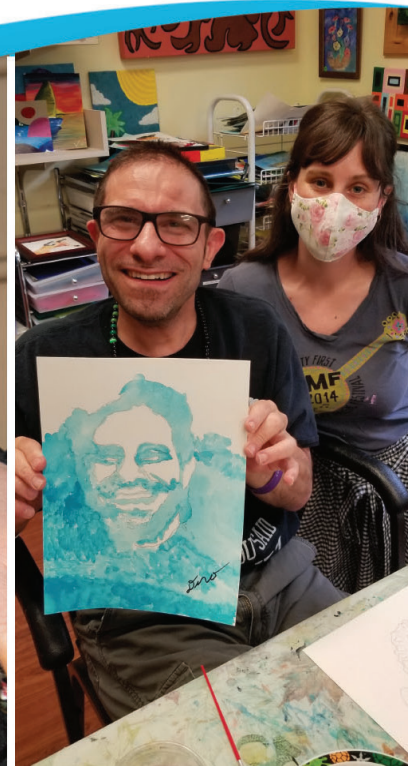




Project Impact Reports



# L'Arche



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## Part I - Organization and Project Overview

### About L'Arche USA

L'Arche is a network of communities of people with and without intellectual disabilities living, working, praying, and playing together. Building on a movement that began in France in the 1960s in response to inhumane conditions of large institutions for people with intellectual disabilities, L'Arche communities began to be established in different areas of the United States, beginning in the 1970s. L'Arche International formed in 1981 and L'Arche USA was founded in 1986. Each L'Arche community operates locally as a separate non-profit with its own governing board. There are 154 member communities around the world, with 61 homes in the United States, home to 284 Core Members and 447 Assistants. Core Members are people with intellectual or developmental disabilities that live in a L'Arche home or participate in a day program. Assistants are people without intellectual or developmental disabilities who live with and support Core Members.

### About the Project

During 2020 and 2021, six L'Arche communities from across the United States participated in an evaluation capacity-building experience called Project Impact, facilitated by the team at Dialogues In Action. Project Impact is a participatory, empowerment approach to evaluation. The approach is a self-generated, reflexive practice grounded in curiosity. The first cohort of three communities (Greater Washington D.C., Jacksonville, and Spokane) during 2020 and the second cohort of three communities (Boston North, Cleveland, and Tahoma) during 2021 gathered teams from their communities to engage in the project. Each of the six communities implemented a mixed-methods self-study of the impact of L'Arche in the lives of its members.

The initial phase of the project was focused on developing the ideas of intention. This included the formulation of an impact framework including impacts, indicators, and principles of change. The second phase of the project was focused on designing data collection methodologies and implementing both a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and a quantitative approach using an outcomes survey. The third phase of the project involved the application of the findings from the data for responses and strategies going forward.

After each community implemented their own self-studies, the team leaders convened to consider the intersection of their learning in meta-themes, those insights that are shared among the six communities as a sample of the L'Arche communities throughout the United States. The combined report is presented in this summary. Reports from each individual community can be found in the full [Project Impact Report](#).

### L'Arche's Vision, Mission, and Values

L'Arche USA strives to make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, foster environments that meet members' changing needs, and engage in diverse cultures working toward a more human society. The organization's mission includes supporting L'Arche communities in the United States, helping all members realize their full potential, and engaging the broader public so that everyone can experience the unique gifts of people with intellectual disabilities. In L'Arche, people of differing intellectual capacities, social origins, religions, and cultures build relationships rooted in trust and vulnerability. L'Arche USA advocates alongside people with intellectual disabilities for the rights they deserve. L'Arche USA partners with relevant organizations to raise awareness of policy issues.



## Intended Impacts of L'Arche Communities

The focus of this evaluation was shaped by the primary ideas of intended impact. These ideas of impact, and the quantitative and qualitative indicators associated with each idea, provided the conceptual framework for the data collection. The intention of L'Arche is that members, both non-core and core, would experience the following impact as a result of L'Arche:

1. Members develop awareness, sensitivity, and curiosity for others, especially across differences in gifts and abilities.
2. Members experience personal transformation in fundamental aspects of their lives.
3. Members create meaningful relationships and find belonging in community with others.
4. Members approach vocation and life-purpose in a holistic and human-centered way.
5. Members critically engage societal values of accessibility and inclusion and advocate for social justice.
6. Core Members identify and live out their choices.
7. Core Members have full, healthy lives.
8. Core Members exercise positive influence in the lives of others.



## Part 2- Evaluation Methodology

The aim of the evaluation project was to evaluate the intended impacts of L'Arche communities on members' lives. Specifically, the project teams explored two primary questions:

1. What is the impact of the experience of L'Arche on the members of L'Arche?
2. What about the experience of L'Arche contributes to the impact?

The initial step was to identify and clarify the intended impacts of L'Arche communities. The teams then used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact focused on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in community members that indicate achievement of impact. These indicators were used to develop a qualitative interview guide and a quantitative questionnaire, which were used to measure progress toward achieving intended impacts.

### Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative portion of the evaluation was informed by the following principles and approaches:

**Inclusive Research Approach.** A key consideration in the design of the research instruments was to ensure inclusive and adaptive research models grounded in the principles of Universal Design, that were usable by people with diverse abilities. With the guidance of Dr. Andy Roach, Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at Georgia State University, teams designed interview protocols and survey questionnaires with consideration to three principles of Universal Design: equitable use, flexibility in use, and perceptible information (meaning information is communicated regardless of the user's sensory abilities). The research instruments were designed to be easy to understand and deliberately intuitive. Accommodations to allow for full accessibility were considered, including designing a version of the survey questionnaire to be completed in person with Core Members with the assistance of a direct-care staff person, volunteer, or family member (see Appendix B).

**Qualitative Sampling and Data Collection.** The total sample size for qualitative interviews across the six communities was 125 people. Participation included 43 Core Members and 82 non-core members (including direct-care staff/assistants, non-direct care staff, board members, volunteers, former staff, and family members). Interviews were conducted by team members in each of the six communities and consisted of staff and volunteers. Interviews took place both face-to-face and, due to Covid-19 safety considerations, via video call. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour in length with each participant. Interviewers gathered the data by capturing the conversation through detailed written notes during the interviews, and/or using Otter.ti transcription software. Notes were immediately reviewed and filled in after each interview to obtain a more complete rendering of the interview content.

**Qualitative Data Analysis.** Each team analyzed data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. The process for analysis involved 1) becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes for each interview; and 2) reviewing, defining, and naming themes. Specifically, the analysis involved the following sequence of steps:

- Review each interview four times through each of four lenses to illuminate a different aspect of what the data reveal about the research questions;
- Gather data into four categories to serve as an initial set of codes;
- Develop intra-interview themes to interpret the meaning and significance of the data from each interview;
- Review the initial themes as a team to identify the overarching and inter-interview themes
- Map the themes visually and examine them to further define and identify the features, causes and catalysts, new or surprising insights, and relationships between themes; and
- Determine the most significant and meaningful findings

### Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative portion of the evaluation was informed by the following principles and approaches:

**Preparing the Survey Instrument.** The quantitative indicators of impact were used to design a questionnaire. The questionnaire included a brief demographic section followed by a substantive section with scale response-formatted questions that focused on the participant's self-perception, comparing knowledge, actions, and feelings before and after they were involved in the L'Arche community. The questionnaire concluded with a short section that asked for general feedback as well as optional demographic questions. A print version of the survey was also available and was used in some instances to administer the survey with Core Members or others with limited access to the online version.

**Quantitative Sampling and Data Collection.** Team leaders shared an invitation to participate in the online survey via email with their network of L'Arche community members and supporters. The online survey was live for two weeks, with reminders to participate administered throughout that time by team leaders. Responses to the printed survey were manually entered into the online software by team members and volunteers. 68 Core Members and 167 non-core members completed the survey, for a total of 235 responses.

**Data Analysis.** The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. The teams identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings.



### Considerations for the Evaluation

The project launched in early 2020, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to impact communities across the United States. The effects of the pandemic on community life and staff responsibilities resulted in the shifting of timelines and the division of the six project teams into two cohorts, with half of the teams completing their qualitative research and analysis in the fall of 2020, and half in the spring of 2021. Team leaders observed that in some interviews, particularly with direct-care staff, interviewees reflected on how their response may have differed pre-pandemic versus in the midst of the pandemic.



## Part 3 - Shared Findings

The data revealed emerging findings from the shared discovery of the six participating communities. The following are the most salient discoveries about the impact of the L'Arche experience on Core Members and non-core members alike:

### Findings about the Capacity for Care and Community

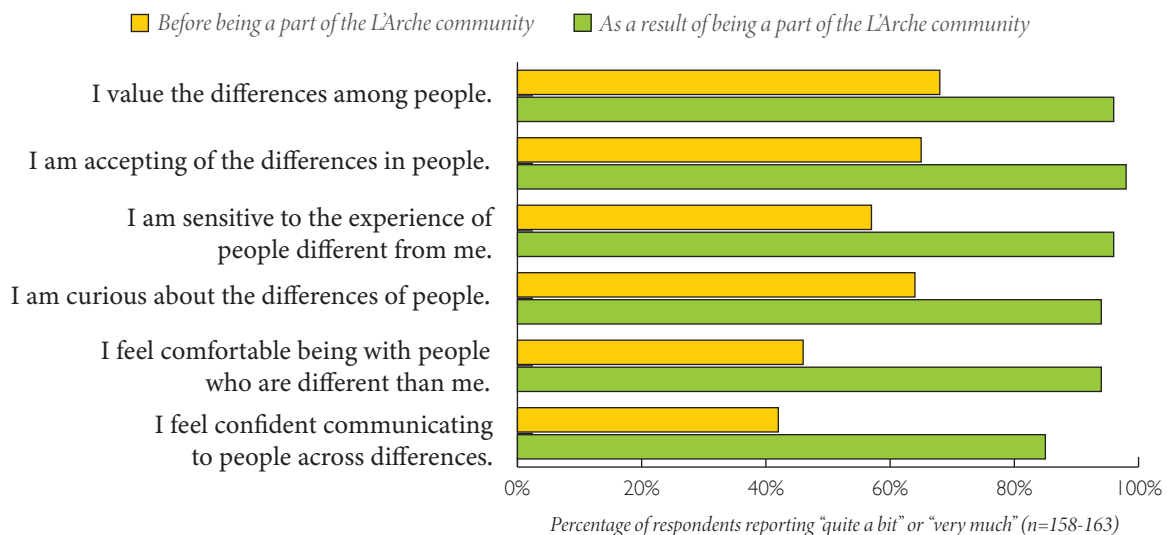
In this section, six findings point to the significance of members' experience of increased capacity for caring, relationship, and building community as a result of their time at L'Arche:

**I. Care, Curiosity, and Compassion for People Across Differences.** Many non-core members who were interviewed described being more aware of disability issues as a result of their experience at L'Arche. One said, "Physical accessibility is something I think about constantly now and makes me very passionate." This was caused by "being invited into really intimate sacred spaces with Core Members." The data show that those with a L'Arche experience are more comfortable than they used to be relating to people with disabilities. They attribute their relationships with Core Members as a driver of this change. People recognize the gifts and capabilities of those with disabilities and see them in a more holistic way. One volunteer said that before L'Arche, he was not attracted to engaging with people with intellectual

disabilities and never interacted with someone who had an intellectual disability. Since coming to L'Arche, he has spent years getting to know Core Members as individuals and has developed true friendships with them. As with the experience of others in L'Arche, participation in L'Arche expanded his knowledge of issues affecting people with intellectual and other types of disabilities.

The survey data also show that non-core members are making significant gains related to embracing and working across differences. The two items that show the most substantial growth are feeling comfortable being with people who are different and feeling confident communicating to people across differences. These items showed a 104% and 102% increase as a result of being part of L'Arche (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Non-core members are embracing and working across differences

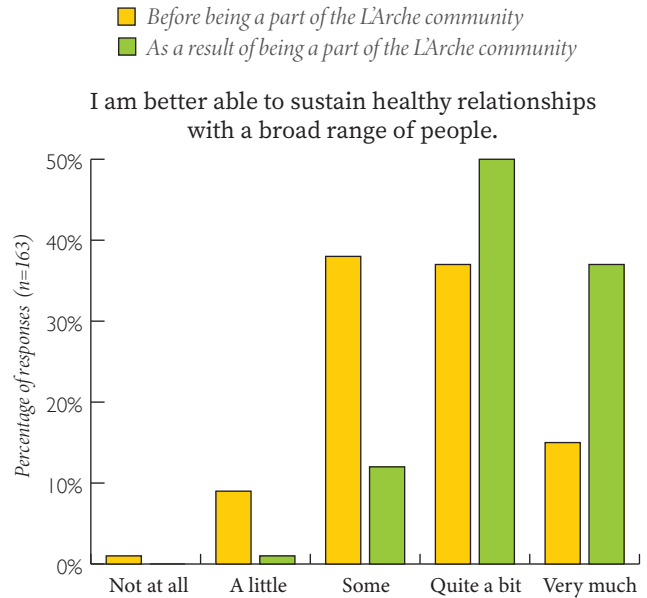


**2. Celebrating the Worth of Others.** Core Members said they enjoy being with people who are different from them. One proxy interviewee said a Core Member had “learned to adapt” because of many different people coming and going. Another proxy interviewee noticed that a Core Member had grown in her ability to interact with different people and follow up on her curiosity about them. Most volunteers said they were more comfortable with a wide range of people through being at L’Arche. For example, one said, “Being at L’Arche is what allows me to see that we are not so different. We are human.” The data show growth in the members’ ability to see, appreciate and honor the value, dignity, and worth of others because of their time at L’Arche.

**3. Ability to Create Community.** Those who have been with the community of L’Arche report that L’Arche changed how they value community more broadly. The experience changed their view of the power of community. Some had wholly new ideas about what community could and should look like. One expressed a newfound understanding of how communities like L’Arche can integrate themselves into their neighborhoods. Another learned that a community experience does not have to be geographically bound. Another still has come to view community as a space where people are equal instead of part of a socially determined hierarchical structure. Others changed how they saw themselves in relation to community. All Core Members report that relationships with community members were important to them. Community, and the desire for and ability to create community, is a capacity developed in people through L’Arche.

The survey data show that non-core members grew significantly in their ability to relate and build healthy relationships with others as a result of being a part of the L’Arche community. 88% of non-core member survey respondents said that they were quite a bit or very much able to sustain healthy relationships with a broad range of people as a result of L’Arche as compared to 53% before L’Arche (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Non-core members are better able to sustain healthy, diverse relationships**



**4. Genuine Connection with Others.** Members of L’Arche demonstrate an ability to form genuine and deep connections with others. As an organization, L’Arche uses the term “mutual relationship” in its mission, writings, and trainings to describe the reciprocal bonds that are fostered between assistants and Core Members. Relationships are rooted in the recognition that both parties have something essential to contribute. Interviews with members of L’Arche reveal that mutual relationship and human connection are indeed being fostered at L’Arche and that members develop an ability to form real, authentic connections with others. One Core Member said that living in L’Arche made her a better person because she “loves a lot of people.” She spoke about her ability and willingness to give and receive love, and then to allow that love to change her as a person. Another Core Member described a change that occurred within a relationship with a non-core member whom she did not at first like. The word “love” is used by Core Members and non-core members alike in almost every interview, signaling that something transcending the typical client-caregiver relationship is occurring at L’Arche. Members are able to open themselves up to form genuine connections with other human beings.

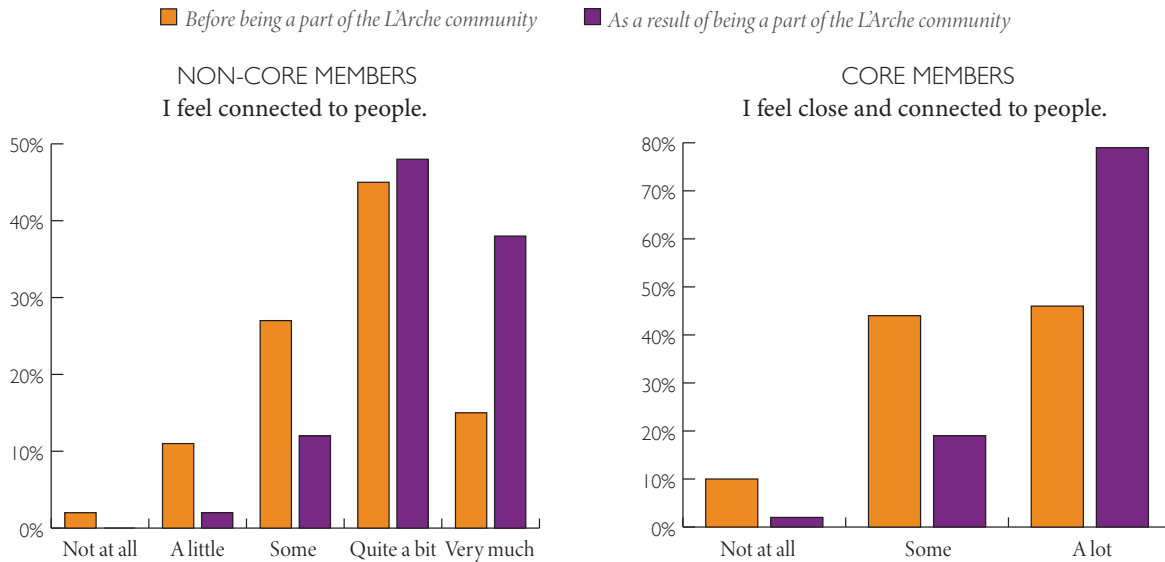
The survey data also reveal that both core members



and non-core members feel more connected to others. 60% of non-core members reported feeling quite a bit or very much connected to people before L'Arche and 86% reported the same as a result of L'Arche. 46% of core

members reported feeling close and connected to people before L'Arche and 80% reported the same as a result of L'Arche (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Members feel closer and more connected to people**



- 5. Lasting Relationships.** Relationships, and the development of the aptitude to make relationships healthy and productive, are at the heart of the L'Arche experience. One said, "Almost everything I know about love and relationships I learned from L'Arche." Core Members speak convincingly about the meaning and importance of the relationships they have made at L'Arche. Many Core Members said they keep in touch with close friends they have made through L'Arche, including former assistants who are no longer in the area. One Core Member signed about the affection he had toward another Core Member who passed away a few years ago. Another non-core member said that her relationships with others in the community are what is most important to her. She entered L'Arche with a strong desire to learn about other people and cultures. L'Arche helped that interest develop into a commitment to growing in relationship to other individuals in the more proximate community to which she now belonged.
- 6. Global Belonging.** The data showed that for some people being part of a L'Arche community takes them beyond their individual location. Being part of L'Arche meant

that one was contributing to a global movement, and along with that came a deep sense of belonging. Through time at L'Arche one member learned that a community experience does not have to be geographically bound, instead one could connect with L'Arche communities all over the world. A Core Member experienced an expansive understanding of family that, for her, spanned the globe. The data points to many people feeling interconnectedness and belonging as part of a larger whole.

### Findings about Character Formation

Four cross-community findings in the qualitative data spotlight the transformation members experienced in the formation of character as a result of being part of L'Arche communities:

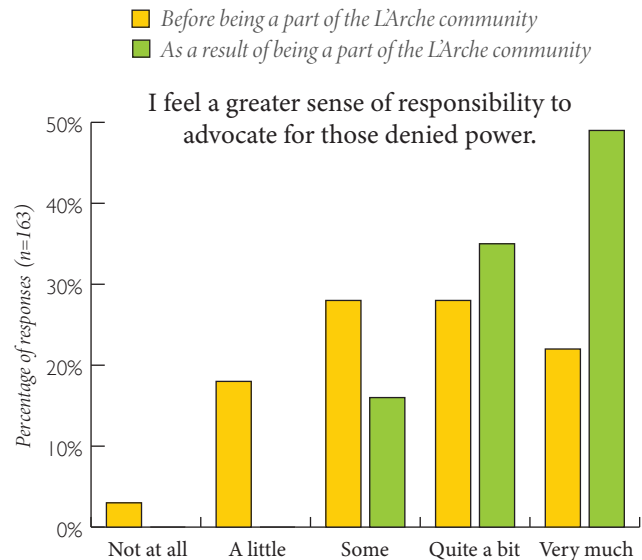
- 7. Personal Transformation and Shifting Habits.** Living in a L'Arche community results in personal growth and shifts in habits. The data show that assistants and Core Members developed more patience as a result of sharing living space. One assistant shared that a Core Member has "gotten much more flexible" about sharing responsibilities. An assistant explained how community

living is challenging, but also good for her: “It helped me grow... it has helped me be more flexible, and it has helped me be more okay with change.” Another assistant expressed an increased tolerance of difficult behavior in others, saying he noticed “a progression of being able to embrace a wider range of behavior; things that upset me before don’t anymore.” People said how time in L’Arche communities helps change habits. One assistant said, “L’Arche has been a wake-up call to so many assistants that we need to change our own ways.”

**8. The Inner Growth of Character Development.** The data reveal that most people experienced some sort of internal character change through being at L’Arche. People reported being more open to people, being more empathetic and resilient, and being more gentle, patient, and sensitive as a result of L’Arche. One person said they cared less about what others thought about them. One former staff member said that through L’Arche he became more sympathetic and compassionate and learned to love people how they wanted to be loved, not how he wanted to love. Another reported a change in the ability to stand up for others: “I have really developed a fierce loyalty to people with disabilities.” One person said L’Arche helped them believe they themselves have a lot to offer. A volunteer said he learned to make “my love for people more tangible and more practical, less a sense of love as a notion and emotion and more like something you actually enact with your hands.” Another volunteer said when he began volunteering at L’Arche that he felt gratitude and that the longer he remained, the more he felt contentment with the gifts of his life.

The survey data also show that non-core members are developing a greater sense of responsibility to support vulnerable populations. 84% of respondents report that they feel quite a bit or very responsible to be an advocate for those denied power as a result of L’Arche as compared with 50% reporting the same before L’Arche. (See Figure 4.)

**Figure 4. Non-core members feel greater responsibility to advocate for those denied power**



**9. The Development of Patience and Empathy.** The L’Arche community has developed assistants’ and Core Members’ patience, tolerance, and openness to others. The data show the development of empathy toward others through L’Arche. Interviewees revealed they are more accepting of differences in others. One assistant expressed how living with different people has impacted him: “I am not as critical as I used to be. I have more room to allow people their individuality and see it as a good thing across the board.” Another said, “My relationship with Core Members has allowed me to be more flexible and to appreciate the good moments we have.” Several board members also spoke about how they are becoming more tolerant, open-minded, empathetic people. The data reveal that Core Members are also building empathy and understanding of other people. A parent of one of the Core Members said, “He has grown in his consciousness of other people.”

**10. The Power of Love.** Core Members and non-core members grew in their capacity to love themselves and others as a result of their time at L’Arche. This has led people to experience happy lives in community. It has also translated to community members’ ability to be kinder with family and friends outside of L’Arche. One assistant said that because of his time with L’Arche, “[I am] able to better connect with others and [I am]

learning how to make myself present in a way that's vulnerable and true, and in turn is open to giving and receiving love." When Core Members show their love through acts of kindness they share in humanity with their peers. Some community members said that it can be complicated to explain the experience and power of love in L'Arche to those outside of the community and who have not experienced it in person.

### Findings about Personal Development

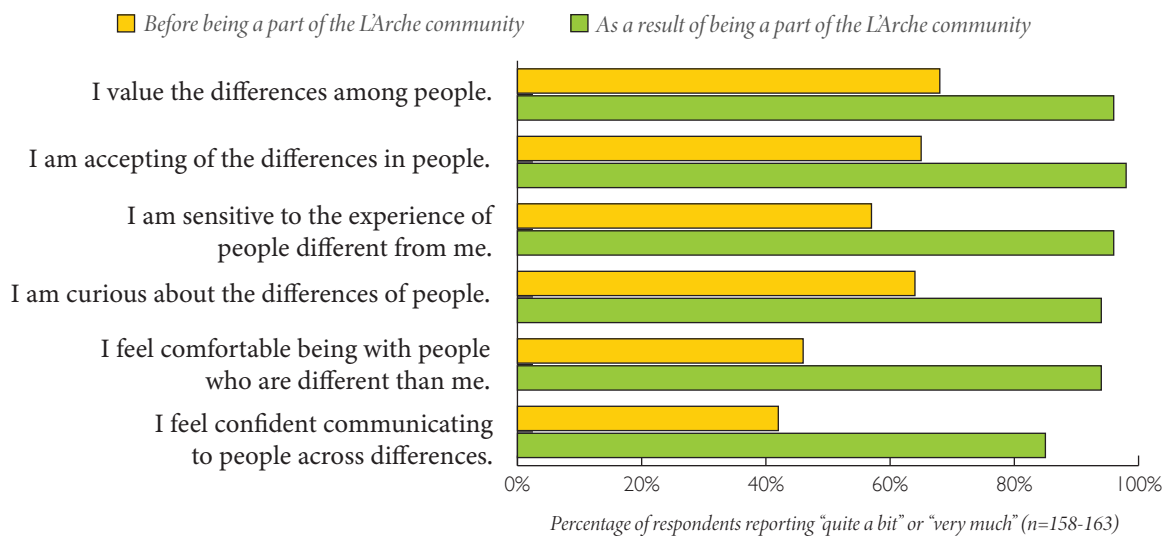
The following findings are discoveries about the personal growth and development experienced by both Core Members and non-core members as a result of their time at L'Arche:

**11. Exercising Personal Authenticity.** The data demonstrate a phenomenon of mutual transformation occurring within L'Arche. Individuals become the most authentic versions of themselves. Because they give the opportunity for others to become their most authentic selves, they come to believe that they are accepted and loved for who they are as well. One assistant realized she was trying too hard to control the people around her. She was confronted by a Core Member who asked her "Why don't you like me?" As the assistant reflected on why the Core Member came to that conclusion, she realized, "It came out of me trying to be too controlling.

And controlling joy is not a good idea." The concept of "entering into the world" of another, rather than constructing an environment that they are expected to adapt to, creates a context in which people are free to be themselves and create the same opportunity for others. When everyone feels safe enough to be the most authentic version of themselves, it leads to the realization that everyone is a combination of strength and weakness, beauty and brokenness.

The survey data show substantial personal growth in non-core members related to authenticity as well. Among the most significant areas of growth was in knowing personal strengths and weaknesses. 44% of non-core member respondents reported that they knew their personal strengths and weaknesses quite a bit or very much before L'Arche and 91% report that they know this as a result of being a part of L'Arche, a 107% increase. However, the data reveal that there is room for improvement in this area as well. In response to the item, "I do not hide who I am," 42% of respondents reported that they quite a bit or very much did not hide who they are before L'Arche as compared with 66% reporting this as a result of L'Arche. While this is a significant increase, the data illuminate that one-third of people do not yet feel as though they can be their authentic selves (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Non-core members are embracing and working across differences



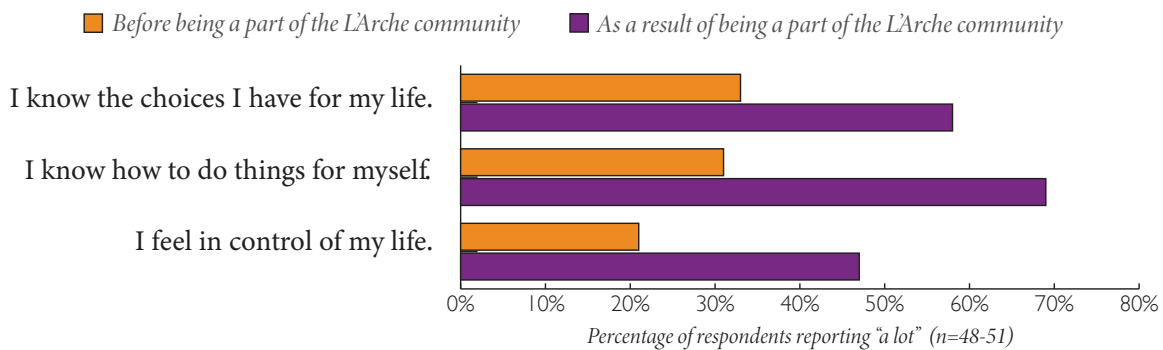


**12. Building Voice and Choice.** Core Members strongly value the integration of independence into their lives, which in turn gives them confidence and a sense of purpose. Many Core Members describe their ability to make choices as a very positive influence on their lives. By acquiring responsibilities within the house, and in turn, completing the tasks on their own, Core Members feel as if they are integrated into their community. It makes them feel important. They recognize that if they were not present, their community would notice the loss. One Core Member said, “I am important to the community because I lift heavy things.” Other Core Members express their preferences and responsibilities within the house, voicing the following as examples: “I like doing the dishes,” “I like choosing dinner and helping with the Christmas trees,” and “I like to live with no parents and be by myself.” Having voice and choice

gives Core Members an enhanced enjoyment of life, but it also enables them to decide what is important to them. They become more confident and secure in their sense of self. They feel like their life is in their control, which also enhances their happiness.

The survey data show that core members report tremendous progress in aspects of their independence since being a part of the L’Arche community yet there are opportunities for improvement in this area as well. 58% of core members reported that they know the choices they have in their life a lot since being at L’Arche as compared with 33% before L’Arche. 69% reported that they know how to do things for themselves a lot since being at L’Arche as compared with 31% before L’Arche. 47% of core members report that they feel in control of their life since being at L’Arche up from 21% before L’Arche (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Core members value their growing independence**



**13. Strengthened Spirituality.** Faith is a part of everyday life for many in L’Arche communities. People reported that through their experiences in community, they encountered opportunities for spiritual growth, deepened spirituality, a strengthened faith, and an increased openness to dialogue about faith. One assistant said that as a result of their time at L’Arche, “[I now see] the bigger picture of where spirituality fits into daily life.” Another community member said, “Being in a faith-based organization has made me a more faithful person...I’m more mindful of spiritual things.” One community member said that their faith had been

strengthened through witnessing the faith of others, and they were “inspired by the strong faith of so many Core Members.” One Core Member said, “We are a faith community, and we help each other. Love our neighbors as thyself, and that is really good.” A non-core member cited daily relationships with Core Members, spiritual teachings they participated in at L’Arche, and the practice of sharing what they are grateful for around the dinner table as causes of spiritual changes in their lives. The data revealed that many members of the community had become more deeply spiritual as a result of their experience with L’Arche.

The survey data also reveal that non-core members' spirituality has been strengthened. 90% of non-core member survey respondents reported that they integrate their spiritual, mental, emotional life into their decisions about their future quite a bit or very much as a result of L'Arche. 60% reported the same before L'Arche.

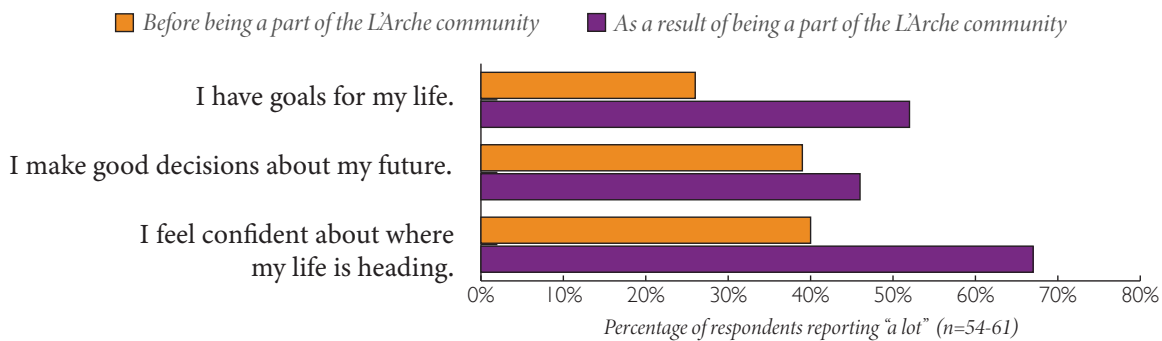
**14. Core Members Gaining Pride and Purpose.** Core

Members experienced increased purpose in their lives, fostering feelings of pride. For one Core Member her time at L'Arche "changed me to be a grown-up woman," which included being independent, making her own choices, having a job, and having her own money. For another Core Member, living at L'Arche has enabled him to be creative and express himself through his artwork. As a result, and of great importance to him, he earned money selling his art and made the decision to donate the proceeds to those in need. This demonstrates his experience of pride in his work, as well as his purpose

in giving back to others. One Core Member initiated and hosted talent shows at her house. She also serves as a leader in her home, welcoming volunteer groups to participate in the talent shows. Other Core Members spoke of joining committees and taking on leadership roles, including representing and sharing Core Member perspectives at board meetings.

The survey data also reveal that core members are developing a stronger sense of purpose and confidence. The percent of core members reporting that they have a lot of goals for their life increased from 26% to 52% from before L'Arche to now and the percent of core members that feel confident in their life is heading increased from 40% to 67%. One aspect of this area increased only slightly from before L'Arche. In response to the item "I make good choices about my future," 39% responded "a lot" before L'Arche and 46% responded the same since being a part of L'Arche (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Core members develop a stronger sense of purpose and confidence**



**Findings about Purpose in Life**

Four findings reveal how members' perspectives and experiences about purpose in life have been influenced and informed by their time as part of a L'Arche community:

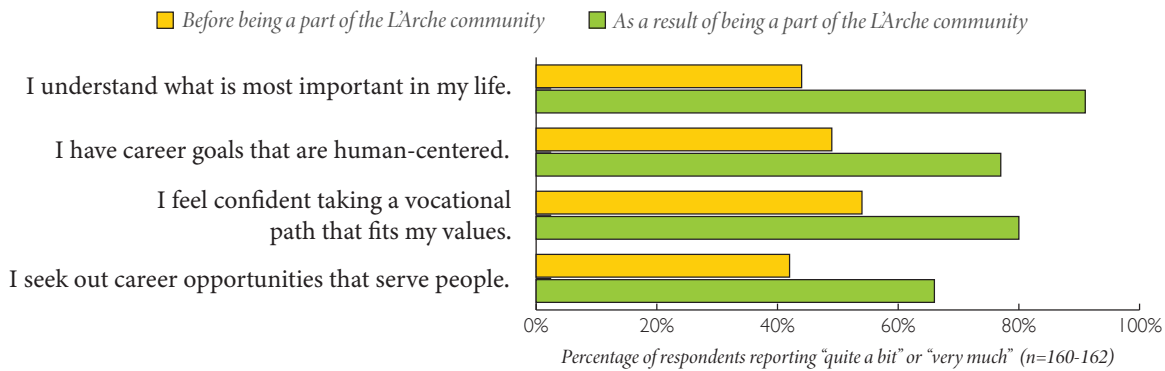
**15. Career as Calling.** Members of L'Arche view their job as a calling. This view sustains them through difficult times, allows them to see the meaning behind their work, and encourages them to be focused on relationships in the work that they do. In most interviews with non-core members, the data show that L'Arche is much more than "just a job." They view their role, regardless of the nature

of the role, as a calling. They believe that their work goes beyond providing a service or completing a set of tasks in exchange for payment. They believe that it is more of a vocation or a calling than a job. In thinking about life after L'Arche, one said, "Discernment and living in L'Arche made me realize that working directly with people—focusing directly on relationships with people, rather than research—was the direction that I wanted to go, and so I went into social work." The ability to find meaning and purpose in work is also what makes

people more resilient in the face of adversity. A non-core member said that when things were difficult, “We could have all just crumbled, but instead we rallied together.” This speaks to the benefit of having a collective sense of purpose and meaning in work.

The survey data also show that human and values-centered work is important to non-core members. Non-core members reported developing a greater understanding of what is important, having career goals that are more human-centered, feeling more confident taking a vocational path that fits their values, and seeking out career opportunities that serve people (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Non-core members pursue human- and values-centered work**

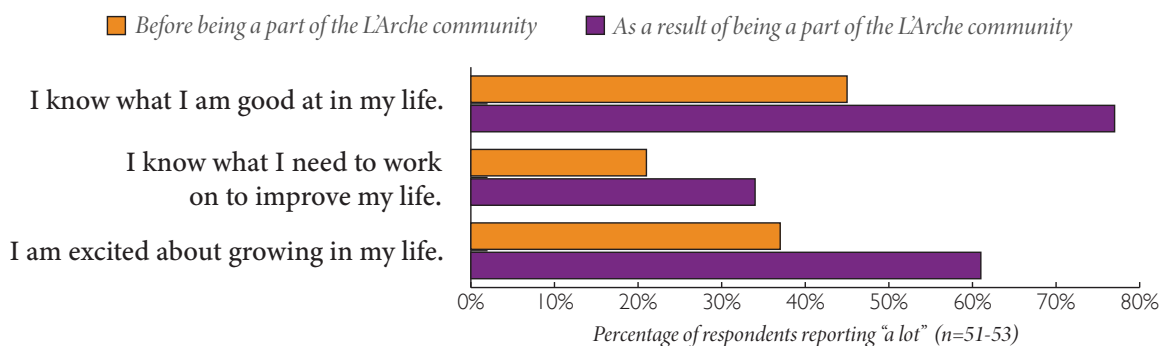


**Self-Worth through Service.** Core Members and staff alike have found profound self-worth and personal value through their daily activities and involvement in the organization. Members experience an enhanced sense of self-worth through their contribution to others in the community. Core Members talked about their participation in daily chores and prayer night. They said that these kinds of activities contributed to their feeling of love and purpose in their lives. The data show that whether they are putting the dishes away, passing a candle around the dinner table, or helping make dinner, members are aware of their worth. Having the opportunity to contribute to the lives and welfare of others reveals the strengths and aptitudes of people. Data show that Core Members were also more aware of their weaknesses, but they did not let it

defeat them. They explained that they were able to work on their weaknesses because L'Arche is a place where they feel comfortable. Through the community, they feel valued.

The survey data show that this growing self-worth is encouraging core members to grow in a variety of ways. 77% of core members reported that they know what they are good at a lot as a result of being a part of L'Arche, up from 45% before L'Arche. 61% of core members reported that they are excited that about growing in their life a lot as a result of L'Arche, up from 37%. In contrast to the qualitative data, only 34% of core members reported knowing what they need to work on to improve their life a lot, which may signal that this is an area for improvement (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Core members recognize their strengths and are excited to grow**





- 16. Clarifying Life's Purpose.** For many, being in L'Arche clarifies and solidifies purpose and calling in life. When asked about the impact of L'Arche on their lives, many interviewees described a sense of confirmation that they are pursuing the correct career that aligns with what is important to them. They credit their experience at L'Arche with illuminating what makes life worth living in the first place. For some, being at L'Arche signaled a shift in their worldview. They were reminded that simplicity often holds meaning. One L'Arche member said, "[W]e are all here to take care of each other." Another board member said, "L'Arche is a great place to learn to love and serve yourself, others, and God." When the purposes of life become clear, interviewees spoke of experiencing a sense of personal joy and peace.
- 17. Redirecting Future Plans.** Many assistants experienced changes in values around career and future life plans as a result of living and working in L'Arche communities. One assistant explained how her career goals changed after "realizing the importance of community." She said, "I want to foster more [community] and make intentional community a part of my life." The data revealed that time spent working or volunteering with L'Arche resulted in many people choosing to remain connected to L'Arche indefinitely. One assistant said, "My experiences and the relationships that I've been able to build have been what have kept me here and guided my path. I don't know what's happening next, but I can't envision my life without some kind of connection to L'Arche." Another person chose "downward mobility" and not to buy a house in order to remain in the L'Arche community with his family. Before coming to L'Arche, a Core Member had a goal to live independently but changed her mind after her positive experience living in the L'Arche.
- 18. Simply Be.** The data show that members of L'Arche communities believe that a person's acceptance and value in the community is based on their presence, not just their actions. Non-core members spoke of their experience at L'Arche as a place where one does not have to be accomplishing a task in order to be considered contributing and valued. One community member shared that because of her time at L'Arche, she lost her interest in "stereotypical success" and the need to "achieve." One assistant said they did not need to always "do things," instead they were able to "just be present" with Core Members, without needing to also complete a task. To many non-core members, this felt very different from other work or volunteer experiences, where their value was measured by their level of productivity.
- 19. Security, Safety, and Trust.** L'Arche communities are places of security, safety, and trust for Core Members and for their families. Prayer nights were shared as examples of safe spaces for members to voice their feelings and express empathy for others. One assistant said, "Being in a place where you know caring and being cared for really matters feels like a good place to be." Core Members described L'Arche as a place where they have help and support. One Core Member said, "Being in community, everyone supports each other." While another Core Member said, "[I] get help when I need it." Several Core Members said that knowing they had a home in L'Arche was a source of comfort and security to their families. A Core Member said, "[My] family wanted me to be taken care of as they age." And another said, "My mother made sure I was okay before she died." As a result of L'Arche communities, families trust and believe their children and loved ones with intellectual disabilities have a safe and secure place to call home for the rest of their lives.

Findings about the Unique Experience of L'Arche  
The following findings point to the special and unique experiences members have when participating in community at L'Arche:

The survey data also show that core members feel safe at L'Arche with 84% reporting they feel safe a lot since being at L'Arche, up from 55% before L'Arche.

**20. Family as a Metaphor for Community.** The L'Arche community was frequently referred to as a "family" in interviews with Core Members and their legal guardians. Core Members experienced a deep sense of belonging as members of their L'Arche communities. One said she began to see her life as part of a home and a community, to see it as part of a broader, shared experience rather than an individual one. A Core Member who had attempted to run away from his past living situations no longer expressed the desire to try to get away, rather he now feels that L'Arche has become his permanent home. A parent of a Core Member said that L'Arche is like his family, and she has witnessed that "he likes being part of a whole." When asked how they knew they were loved by other people in the community, a Core Member responded, "because we are a united family." One assistant spoke to the pain and beauty of accompanying Core Members in their final living moments: "It's really tough to walk the journey with people in their best moments, and then in their most difficult. When someone dies, it's like losing a family member."

**21. Humor as a Common Language.** The data show that sharing joy through laughter and humor is a common experience in L'Arche communities. Assistants explained the value in using humor to relate to Core Members. Humor allowed for deepening and growth in relationships. One assistant said of a Core Member, "I've learned that people's jokes are super important... when I laughed it made him laugh, and it made him happy ... it was a big lesson." Interview data show communities rely on humor to bring comfort and support during difficult,

discouraging, or overwhelming moments. One assistant said, "I feel like it's [fostering community], always trying to make people laugh and make people have fun... I feel motivated to try to do that even though it might be hard in some circumstances."

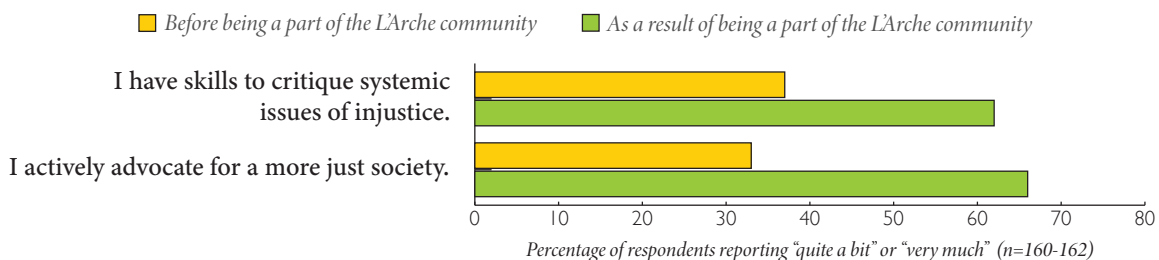
**Findings about Areas for Improvement**

Across the six L'Arche communities, the data reveal findings about areas that warrant more reflection and action for improvement.

**22. More Attention Needed for Social Justice.** Among the positive effects related to developing a sense of empathy and understanding, the data also reveal gaps in the ability of members to engage critically in the public square about issues of social justice related to disability, advocacy, and inclusion. The concepts of advocacy, engaging in social justice issues or addressing larger issues such as disability rights were largely absent in the interviews. A few people mentioned the term "advocacy," but did not elaborate or give examples of the advocacy playing a large role in community life. While many of the other impacts of L'Arche indirectly address social justice issues related to disability, there does not seem to be evidence of direct engagement in the issues themselves or a change in the way that people understand these issues.

The survey data also show that social justice is an area that is lagging. While improvement has occurred in this area for non-core members as a result of being a part of the L'Arche community, items related to social justice are among the lowest-rated on the survey (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Non-core members show modest growth in skills and actions to promote social justice**



**23. Needing Contribution for Community Direction.**

Core Members are not as involved in community-wide decision-making processes as they might be. The data show that L'Arche does very well in empowering Core Members to make choices that affect their everyday lives. However, this does not translate into participation in larger decision-making. In many cases, Core Members are currently not involved in larger decision-making processes/structures that affect their lives. While they have autonomy over everyday things – how they spend their time, what they wear, or what they eat for dinner – they are not incorporated into larger decisions that affect their lives, either indirectly or directly. Core Members rarely expressed that they had opportunities to voice decisions that affect the “big picture” of the community, such as structural changes, policies, hiring new assistants, or other community-wide decisions.

**24. Limited Connection with Neighbors.** While L'Arche members spend time doing activities outside of the house, there is less interaction with the people in their neighborhood. When asked about life outside of the L'Arche community but within the surrounding neighborhood, Core Members did not have much, if anything, to say. As stated in other key findings, L'Arche develops a very strong community within the houses between L'Arche participants. L'Arche also encourages Core Members to go out of the house and do activities. However, when asked if they knew their neighbors, or if they spent time with the students nearby, many Core Members either say “no” or cannot identify a specific example. While there are some small connections, such as a school-affiliated program that many Core Members participate in, it appears that most would not recognize the neighbor living next to their home. It is difficult to identify the reason for this. It might be a lack of desire to connect, or it may not be as fulfilling as other spaces in the community. Core Members do not appear sad or have feelings of loss because of this gap.

**25. Core Members with Unarticulated Unhappiness.** The data show that Core Members do not have many answers or detailed thoughts about being unhappy, sad, or mad. This could be because there is not a healthy space for this dialogue. Some of the Core Members had positive thoughts to share, but quite limited thoughts about the conflicts they were facing. Their expressions about difficulties or areas of discouragement appear to be underdeveloped. Providing space for bad feelings can be hard in a place of care. It is possible that Core Members may lose touch with their uncomfortable or unhappy thoughts or states of being. Feeling all of the different types of feelings is important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and mindset. L'Arche communities' positivity and recognition of the good is so powerful, but it may be missing the roundness of feelings.

**26. Challenge of Becoming Better Advocates.** Board members and assistants alike mentioned room for improvement when it comes to being knowledgeable about issues affecting people with disabilities. Some expressed a belief that they were too entrenched in the day-to-day activities to know about the bigger picture issues and resources. Some who were not living in L'Arche homes experienced some disconnection to the struggles of the Core Members. Many study participants were discontent with their level of knowledge about how to be an advocate. One interviewee said, “I would be happy to advocate, but I need to understand [the issues] better.” Interviewees recognized that there could be an improvement in training, access to resources, practice in approaches to advocacy, finding opportunities, and establishing habits of advocacy.

**27. Financial Sacrifice for Staff.** For many assistants, community living at L'Arche came with numerous rewards, including doing work that was deeply aligned with their values. At the same time, the data also show that assistants experience financial hardships as a result of choosing to live and work in L'Arche communities. People have concerns for their financial



futures once they choose to leave L'Arche. Assistants experienced difficulties when aspiring to meet more traditional financial milestones for their futures, such as homeownership. One said, "I live in a very beautiful situation that I am so grateful for ... but I would love to own my own house.... these aspirations [are] surface level and material, but also [bring] a sense of dignity." One assistant spoke of seeking out supplemental avenues of income in addition to their work at L'Arche in order to support themselves in the future. He said, "I'm trying to scramble... so [in] retirement I have enough to sustain myself." The experience of financial insecurity and sacrifice highlights a difference in the ways assistants experience security in a L'Arche community compared to Core Members.

**28. The Challenge of Living in Community.** The data show that both assistants and Core Members struggled at times with living in community with one another. A number of Core Members spoke of difficulties with roommates and the challenges they faced adjusting to new habits and the practices of others. Many emotions and feelings arise when living in community with diverse groups of people. These dynamics are challenging. An assistant said, "Living in community is not going to be easy just because you live in community. It's the same as a family. It can be dysfunctional." One consideration when striving to create a positive home environment for Core Members is to also consider support for the wellbeing and care of assistants.

## Part 4- Broader Community Response

In June of 2021, L'Arche USA convened a virtual, two-day symposium that brought together L'Arche community members from across the country and internationally, as well as invited academics in the fields of Psychology, Cognitive Science, Theology, Disability Studies, and Public Health. For members of the broader L'Arche community, the symposium was an opportunity to learn about and consider the results of the efforts of the Project Impact teams from the six L'Arche communities. The Project Impact team leaders and invited academics participated in three guided panel discussions. Project Impact team leaders shared their sense-making and reflections on the findings of their work in their individual communities. Members of the academic panels provided their insights and perspectives about the findings, including themes about the healing power of being recognized as human, authentic empathy, and sharing power. Panel members also spoke about themes of critical race theory, social justice, the intersection of race and intellectual disability, and the tension between the actions of acceptance versus improvement.

Following the panel discussions, small groups of symposium participants shared their perspectives and impressions regarding the evaluation themes and findings in breakout sessions. Participants were invited to share their responses to three questions: (1) What resonates with you?; (2) What did you find curious or surprising?; and (3) Where should we focus going forward? The following summarizes the broader community response to the Project Impact findings and the panel discussions:

**Autonomy and Care.** Members of the L'Arche community and those reflecting alongside the L'Arche community recognize the complexity of the relationship between the caregiver and care recipient. Assistants and community members without intellectual disabilities provide assistance for the practical needs of Core Members to ensure wellbeing and safety. At the same time, assistants want to allow for Core Members' autonomy and independence. Community members in L'Arche focus on the interdependence, or mutual relationships, between assistants and Core members. This means that caring for one another goes both ways. Care is not one-directional. In the mutuality of relationships, everyone needs care in some way. Core Members provide care to assistants too. One said, "Our Core Members need to know that we need them, too. People like to be needed. This is why we all come to L'Arche." Assistants want to find a way to provide care, while also allowing Core Members' to have autonomy in their lives. The concept of "relational autonomy", which is grounded in the field of psychology,

offers an approach to thinking about caregiving where differing contributions can be equally valuable.

**Power and Inclusion.** The organization of L'Arche has been influenced by cultural histories of colonization and Catholicism. Both histories include power resting in the hands of a dominant few, often resulting in oppressive and harmful outcomes for those with less power. As L'Arche continues to work towards inclusion and the welcoming of all people into L'Arche communities, there is the opportunity to examine power dynamics within the organization. Shining a light on power dynamics within a community can decrease the chances of abuse of power. While L'Arche strives to be welcoming and inclusive to all, there is a need to be sensitive to a focus on the integration of power for all members, especially those who have not historically been empowered. Attempts simply to subsume individuals into the dominant culture can result in the erasure of unique perspectives and experiences. For example, expecting Core

Members to conform to larger societal norms instead of allowing for difference could have harmful outcomes. The lack of racial diversity at L'Arche is another consideration within the theme of inclusion. Those who reflected on the findings in the symposium expressed a priority for L'Arche to grow as an anti-racist organization. They noted that there is the opportunity to investigate why the community is predominantly white, and how the community might become more welcoming for people from all racial and cultural backgrounds.

**Spirituality.** L'Arche was founded in the Catholic tradition and continues to be influenced by its Catholic foundation. As the organization has grown and evolved, L'Arche has come to welcome people of all faith backgrounds. L'Arche even welcomes people of no faith background. The data show that members experience life at L'Arche as a place where spirituality is welcomed, explored, and lived. At the same time, some members express a need for a clearer definition of the role of spirituality in community life at L'Arche. Community members have different perspectives about how to define the place of spirituality at L'Arche. Some want to remain connected to the Catholic traditions. For example, one community member said, “If we lose our roots, the tree will topple. How do we keep nourishing the tree?” Others stress the importance of L'Arche providing distance from the early participation and emulation of the Catholic religious community and appreciate the ways it has become a community more representative of the broad spectrum of humanity.

**Vulnerability and the Vanier Inquiry.** Vulnerability was an important theme for those reflecting on the findings of this study, both in the context of disability rights movements and in the lived experience at L'Arche. The perspective of some in the disability rights movement is that vulnerability is not a positive attribute because it equates to weakness. In contrast, L'Arche members see vulnerability as an opportunity for acceptance, compassion, and love. For many in L'Arche, the approach to vulnerability is grounded in the teachings of founder Jean Vanier. Recent revelations about Jean Vanier's abuse of community members over multiple decades, resulting in an independent inquiry, have left many in the L'Arche community questioning how to engage with the concept of vulnerability going forward. One participant said, “Since the inquiry, people are somehow more intrigued to come and learn alongside L'Arche because we have admitted and named that we are indeed vulnerable, that [we] are not perfect.... [This] has invited a way of meeting with others.”

See Appendix D for in-depth responses to the Project Impact findings written by the invited academic symposium participants.

## Part 5- Going Forward

The findings of Project Impact and the subsequent reflection on the findings from the participants of the symposium demonstrate the significance of the impact of L'Arche on its members. The findings reveal that the effects of the L'Arche experience on members are deep and durable.

Through L'Arche, members develop awareness, sensitivity, and curiosity for others, especially across differences. Members experience personal transformation in fundamental aspects of their lives. Members create meaningful relationships and find belonging in community with others. Members approach vocation and life-purpose in a holistic and human-centered way. And for many, members critically engage societal values of accessibility and inclusion and advocate for social justice.

In the lives of Core Members, the impact is significant as well. Core Members identify and live out their choices. To a great extent, they experience full, healthy lives. They have a positive influence on the lives of others.

The findings demonstrate how the guiding principles of love, empathy, and authenticity at work in community become powerful contributors to people's lives.

### Recommendations

The six participating communities considered themes that signaled areas for improvement. The symposium participants also consider questions about what comes next for L'Arche and where L'Arche should focus energy and efforts to improve in the future. As L'Arche communities consider their pathways forward, some of the more significant areas for consideration and attention are the following:

- **Share Power.** Sharing power with Core Members could increase understanding about their self-advocacy, or its absence, and deepen understanding about what empowerment for Core Members can look like. Structural shifts within the organization are needed to support Core Members' representation and involvement in decision making and leadership while avoiding tokenism.
- **Foster a Culture of Allyship.** L'Arche communities could engage more in the greater efforts for disability rights for all. The organization could foster a stronger culture of allyship and advocacy to encourage full and effective participation of members on behalf of disability rights. The L'Arche community could benefit from elevating disability rights advocacy as a priority. These efforts would serve to deepen relationships and build partnerships in the larger community and work to end isolation and segregation for all people with disabilities.
- **Prioritize Assistant Wellbeing.** Assistants can experience burnout, exhaustion, and financial stress while working and living at L'Arche. Those in leadership roles could deepen their commitment to the wellbeing of assistants and take steps to ensure a welcoming workplace with adequate systems of support. The recruitment and retention of staff would be strengthened and benefit from exploring new efforts to support the well-being and resilience of staff.
- **Consider and Clarify the Role of Spirituality.** The L'Arche community is welcoming of all faith traditions, including those having no faith tradition. And yet, there is a need to define and communicate more clearly the meaning and role of spirituality within the community. The community could take steps to understand more fully the perceptions of those with non-Christian



and other belief systems and explore their sense of spirituality and acceptance within L'Arche.

- **Further Define L'Arche Identity.** L'Arche could continue its ongoing internal discussions about values and essence. Identity-focused conversations could help when engaging in efforts about sharing power, fostering allyship, and considering the place and practice of

spirituality. These efforts would benefit the recruiting and retaining of new community members and staff and help to articulate values and impacts to external audiences like funding organizations. L'Arche's ongoing work in identity could help communities and members of communities healthily process challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and revelations from the Vanier Inquiry.

## Part 6 - L'Arche Impact Reflections

### Lisa M. Cataldo, MDiv, PhD

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#### Relational Matters: Reflection on the L'Arche Impact Report

*"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."* – Ann Frank

In the field of psychotherapy, we often discuss “therapeutic action,” the concept of *what facilitates change in psychotherapy*. What are the circumstances, actions, and attitudes of patient and therapist that make possible real and lasting transformation? This impact study by L'Arche USA is asking similar questions about life in and with L'Arche. It's safe to say that anyone who's ever been involved with L'Arche knows it makes a difference in the lives of its members and beyond. But just *what* difference it is making and how is that change created for core members, assistants, staff, board members and friends? And what is left out? What flaws, insufficiencies, or gaps are revealed in the study in what it concludes, and by what it might not include at all? I find myself reflecting on these questions from both my own experience with L'Arche (I'm a former assistant and board member, among other connections) and from the perspective of my intersecting vocations as a therapist and professor who engages the convergences of relational psychoanalysis, spirituality, and pastoral care.

The impact report reveals that L'Arche facilitates growth and transformation for its members. Involvement with L'Arche moves people toward more compassion and self-compassion, greater appreciation of difference, increased self-awareness, experiences of mutual recognition, deeper connections with oneself and others, and a growing sense of meaning and purpose. This resonates fully with my own experience over a 25-year relationship with L'Arche, and it is a portrait of what many psychotherapists would see as a movement toward a fuller and more authentically related human life. What follows

are a few observations of the report's conclusions from a relational and “psychology of spirituality” perspective. These observations are not meant to be comprehensive, but simply to highlight a few areas of psychological resonance.

#### **We matter, we need to know that we matter, we need to know others matter.**

Relational psychoanalysis frames the human person as created in and by relationships. Each of us needs to feel recognized and valued by others who care for us. Ronald Fairbairn, a British psychoanalyst, claimed we must experience ourselves as the “gleam in the other's eye.” Not all of us have this experience in our early lives (and no one has it perfectly), but later relationships can help to resume the developmental movement toward a healthy feeling of being a valid and valued person.

Developmentally, the experience of being recognized allows a healthy sense of boundaries between self and “other.” When I am recognized as myself, I can recognize you as yourself, separate and different from me, but also connected to me. I can only be me authentically because you are you, authentically. This mutual recognition of the “irreducible autonomy of the other” (a phrase coined by relational psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin) means that we can be in authentic relationship without the illusion that the other person is under our control or that they must be as we have imagined them. The other's value rests in their being there as a person.

The Impact Report reveals the transformative potential of L'Arche in terms that resonate with the psychological need for

mutual recognition and for feeling valued as ourselves.. Not everyone arrives at L'Arche with a sense that they matter, but time in L'Arche brings to life the psychological and spiritual conviction that everyone counts.

### **We need to feel our contributions matter.**

Whether from a clinical or spiritual point of view, a corollary of our need to know we matter is the need to feel our relationships are not one-sided, and that we have the ability and power to contribute in a way that matters. British analysts Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein both emphasize the developmental need to feel we are “contributing-in” to our relationships and communities. In the quest for mutual recognition, being “done-to” or “done for” is not helpful. Instead, it is essentially one side of a potentially exploitative dynamic – one person is doing and the other one is being done-to. The doer-done-to dynamic is the opposite of mutuality. The Impact Report reveals an understanding of this potential danger is implicit in the L'Arche model. Part of the impact L'Arche has on the life of its members is that it fosters both mutual recognition and mutual vulnerability that values “doing-with,” so that all members feel empowered to contribute in to the community via their unique talents, skills, ideas, and energy. For many people at L'Arche (and in the world for that matter), in all different roles, being able to contribute in, and to have those contributions acknowledged and valued, is a powerful and transformative experience.

### **The myth of independence and invulnerability is just that, a myth. But there are dangers.**

Whether from a psychological or spiritual point of view, there is transformative potential in recognizing our interdependence and our need for one another. There is no human being who is not vulnerable in some way and at some time, but American culture in particular has tended to depict the ideal person as tough, independent, and self-sufficient. Clinically, the need to appear “in control” or to “not need anyone” can cause significant suffering. A relational psychoanalytic understanding of personhood stresses that our human vulnerability is a given and that our

need for one another, rather than being “weakness,” is in fact the foundation of compassion and justice. In a framework of mutuality – mutual recognition and valuing of the other – we are able to say, “I see you,” and also, “your suffering can move me.” The Impact report highlights the experience of mutual vulnerability and interdependence as potentially powerful agents of growth. However, the elevation of ideas of vulnerability also holds potential danger when the reality of power is not also recognized.

### **Power must be acknowledged.**

There is no human relationship that is completely free of the dynamics of power. Some of us hesitate to accept this statement because we think of power as threatening or negative. This is not the case. Without power, nothing could move! But power can become dangerous – certainly when it is abused, but also when it is not acknowledged. It is a central tenet of professional ethics in both psychotherapy and ministry that awareness of power helps to discourage its abuse. Because of the varying realities of ability and resources (physical, emotional, spiritual) among L'Arche members, at any given time one person or group is in a position of power in relation to another person or group. In light of this reality, we might rely on the wisdom of the late Lewis Aron, a relational analyst who reminds clinicians of the “mutual but not equivalent” dynamic in the therapeutic relationship. Those in a position of power in whatever way have an obligation to recognize use their power in ways to empower, advocate for, and encourage others (“power with” rather than “power over”).

The fact is that being vulnerable with another entails risk, but it should not be an occasion for exploitation. Transformation can be fostered in vulnerability, but only in a framework of sufficient trust and safety where the boundaries and expectations are clear, and the differences in power are acknowledged.

It would be remiss not to invoke the fact of the revelation of the abuses of power that are part of the founding story and history of L'Arche. Although many in the USA communities may not have had any direct or meaningful relationship with Jean Vanier, the reality of his behavior and its hiddenness





conflicting findings, including those that provoke discomfort and disappointment given desired outcome. The world cloud above visually displays common words in the report—one can begin to image the connective and influential relationships among these core ideas.

While the richness of this report requires prolonged engagement, I share here a few initial reflections and look forward to further engagement and reflection. My academic education and experience is in community psychology, prevention science, disability studies, program evaluation, and public health. I also have lived experience as a L'Arche Assistant and Board member. I draw from this professional background and lived experiences to reflect on what can be learned from L'Arche, what L'Arche can learn from others, and future directions.

### **Intentional Community: Be More than a Sign**

The Project Impact report conveys the many successes of L'Arche communities in building and sustaining intentional community with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and of differing levels of societal marginalization. The Project Impact report also relays the power of community and its many positive influences on individuals—from creating friendships among those who might otherwise not come in contact with one another or be in relationship with one another to the ways those friendships are mutually beneficial and influential.

The search for genuine acceptance, for a sense of belonging, and for authentic inclusion in one's community are deeply desired by many people with intellectual disability (and others) and far too often absent from their lives given longstanding segregation, discrimination, and marginalization. While L'Arche has long desired to serve as a sign for how to build meaningful, mutual relationships and community, L'Arche could also proactively lead in this space offering insights and lessons derived from their decades of experience across the world to others seeking to build similarly meaningful relationships and inclusive communities. Such deliberate outreach may foster an improved quality of life for more individuals with intellectual disability.

### **Disability Rights: Rooting out Ableism via Anti-Ableist Work**

The Project Impact report repeatedly notes gaps in attention to and desire for gains in topics related to social justice. Here I offer a few reflections related to ableism and the ways I would encourage L'Arche to undertake anti-ableist work with greater intentionality. Part of being accountable to marginalized populations means unpacking social influences on structures, processes, and dynamics at all levels and taking actions towards ensuring they are fully free of beliefs and practices that reify injustice. More specifically, movement towards eradicating ableism entails dismantling the intentional and unintentional interpersonal, institutional, and structural dynamics that discriminate on the basis of disability and give rise to inequities so that people with disability experience equal access and flourish. For those without developmental disability, this process is one of allyship or the lifelong, positive, and conscious actions undertaken to promote the inclusion of marginalized populations.

There are vibrant disability rights and self-advocacy communities that can and should be leveraged to achieve these goals. Core members might benefit immensely from joining these movements locally or globally. They might experience greater disability pride, an understanding of their rights and responsibilities, and increased confidence and skills to lead their lives as desired. Community members without lived disability experience can leverage these communities to learn more about disability justice and the experiences of people with disability, how authentic relationships and using one's power can amplify the voices of people with intellectual disability and transfer privilege and power, how to critically assess structures/policies/practices and take action to embody disability justice, how to take action to encourage others to become allies, and how this work is a life-long commitment and using reflexive practice to continuously grow. There are many existing resources that can be accessed toward these goals, an audit might be undertaken to identify and reduce ableism, co-leads might emerge as ways to increase power among core members, as but a few examples of promising directions toward anti-ableist work.

## Leveraging Strengths and Resources for Continued Growth

Looking towards the future, keep in mind that things that are hard are not necessarily bad—everyone with experience with intentionally community living knows this to be true first-hand. As L'Arche undertakes important work to further generate desired impacts, the organization and individuals embedded therein have many strengths or assets that can be leveraged in these growth processes. One that merits specific attention is the relationships that exist among individuals with and without intellectual disability. A key construct in disability studies and bioethics is that of relational autonomy, a construct that recognizes the social contexts within which we all exist and the implications for decision-making.

Considerations for relational autonomy may be critical to expanding opportunities core members have for choice and control over their lives and over L'Arche policies and practices. That is, by considering how relationships are marked by allyship and can be an asset in anti-ableist work, L'Arche may achieve greater success in desired growth toward disability rights.

Briefly, it is also important to note that L'Arche may benefit from greater connections to efforts to offer living wages to all workers, efforts to better train and support direct support professionals, and efforts to build communities of practice to help support individuals and communities undertaking anti-ableist work.

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## Thomas Murphy, PhD Candidate

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### Impact Report Reflection

In the interdisciplinary space of Christian theology and religious education, a commitment to accessibility and inclusivity for people with intellectual disabilities takes on a particular urgency. If we are unable to creatively welcome and educate brothers and sisters across the whole wide and wonderful diversity of human intellectual capacity, then our faith communities will be incomplete, missing a part of the Body of Christ even. The L'Arche Impact Report and Symposium suggest the potential of a robust dialogue between L'Arche and theological educators towards collaborative ways in which educating in faith and theological reflection and discourse can occur with, rather than for or about people with intellectual disabilities.

### What Does Your Field Have To Learn From L'Arche?

There is a strong sense of the spirituality (very broadly construed) of L'Arche spread across the findings of the Impact Report. For instance, the data points to “growth in the members’ ability to see, appreciate, and honor the value, dignity, and worth of others” (#2); growth in “ability to relate and build healthy relationships with others” (#3); personal transformation and growth in patience and empathy (#7, #9), compassion and gratitude (#8); and increased capacity to love self and others (#10). Relatedly, a whole range of findings indicate that L'Arche helps its members to find clarity around self-worth and purpose in their lives, including discerning a “call” in life (#15-18).

These findings seem to be both rooted in the Christian/Catholic foundation of L'Arche and also suggest a more universal and open expression of spirituality. Theological and religious educators can learn from how L'Arche makes readily manifest some of these contours of the contemporary human quest for the transcendent and the deepest sources of our human experience and values. Such findings suggest some tracks along which formation into a life of faith or a spiritually meaningful life or community can occur and how the values and tenets of a spiritual tradition are passed on. At a very fundamental level, L'Arche demonstrates how the inner and outer life can be brought together in concrete practices of care

and relationship, directly within the milieu of our daily lives. L'Arche provides a living example of how the most personal and transcendent yearnings of our lives find expression and conversion when we authentically and wholeheartedly enter into relationships in community. That all of this occurs in a community marked by rich faith and spiritual plurality – as well as a wide diversity of abilities, cultures, etc. - makes it all that much more challenging, hopeful, and relevant beyond L'Arche.

Such questions are often approached theoretically within scholarly discourse, but L'Arche makes clear that these are very real matters of praxis with profound consequences. To find ways for the transformational praxes of relationship in L'Arche to inform theoretical reflection and research is a critical task for the academic field of theology and education. To be fair, this work has already begun in earnest by multiple theologians, but this Impact Report suggests there is still a wide range of ground yet to explore.

### What Does L'Arche Need To Learn From Your Field?

The dialogue occurring between theology and disability studies can fruitfully challenge L'Arche towards some of its stated growth edges. An important part of this dialogue has been its efforts to theorize and create more accessible and inclusive faith communities, spiritual formation, curriculum and pedagogical methods and to increase participatory research methods that can include people with intellectual disabilities in crafting research questions and solutions. As noted in the Report's areas of improvement, there is room for growth in such arenas, particularly as L'Arche seeks to more critically engage issues of social justice for people with disabilities in the public square (#23), foster greater core member involvement in structural and policy change and decision making in communities (#24), and gain skills and resources to become better advocates (#27) a turn towards some ideas from this interdisciplinary dialogue could prove beneficial.

Relatedly, disability studies and critical disability studies are increasingly engaging with a growing disability justice movement that is seeking to raise the profiles and perspectives

of people with disabilities and to foster communities of practice and activism. This movement engages the spheres of socio-economic, political, and cultural power, and challenges repressive bodily and intellectual norms. Such work is accompanied by a growing awareness of the dynamics of ableism, including ways to raise critical consciousness around this issue and to creatively mitigate its pernicious impacts. Closer alignment with such movements could greatly benefit and shape the approach of L'Arche to its internal power dynamics, including shifting it away from some of the less helpful aspects of the charity model of its founding and towards a more equitable sharing of power across ability difference rooted in its mutual relationships. Such internal shifts would also re-focus and re-invigorate the prophetic witness of L'Arche in the church and world.

### What Are Some Next Steps That L'Arche Might Want To Take?

1. As I noted above, there is a strong sense of the spirituality (very broadly construed) of L'Arche spread across the findings of the Impact Report. There is a real gift in the fact that the spirituality is so intimately intertwined with the many other facets of the impact of L'Arche in people's lives. In light of this, some "next steps" for L'Arche in the USA might be extracting some of the more compelling and common themes to explore them more thoroughly. Relatedly, these themes might be markers of the leading edge of contemporary spirituality that L'Arche represents. To articulate them more robustly, clearly, and widely could help L'Arche to deepen its role in the present stage in the evolution of human spirituality. This step includes finding new language that honors both the treasured traditions and the emerging spiritual transformations and insights engendered by L'Arche.
2. It is clear from the "areas for improvement" portion of the Report that L'Arche in the USA is seeking to grow in its more direct engagement with issues of disability justice and public policy. I could foresee some next steps in this regard as: (1) identifying and deepening relationships with critical disability scholars and activists

who are working at the nexus of theory, lived experience, and public policy, (2) leveraging the profile of L'Arche to provide ever more unambiguous rebuttals to ableism within our US culture (this would also include a close look at ableist tendencies that can manifest within L'Arche assistants, staff and structures), (3) drawing on a Universal Design for Learning or similar inclusive design

framework to comprehensively examine all internal and external communication and formation material and processes for maximum access and inclusion, and (4) exploring the work of assistants and staff through the lens of allyship (including its relationship to - and difference from - friend and/or advocate).

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## Andrew Roach, PhD

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### L'Arche Report Response

I responded to each of the queries in the paragraphs that follow. However, before responding to the report, I want to acknowledge the incredible work of the team that conducted this research. The scope of the qualitative and quantitative data collected (and analyzed) is impressive. To have accomplished this during a pandemic is even more noteworthy!

### What does your field have to learn from L'Arche?

Because the evaluation team was so successful in engaging participants, the summary report covers a lot of ground. As such, selecting one or two themes (out of 29) to highlight is a difficult task. However, I want to life up the concept of love, which is discussed at multiple points in the report, for closer examination. For example, the report summary states:

One Core Member said that living in L'Arche made her a better person because she “loves a lot of people.” She spoke about her ability and willingness to give and receive love, and then to allow that love to change her as a person.... The word “love” is used by Core Members and non-core members alike in almost every interview, signaling that something transcending the typical client-caregiver relationship is occurring at L'Arche (p. 7).

Love as a construct and topic of study might seem a little “squishy” to many social scientists. Certainly, our society too-often equates love with the sort of sentiments expressed in Hallmark Cards, romantic comedies, and paperback romances. However, the love discussed in this report is only distantly related to the typical representations of love in popular culture. The words of both core members and non-core members describe a love that is intentional, relational,

accepting, and compassionate. As I read the report, I found myself reflecting on bell hooks' book, *All About Love: New Visions*. In her journey towards a meaningful definition of love, hooks invokes the words of the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, who wrote love is “the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.... Love is an act of will—namely both an intention and an action” (hooks, 2000, p. 5). Peck's words are echoed beautifully in the reflection of a volunteer who observed that, through L'Arche, he learned to make “*my love for people more tangible and more practical, less a sense of love as a notion and emotion and more like something you actually enact with your hands*” (p. 9).

Later in the report summary, the evaluation team writes: “*Some community members said that it can be complicated to explain the experience and power of love in L'Arche to those outside of the community and who have not experienced it in person*” (p. 12). The results of this investigation provide many concrete descriptions and examples of how love is enacted and experienced in L'Arche communities. I hope these “thick descriptions” can provide a starting place for conveying love's centrality to L'Arche's purpose, values, and impact.



### What does L'Arche need to learn from your field?

I hesitate to suggest that L'Arche can learn anything from my field, but I do welcome L'Arche's embrace of Universal Design for Learning (UDL; <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>). Developed by the non-profit CAST, the UDL Guidelines offer "concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline or domain to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST, n.d.). Member development is one of L'Arche USA's focus areas and L'Arche communities already use a variety of inclusive learning strategies that focus on the members' learning and growth. The UDL guidelines might provide a useful framework for guiding future curriculum development and implementation.

### What are some next steps L'Arche might want to take in thinking about its impact on community members and other stakeholders?

This grant-funded project reflects the Templeton Foundation's focus on research that informs "the developmental science of virtues and character, including identification of relevant precursors, correlates, developmental trajectories, and assessment of potential inter-individual differences" (Templeton Foundation, n.d.). This is a worthy goal, but I found myself wondering if a focus on individuals' character and virtue development misses a "key ingredient" of the L'Arche experience. Perhaps, Gergen's writing on *relational being* can provide a useful heuristic for thinking about next steps in this work (2009). Gergen argues that relationships, rather than the behaviors and perceptions of bounded individuals, should be the focus of investigation. For example, he notes, "there is no action that has meaning in itself, that

is, an action that can be isolated and identified for what it is. There are no acts of love, altruism, prejudice, or aggression as such. In order to be anything at all, they require a supplement, an action by at least one other person that ratified their existence as something" (Gergen, 2009, p. 33). While it is necessary to understand how core members and others are changed by L'Arche, it might be more important to continue to delineate the qualities of the interactions and activities that create those changes. How might L'Arche intensify its focus on relationships in future evaluation studies? Perhaps ethnography, focus groups, or participatory methods can serve as strategies to capture what Gergen calls coordinated action (or co-action) in L'Arche communities.

As L'Arche plans for future evaluation work, it is important to continue to build on the inclusive and participatory methods that were utilized in the current study. How might L'Arche continue to demonstrate its commitment to amplify the voices of all people, particularly those with intellectual disabilities? The current evaluation represents an important step toward recognizing that aspiration. However, as Aldridge (2016) indicates, "the fundamental difference between participatory research and other research methodologies lies in 'the location of power in the various stages of the research process'...and the fact that, in the main, the stories and 'voices' of participants are placed center stage, both in the design and objectives of participatory approaches" (p. 9). Future studies might extend the findings of this current work by further centering L'Arche core members in the design and implementation of the evaluation process. This is not easy work, but I can think of few organizations better positioned than L'Arche for this sort of undertaking.

### References

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## Rachael Wanjagua, PhD Candidate

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The uncertainty some symposium participants had with the silence or lack of input from core members about what needs to improve could be signaling deeper unconscious systemic problems. First, core members have been taught to view the ideal world from an ableist perspective and see their own as deficient. A lack of an Intellectual disability epistemology that views and positions having ID as an okay and legitimate way to be in society, contributes to this silence/ dilemma.

The stirrings of some L'Arche members whether they can be in a position to fully represent perspectives or voice of core members is an important sign or 'haunting' of the conscience to determine if the direction we take with representation and inclusion is sufficient. Inclusion in itself exists within a power dynamic that supposes an "other" needs to come to the position or worldview of the one including. It basically happens through a colonial relationship where the more privileged have access to knowledge, resources, dominance through being the majority and so on. The success of the dominant group and a lack of seeing itself as dominating the 'other' is because of dominant world views, rhetoric and attitudes created and systemically sustained by the dominant group. Having a dominant voice, they may seek to convert the other to be like themselves and with intellectual disability, the term inclusion has become a popular approach.

Inclusion has the connotation of affording people with ID the 'good life' similar to that of their none disabled counterparts. The success and beauty of life is viewed from the perspective of popular culture and world view which most of the time is ableist in nature. Becoming like an "other" does not in any way give justice neither does it allow God given identities and purposes to emerge. Inclusion and the idea of affording 'justice' or democracy for people with intellectual disability most of the time ends up obscuring the oppressions core members were experiencing by making them invisible. This is a much worse tragedy since inclusion masquerades as a good thing while all it has done bring everyone into the dominant culture and perspective. By doing so the identity of the disenfranchised is buried deeper while the dominant

ideologies continue to establish themselves as absolute truths that are ethical and objective. This approach does nothing to challenge the conscience of the dominant group which is very important if transformation has to happen. It is not just the core members or people with ID who need to walk towards ableist world views but in fact, the opposite needs to happen if justice is to be served and people with ID have to live their lives fully.

Since people with intellectual disability have lacked social capital and historically have been disenfranchised to have a worldview and be accepted as such, L'Arche has a difficult task of being intentional about the capacity to identify the 'hauntings' core members exhibit despite being comfortable and treated well because suppression of one's true God given identity always finds a way of putting up resistance to be othered and surfaces. This could take the form of the inability of core members to perceive any challenges, and sometimes it could be practical shows of what has now been branded as challenging behavior. Just as every other spiritual being is making their journeys through life discovering who they are in God and their purpose, so do core members. Since people with other abilities and disabilities do not require permissions to become themselves from their fellow human beings, the lives of core members or people with ID should stop being held at ransom for the benefit of others other than themselves and their service to God.

To help the situated knowledges of core members shine through requires the support of L'Arche members in the process of becoming. The process can be messy and complex since the people who support core members (assistants and administrations) have their realities/worldviews in conflict with those of core members. L'Arche can also not work alone in this process since the issues that disenfranchise people with ID exist beyond L'Arche spaces. The justice core members require touches on all aspects of society: economic, educational, health, spiritual, political etc. L'Arche therefore might need to reconsider its often-quiet position and be proactive in knowledge production as well as influencing discourse for people with intellectual disabilities in society.