jaroszewski
My dream became reality

Mireille at L’Arche de la Vallée in Drôme in 1996, at age thirty-three. She lived in a L’Arche house and participated in the activities offered at the community’s workshop. She recently started three-month trial period at E.S.A.T. (Occupational Establishment and Assistance Service) in order to get a job. Her desire to work and to earn a salary has been growing. It’s a big change in her life that is both turning her world upside down and carrying her along.

This year she was given the opportunity to go to Paris to be filmed speaking about a variety of topics. The film was shown at Paray-le-Monial in celebration of L’Arche’s forty-five-year anniversary. I talked to Mireille about the experience. I asked how she felt before, during and after this adventure.

Mireille told me this was a brand new experience for her. She got stage fright thinking about being in front of everyone, but she wanted to try. “I found the courage to be filmed. It was important for others to see me looking good, well dressed and done up. I made other people smile; I didn’t sulk. I spoke in front of them.”

Diane-Eve, the assistant who was with her, had explained to her exactly what would happen. Mireille, who has speech difficulties, was afraid that she would not be understood. “It’s strange being filmed. I didn’t have much self-confidence.”

Mireille trusted Anne Chabert d’Hières who conducted the interview. Anne reassured her and spoke with her before beginning, and Mireille was no longer afraid. “I was comfortable. I looked at Anne. We giggled a lot.”

Mireille says that she was not aware that the film would be seen by so many people. Nor did she think she would find herself in front of such a large crowd. She had a strong reaction; she ran away shocked and crying. Her fear of not being understood had returned; she was ashamed. She went to see the cameraman, Nicolas Favreau, to tell him that the filming was rubbish; she was so angry. Mireille still has not seen the film, but she has lent it to people whom she trusts as she wanted their opinion. “When Etienne and Marie-Hélène told me it was alright, then I relaxed and felt relieved. I trusted them and it was good to hear their opinion. After Paray le Monial I was fed up; everyone told me the film was great. Why? I didn’t understand. It’s true that it was good.”

Then Mireille calmed down and was no longer angry. She confided in me that before she had been shy, but now not at all. Mireille has been living at Chaumière in Hauterives since September. She can approach friends and neighbours more easily. The film helped her to overcome her fears. With regard to her work placement, she tells me, “I feel comfortable there. There are no problems. Before I was too afraid, I didn’t talk to anyone except my mother and brothers and sisters. I like everybody. I like to talk; that’s important. Talking helps you learn to express yourself, calms you down and does you good.”

“If you can’t talk, it’s not funny! I watch journalists on TV using sign language and that interests me. If I can no longer speak one day I could learn how to speak in sign language. Movies and the theatre help me to express myself to the world; the film helped me to change. I learned things about life, friends and happiness.”

Her dream of working, which is taking shape, has opened the door to other confidence-building experiences. She had to make jewellery for the first time. She was told only once how to make necklaces and she was able to make them on her own; no one showed her how to make earrings. “Before I used to tremble, but now I do it all by myself. It’s a miracle. This has affected me, touched me, done me good, relaxed and encouraged me. Everyone was happy. I didn’t think I would be able to do that. I watched, I thought about it, and it worked.”

All these new experiences: the film, changing homes, her new job have presented her with opportunities to confront herself, face her limitations and face others, but also along with her strengths, which she is slowly discovering.

After our interview, Mireille told me that she wanted to watch the film alone. Mireille concluded, saying, “I really liked that the film was shown to everybody. It’s good. Everything is better: my project, my job. I have had a rest, so I’m going to watch the film alone. Thank you for having thought of me for this interview and kind regards to all.”

Mireille Morin and Marie-Hélène Corcoran
Dear Letters of L’Arche,

I love the Charter. Its words are simple, and many of its turns of phrase memorable. It speaks of communities with the “same spirit of welcome, of sharing and simplicity”, who “seek to offer not a solution but a sign”, communities who “bring together people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture”, with a “mission to work for unity”.

I remember the excitement of the brown envelopes arriving every couple of months before the Federation meeting in Quebec in 1993. Each contained an update about the work done on drafting this common statement across communities, with their different cultures and faith traditions. There was a sense of achievement and of the common discernment of something of value for the future growth and unity of L’Arche.

The Charter has served us well and helped build unity. Even so, I was excited over the last few years as the Identity and Mission process made us look again at similar themes: What is the heart of community and the value of small-group sharing in helping us discern locally? How does a diverse network of communities say something new about its key realities?

What emerged this time was a strong sense of the core statement of Identity being framed for all as something that could be taken on by those who were thinking of becoming involved in a community, whether as an assistant, a person choosing their support from L’Arche, a volunteer, a trustee, or a pastor, as well as by those who’d lived this journey for many years. And it was put into eight phrases, rather than 1200 words.

The Identity and Mission Statement, too, gives pointers about setting priorities for how we wish to live it in our communities. This made me think: How are the two texts related? Is the Charter superseded by the Identity and Mission Statement? Or is it more that the later one helps to shape the way in which the earlier is received or heard today – just as St John’s Gospel shapes the understanding of Luke, without superseding it?

Re-reading the Charter in the light of Identity and Mission: two advances...

So I went back to the Charter, reading it again in the light of Identity and Mission. I found myself reaching the end of its introduction - about communities united by the same vision - and hearing the statement of Identity as being that ‘same vision’ – and so wishing it were there, to complete the Charter’s introduction.

I reached the end and sensed another gap. Instead of reading a ‘Conclusion’ about the desire for “sol-
identity with the poor and with all who struggle for justice", I longed to hear the statement of National Mission for L’Arche in my country, Scotland. For this puts the same point more sharply, and without the third-person reference to ‘the poor,’ as if ‘they’ were separate from me. That can seem to neglect the reality of poverty within me and each of us. In the same way the particular picture of Jesus in John’s Gospel as a shoeless advocate of barefoot love, entering into mutual relationship so as to receive a foot-washing before offering it to another, interprets the beatitude in Luke of ‘blessed are the poor…’

And one gap...

The Charter names our call to unity; the brevity of Identity and Mission means it is more implicit. That is a real gap. So now we need a third process in Commitment and Belonging to remind us of this, and re-read where we are by listening to the diverse ways in which people express their personal mission, and that of the communities. Through this we will come to reread those parts of the Charter which speak of unity, membership, and living a covenant. “Communities recognise that they have an ecumenical vocation and a mission to work for unity”. Who gives that mission of unity to communities? The same God who invites us to live mutual relationships in trust. To dare these could, for some, mean being open to the long term.

Faith traditions see God holding this story - past, present and future. Three traditions see Abraham as our father in faith, and a witness to pilgrim values. Jews, Christians and Muslims honour his journey. The story of Abraham’s community changes our understanding of who God is, continually inviting disparate individuals whose relationships were marked by envy, shame, and loss to live mutual faithfulness – or in the words of the Scripture, to be a covenant people, and to let their own relationships reflect the faithful love of God.

Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls the whole of humanity. The same God makes one, universal invitation to covenant relationship and many particular invitations to covenant. So when we speak of ‘the covenant,’ which-in English at least-conveys uniqueness, we must remember we are speaking of an invitation to the whole of humanity to live as a covenant people with each other, with creation, and with God. We over-reach ourselves if we refer to L’Arche as living the covenant. It’s misleading. Unity in community is founded on a covenant of love, which God calls each person to explore and live. A particular covenant is a chapter in a wider story. It is not the same as the universal invitation, though its full and long-term expression will deepen appreciation of that, including among those whose call is to leave L’Arche for now, to continue their spiritual journey elsewhere.

We need to invite people attracted by our lived identity to come and share in our local and national missions. Some will be potential assistants, others will be people newly choosing their support from L’Arche, yet others volunteers, trustees, and pastors. Over time, some will make a long-term commitment.

There is wisdom in the way L’Arche never presumes there will be a single, common form in which individuals express their sense of belonging, commitment, and personal mission. We each create a unique expression of our belonging and disengagement, our ambivalence and commitment. For me it is a conviction of covenant faithfulness that makes it possible to glimpse the history of L’Arche as a whole, as one chapter in God’s wider story. Many stories, perhaps most, may not mention ‘living a covenant’, but be framed in other ways. In time, we will come to reread those parts of the Charter that speak of unity, membership, and covenant. We are diverse, but in listening to each other, I hope we will find new expressions of both the universal call of humanity, and the particular mission of L’Arche, which is to walk barefoot together and to make ourselves vulnerable, one to another.

Anthony Kramers
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* The whole text of the Charter and the Identity and Mission Statement is available on the website www.larche.org in the ‘Resources’ section.
I have a son with an intellectual disability. When he was six months old, we heard that our child had cerebral palsy. This diagnosis came as a shock. We had other dreams, but the verdict was final: our family would never have the kind of child others had, our son would never walk...

From that moment, everything changed: we experienced despair, rage, disillusionment, as well as mutual recrimination. People avoided us, just because we had a child that was different. The biggest support for us at that time came from our close family – we could always count on them.

I stopped working and devoted my whole time to my little son. At that time, I was not close to God. But in that hopeless situation, a kind of little sign appeared: we could be happy like children. And contrary to his medical diagnosis, Adam even began to walk.

It was hard for me when he began to speak of his dreams, the dreams that each young person has. He wanted the company of people his own age; he wanted to love, and to be loved. He wanted to start a family. I wanted to protect him, because he would not cope on his own, and I had no picture of his future. We lived in a ‘closed circle’, even if Adam had started attending a Rehabilitation Centre, where he learnt independence skills. He had already realised that he would never be able to start a family.

One day, the parish priest came round on a pastoral visit. After just a short conversation with him, I looked on our situation from an utterly different perspective. I realised that God had chosen our family for Adam, and that, for us, this was a mark of distinction. I spent a long time pondering over that. I began to go to mass more often.

After a much urging by Adam, we opted to go on a Faith and Light camp. From that time, our life changed diametrically. Adam was happy. He would go for walks, for visits, trips, and camps. Often he would visit people living in L’Arche. Friendships sprung up. Everyone, including Adam’s younger brother, became members of Faith and Light, and remain so to this day.

Then, our son began to ask: “what will happen to me, after my parents are no longer here?” This question was often repeated. And so, in 1998, at his own request, he moved into the L’Arche house. My own life up till that point had been very linked to Adam’s: everything revolved around him. Suddenly, my days became long and empty. This was very hard for me, but inside I rejoiced that Adam had found a place which was good for him and where he felt at home.

For us and for our son, L’Arche has brought great hope. Its existence gives people with a disability and their families a feeling of security. Obviously, as in each family, L’Arche too has its share of joys and sadnesses, better days and worse days; but in L’Arche, each person is valuable, and is listened to by others, and these things are vital for every person.

I am myself connected with the community, since I worked in the workshop for a long time, and through this I got to know L’Arche from another perspective. I know that although L’Arche now is living a crisis and various shortages, such as assistants, if I had to take the vital decision again for Adam, I would make the same choice. I thank ‘the L’Arche folk’ that I too feel well there. I can bear witness, that it is thanks to Adam and his disability, and beyond that, his community, that I have become more aware of the presence and action of God in my life. I want to tell you, that people with a disability also manage to make decisions about their life. It is just that sometimes, they need a bit of extra help, just like we help them in other matters.

Alicja Sekuracka, L’Arche Poznan (Poland)