

# L'Arche: The Successes of Community, the Challenges of Empowerment in a Faith-Centered Setting

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**ABSTRACT.** L'Arche communities offer faith-centered, shared community living for individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. L'Arche communities focus primarily on deepening social ties for persons with intellectual disabilities in an international context that increasingly focuses on the empowerment of this group. Several theoretical distinctions between sense of community and empowerment point to natural tensions between the two concepts. However, a further analysis

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The first author extends her gratitude to the many L'Arche family members who guided her towards a deeper understanding of life, relationships, and an empowering sense of community and whose friendships have enriched her life. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and not of L'Arche International or any of its communities. These views are based on experience with only a subset of L'Arche communities, experiences elsewhere may vary greatly. Both authors thank Jo Anne Horstmann for her insightful comments on an earlier draft. All names and certain identifying details have been altered in order to protect individuals' privacy.

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uncovers the potential for positive interplay between them. Here, we present a narrative informed by experience that explores the differential effects of a deepened sense of community on empowerment within a faith-centered setting, L'Arche. Implications for creating theory and settings that promote synergy between sense of community and empowerment are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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### ***THE SUCCESSES OF COMMUNITY, THE CHALLENGES OF EMPOWERMENT IN A FAITH-CENTERED SETTING***

In response to growing dissatisfaction with existing conditions, many individuals and groups have created alternative settings in which to deliver new forms of supports and services (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001). L'Arche communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live in faith together offer one such example. These communities create settings that promote faith-centered connections among members and accord people with intellectual disabilities roles of social value. L'Arche communities reflect a more complex stance toward the empowerment of community members with intellectual disabilities, notwithstanding the promise of social connections for promoting empowerment and a growing international emphasis on its importance. Herein, we explore L'Arche communities' successes with developing a sense of community and the implications, negative and positive, of this success for the empowerment of community members with intellectual disabilities.

#### ***L'ARCHE: FAITH-CENTERED COMMUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH AND WITHOUT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES***

In 1964 Canadian Jean Vanier took a seemingly small, and yet dramatically impactful, action against abysmal living conditions at institutions for people with mental disabilities. Vanier had befriended two

men with intellectual disabilities, Philippe Seux and Raphaël Simi, who resided in an institution. After reflecting on how to address the situation and consultation with spiritual leader Father Thomas Philippe, Vanier decided to invite these men into his home to share life with him (L'Arche International, n.d.). Ahead of the movement to empty and close institutions in many countries, Vanier made a simple gesture of friendship and faith that sparked its own international movement to develop faith-centered communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities would seek to live together as partners.

In creating L'Arche, Vanier was drawn to the presence of God that existed within those viewed as poor and socially devalued. He was responding to Jesus' call to descend the social hierarchy to discover the path to God (Vanier, 1992) and was largely interested in responding to the human desire to be loved and valued. For too long, people with intellectual disabilities had been excluded from society and made to feel worthless and unlovable. Vanier's hope was that life at L'Arche would accord people like Seux and Simi socially valued roles. In doing so, these men could be accepted and loved as they were and thereby supported in discovering their own self-worth and lovability. The form of community living that these three men created emphasized welcoming, sharing, forgiveness, simplicity, prayer and safe refuge, all grounded in Christian traditions. These early days of life sharing at L'Arche (French for "ark" or place of refuge) taught the three men a great deal about living in community. Vanier noted the unexpected mutuality of care that occurred and learned that sharing life with these men revealed to him his own inner pain and brokenness which facilitated his path to God (Vanier, 1979, 1992, 1998).

Others from around the world joined these three in Trosly, France to witness and contribute to the emerging movement. As the number of people drawn to this way of faith-centered living grew, soon there were several homes and workshops in the small village. At the time, people with intellectual disabilities rarely had homes and were even less frequently welcome in workplaces. The availability of homes and workshops where the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities were recognized was thus a considerable achievement. With time, L'Arche communities spread throughout the world; they now number over 100 in 30 countries on 5 continents. These homes and workshops are linked together as an international federation of communities committed to realize the charter of L'Arche (L'Arche International, n.d.).

L'Arche consists of faith-centered communities that are Roman Catholic in root and ecumenical in modern form. Core members, mem-

bers with intellectual disabilities, and assistants, members without intellectual disabilities, create the central membership of a community. Each community generally consists of 3-5 homes (each with 5-9 members) situated within close geographical distance to one another and sometimes one or two workshops. Life sharing within a home and between the homes within a community occurs as core members and assistants come together to share meals, prayer, house responsibilities, joys, and sorrows (L'Arche International, n.d.). Workshops vary in size and function. Some make candles, note cards, and mosaics; others have working farms; and a few provide alternative activities including sensory-based experiences such as discovery of textures and odors. Workshops persist at L'Arche as places to provide valued daily activities to core members, despite their decreasing popularity as work settings for people with disabilities.

L'Arche communities are distinct from other forms of group living for people with intellectual disabilities in three noteworthy ways. First, L'Arche differs in that it is faith-centered. Spirituality explicitly informs daily rhythms and traditions. Shared prayer is a main focus and occurs regularly before meals, at bedtime and during all house and community celebrations. Community members are encouraged to participate in and lead prayers. Second, L'Arche works to avoid the traditional staff-resident divide. At L'Arche, assistants typically live in the house; they are not considered staff in the traditional sense as their primary mission is to create home with, not for, people with intellectual disabilities. Finally, all community members have a say in inviting potential new members to join. L'Arche communities live by an internationally ratified charter that guides their spirit; the charter's emphasis on life sharing, in a familial way, among those with and without disabilities distinguishes these communities from many other forms of group living available to adults with intellectual disabilities.

L'Arche has developed in a broader context of noteworthy sociopolitical trends. While L'Arche began with an explicit goal of developing social connections, it soon found itself surrounded by a movement that also cared about another goal, that is, the empowerment of people with intellectual disabilities. L'Arche appears to have been quite successful in achieving its goal of building community and yet has struggled more with promoting empowerment for core members. Herein, we explore how L'Arche has been able to use its commitment to community to both the benefit and detriment of core members' empowerment.

We are interested in this question within this setting because of multiple intersecting experiences. The first author has been involved with

three L'Arche communities in two countries for eight years. The second author has been working with community agencies that serve and support people with intellectual disabilities for more than twenty years. He has also been active in developing, studying, and supporting advocacy groups of and for people with intellectual disabilities. Both authors are community psychologists, a field concerned with considering the larger context within which psychological phenomenon occur. We have a strong interest in using the theory and research to better understand the community living movement for people with intellectual disabilities (cf., Bond & Keys, 2000; Henry, Keys, Jopp & Balcazar, 1996; Keys & Factor, 2001). Furthermore, our discipline does not evidence the traditional reluctance of many others towards considering the role of faith and spirituality in individual's lives and communities (cf., Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Maton & Pargament, 1987). As such, we have been led to merge our academic leanings with our personal experiences and to consider the role of spirituality on individuals and communities. With these resources, we conduct this examination of sense of community and its effects on empowerment within a faith-centered setting.

***SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT L'ARCHE:  
HOW PEOPLE COME TO BELONG***

L'Arche communities call people into faith-centered relationships. Their emphasis on life sharing helps develop and sustain a deep sense of connection among community members. Our desire to be and the ways in which we are connected to others, particularly in communities of faith, have been of great interest to social scientists (cf., Maton & Rappaport, 1984; Pargament & Maton, 2000). Within community psychology, work on the psychological sense of community was first undertaken by Seymour Sarason and later expanded by David McMillan, Robert Newbrough and David Chavis, among others. Sarason's (1974) early work defined it as "perceptions of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). The last aspect of sense of community, the value of being part of something greater than oneself, may be particularly relevant to building community in a faith-centered setting. McMillan and Chavis (1986) outlined sense of community as a four-dimensional construct which includes membership, influence, fulfillment of mutual needs and shared emotional ties and supports.

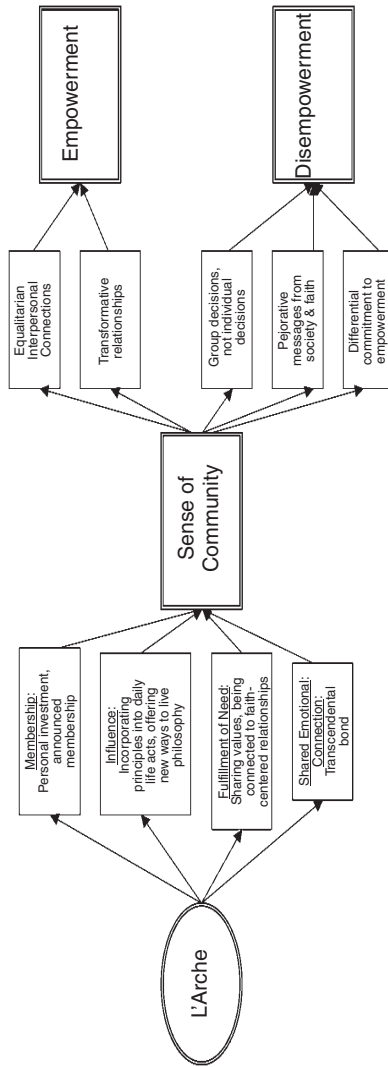
When simultaneously present, these dimensions demarcate the psychological existence of a community. This model helps us understand how L'Arche builds a sense of community among its members (See Figure 1. Note: Throughout the text terms that are part of the framework presented in Figure 1 are italicized).

*Membership*, a sense of having invested oneself in the community and belonging to it, is one key dimension that marks a sense of community. L'Arche communities do extensive work to facilitate membership, thereby positively building the perceived and experienced sense of community. First, L'Arche communities have clearly defined and documented membership guidelines. These guidelines outline the roles and responsibilities of the ways that people can belong to the community and the boundaries that distinguish members from nonmembers. These guidelines stress that membership to a L'Arche community is not a right but comes about because a person, "contributes to the ongoing life and function of the community; actively participates in and supports the daily life and faith . . . ; and is open to embracing and growing in the vision of L'Arche" (Zone Membership Committee, 2003). Members actively and personally invest in the community. Although the process of membership is especially critical in the first few years, many L'Arche communities annually recognize member's anniversaries and ask members to recommit to their journey with L'Arche.

L'Arche is largely open and embracing of new members. Infrequently, members have been asked to or elect to leave the community as their presence is no longer mutually desirable. Examples of such situations may include when a member becomes a danger to themselves or their housemates or no longer desires to live within the vision of L'Arche. These decisions are often difficult and those involved struggle to address the issues raised by their occurrence. The existence of membership guidelines has proven useful in helping to ascertain the appropriateness of the decision to ask someone to leave. Sadness and mourning of the ex-member coupled with relief and/or understanding persist, sometimes for years. Some communities have adopted traditions of blessing the person and maintaining contact as appropriate to help them cope with the loss of the departed community member.

*Influence* refers to the force that an individual exerts upon the group and that the group exerts upon the individual. Bidirectional influence is a second marker of community in L'Arche as members adopt community principles into their daily acts and, in turn, alter the community by their own practices of those principles and other behavior. As new members join L'Arche, they are asked to engage in a period of discov-

FIGURE 1. How L'Arche Builds Community and Its Differential Affects on Empowerment



ery in which they learn the philosophy, history and traditions of the community. As new members become knowledgeable about the functioning of the community and how to incorporate its principles into their life, they are then invited to begin to infuse their own unique ideas and history into community life. In this way, new assistants and core members are expected to first acquire the norms of the community; once they do so, they are then invited to participate in shaping those norms with new ideas on how to enact L'Arche principles. However, the luxury of time for discovery is not always possible. Some assistants begin their journey with L'Arche at a time when their leadership is quickly called upon. Although these assistants face less time for learning community traditions before enacting and perhaps altering them, these assistants are expected to remain sensitive to these traditions and work to protect them. On the other hand, new members often bring with them ideas that are appreciated for their excitement and novelty. For example, new members who bring novel worship practices (e.g., corporal prayer) may be asked to share their own spiritual traditions soon after arriving. In these ways, members' behaviors are altered by the community, and the community is eventually altered by the individuality and fresh ideas of its members.

*Fulfillment of mutual needs* refers to the shared values, satisfaction of needs and exchange of resources that exist among community members. Vanier sought to respond to the distress of people with intellectual disabilities by promoting relationships in a context of shared faith. The desire to share a faith-centered life with people with intellectual disabilities has called people to L'Arche for over forty years. These shared values facilitate and nourish the connections among community members. In L'Arche, members soon discover that life sharing is life giving. L'Arche helps members fulfill the common need for social connections by creating a context dedicated to relationships of acceptance. In grounding daily rhythms with a spiritual purpose, L'Arche is able to fulfill members' desire for a shared spiritual life in which daily habits are informed by religious beliefs and practices. Finally, L'Arche fosters interdependent relationships in which each person both gives and receives. In all of these ways, L'Arche communities demonstrate an ability to provide members with relationships based on shared values, meet their needs, and allow members to exchange resources with one another.

The meeting of mutual needs has not been without challenge. Some community members have come to feel stifled by a constant emphasis on the shared values that call people to live together in L'Arche. At times this feeling adds to perceptions that the community is too insular.

These experiences challenge the sharing of core values among members, and represent dangers of community living that Vanier (1992) warns against. Similarly, some assistants feel that L'Arche has under-addressed their needs in favor of more consistent concern for core members' needs. For example L'Arche has, until recently, done relatively little to address the retirement-related financial or workload concerns of long-term assistants as they age. For some, these less positive experiences have chipped away at a sense of community and their desire to belong.

*Shared emotional connection* refers to the emotional and, in L'Arche communities, spiritual bond that links members of a group to one another and is the definitive marker of a sense of community. The first three dimensions of a sense of community actively contribute to creating this bond. Often this bond is considered transcendental, bringing community members beyond the material world. This bond is less easily described than the other markers of sense of community and yet community members can easily discern its presence. This bond develops as people share life together over many years in a common quest for greater meaning in life. As community members join in the routine aspects of daily life (e.g., preparing and eating meals and praying together) alongside the larger triumphs and sorrows of life (e.g., a met goal, the passing of a longtime friend), common life narratives emerge. These community narratives eventually transform into a feeling of connection that eludes full description and yet is palpably present. L'Arche members often relate that "L'Arche is in their heart" and that fellow community members are integral to their spiritual journey. These community members have attained that shared bond. They are clearly part of something greater than themselves materially, emotionally and spiritually. It is not inevitable that this bond emerge. Some members do not attain this shared emotional connection, likely as a result of their ongoing struggle to realize the earlier indicators of a sense of community which seem to be necessary to achieving this final marker.

For the fullest sense of community to emerge, all four dimensions must be present. L'Arche's success in developing a sense of community builds with the small acts of daily life and demonstrates its strength in times of crisis. The simple acts of sharing daily meals, holding hands in prayer, and choosing evening activities provide roots upon which stronger relationships may grow. It is remarkable how members of the community grow closer to one another over time. Members come to live with those who know them as well as they know themselves and upon whose presence they come to rely. Their absence, whether brief or prolonged, is

deeply felt. Jeff's reaction to the emotional upset of his housemates reflects the strength of these bonds. When his friends are distressed, it is not unusual for him to become temporarily physically ill. Jeff is so close to his housemates, that he experiences their emotional pain physically. Likewise, the strength of these connections shows itself in good times. For example, annual summer holidays may reflect the pleasures taken from one another's company as community members enjoy moments together free from many of the stresses of daily routine. Sharing pleasant-ries, tales, and friendship over a leisurely, seaside picnic are among the first author's favorite memories of her time at L'Arche. These moments created collective narratives that helped cement ever deepening bonds among members.

The strength of these relationships is tested and made visible in more extraordinary life events. To illustrate, consider the unexpected loss of one community member to a fire. In the weeks it took for drawn out governmental investigations to be completed until our friend could be laid to rest, community members relied heavily on their relationships with one another to share their sadness and find comfort. Together they celebrated the life of their friend and mourned her passing. The sense of community that existed was remarkable and the comfort found therein most supportive. As the community organized remembrances, held constant vigil with her coffin, and planted the Christmas tree she had selected only weeks before, they experienced the bonds from which they drew strength.

### ***SENSE OF COMMUNITY: WELCOMING THOSE PREVIOUSLY OSTRACIZED***

L'Arche's sense of community, a central characteristic and reason for being, can be of particular significance to people with intellectual disabilities. A sense of community requires meaningful social connections, an aspect of community life that has often been unavailable to many with intellectual disabilities. They have been excluded from active participation in their communities as they were placed into institutions and isolated from their families and home communities. Even when not placed into institutions, people with intellectual disabilities have often been excluded from neighborhood schools, community groups, and workplaces (Dywbar & Bersani, 1996). In some countries, they have not taken part in major, often faith-based, family occasions like weddings and funerals (Westerholm, Radak & Keys, 2005). Given this historical context, experiencing a sense

of community can represent the attainment of social value and interpersonal connections previously very difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to obtain. It is a major step forward for many core members of L'Arche communities.

**EMPOWERMENT:  
A GOAL PREDICATED ON SOCIAL TIES?**

Access to social and spiritual relationships, while crucial, is only one objective of importance to people with intellectual disabilities. As people with intellectual disabilities have been socially shunned, they have typically been accorded little to no say over their lives, rendering them powerless, with little voice over things that matter to them (Dybwad & Bersani, 1996). The increasing movement into the community of people with intellectual disabilities was quickly followed by a self-advocacy movement that demanded they be more than simply present within communities. Self-advocates clamored that they must also be heard as community members with interests, rights, desires, and responsibilities of their own (Miller & Keys, 1996). L'Arche communities focus primarily on the social integration of people with intellectual disabilities. Nonetheless, they soon found themselves within an increasingly popular and pervasive *zeitgeist* of empowerment for people with intellectual disabilities. Although empowerment is not an ideology around which L'Arche is organized, many of its principles and practices suggest that empowerment may nonetheless occupy a valued position within the community.

Empowerment has been defined as “a process, a mechanism by which people . . . gain mastery over their affairs” (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122). Empowerment can take on setting-specific meanings. For example, within religious settings empowerment may be considered working towards a personal aim of a deeper relationship with God and daily practices that better reflect God's will (Maton & Rappaport, 1984). Empowerment is both flexible and contextually-bound. Empowerment can occur on multiple levels. Empowerment at the individual level refers to individuals' perceptions that they can affect things and to the actual control and influence that they can and do exert. In a faith-centered context the individuals may exert this control and influence directly through their words and actions and less directly through their development of a stronger bond with God and actions based on that bond. Empowerment at the organizational level refers to how organizations can enable their

members to have control and influence as well as how organizations influence and control.

People with intellectual disabilities have made significant advances in improving their control over personal decisions and their influence on relevant public policies. People with intellectual disabilities have made many of these advances by joining together to fight for their civil rights (Dybwad & Bersani, 1996). Recognizing this link between community and empowerment for those marginalized by the mainstream of society calls for further analysis of what may happen to empowerment in a setting such as L'Arche that purposively strives to link people together. L'Arche communities send a promising, but mixed, message about the rewards of a sense of community for the empowerment of people with intellectual disabilities.

#### ***WHEN SENSE OF COMMUNITY ASSUMES PRIMACY, WHAT HAPPENS TO EMPOWERMENT?***

L'Arche's is a place where members "comfort, confirm, and challenge" one another by living in spiritual union. The order of these verbs is critical: Their placement reveals primary and secondary goals of L'Arche communities as well as a hypothesized sequence of relationship development. L'Arche philosophy holds that individuals first be given comfort followed by confirmation of their worth before they are challenged to grow. This saying suggests the primacy of developing social ties and growing personally as others show their acceptance of us, even as they come to know our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

On the surface, the value orientations of sense of community and empowerment suggest inherent contradictions and tensions. Where sense of community emphasizes cooperation, empowerment can connote competition. Where sense of community theorists focus on communion and interrelatedness, empowerment theorists may highlight control and individual agency (cf., Riger, 1993). Rappaport (1981) calls social scientists to examine apparent paradoxes as therein lie the "most important and interesting aspects of community life" (p. 1). Similarly, Riger (1993) suggests that dichotomizing sense of community and empowerment is inadequate to the complexity of human social experience and asks researchers to discover ways to integrate these two fundamental elements. Indeed, the relationship between sense of community and empowerment is far more nuanced and at times synergistic than suggested by an initial analysis of their explicit values and most available connotations. L'Arche's developed sense of community and its effects on em-

powerment may elucidate our conceptual frameworks; we explore this possibility.

### ***SENSE OF COMMUNITY WALKS HAND-IN-HAND WITH EMPOWERMENT***

The challenge to L'Arche (and other settings) is to support empowerment even though power struggles and related conflict may destroy relationships and thus the sense of community, perhaps through achieving a communal form of empowerment. In these faith-centered communities the character of the relationships people are called to live and their ensuing effects on core members can create the context for non-community eroding forms of empowerment.

Members at L'Arche are expected to create relationships marked by a parallel journey of spiritual union. To achieve this union, L'Arche communities stress that assistants are called to *be with* and not *do for* core members. In fact, assistants are expected not to serve the poor (i.e., core members) but rather to recognize their own inner poverty and brokenness and thereby commence a shared journey towards Jesus. This call to a parallel or side-by-side journey in which each party's weaknesses are acknowledged suggests that the division between care giver and receiver prominent in many other residential settings is far less salient within L'Arche. In seeking to eradicate the traditional professional-client dichotomy, L'Arche communities are able to renegotiate once disempowering relationships between people with and without intellectual disabilities in favor of more *egalitarian interpersonal connections*. As a result, core members at L'Arche often have opportunity to experience roles of greater power as they are placed on more equal footing with their non-disabled housemates. In these roles, core members are expected to contribute significantly to household affairs and decisions.

Many core members hold an equal amount of responsibility for the upkeep of the house and meaningfully participate in setting topics for discussion and subsequent decisions. Such experiences are more unusual in typical group homes for people with intellectual disabilities. In more traditional settings, the house is often perceived more as a residence than as a home. As such, people with intellectual disabilities do not hold primary responsibility for home maintenance. Thus their desire to personally invest and demonstrate ownership over their home is thwarted by power dynamics which regard them as having less to con-

tribute. At L'Arche, however, all community members are recognized to have both strengths and weaknesses. Core members bear more equal amounts of responsibility and contribute more to routine household maintenance, thus building a sense of ownership for their house. Similarly, core members partake in determining agenda items for household conversations and the decisions that stem from the conversations. The first author recalls one core member's frustration with how time was spent on weekends. He thus initiated a conversation at regularly occurring all-house meetings on the topic and changes agreeable to all were implemented. These more egalitarian relationships focus on the similarities among all human beings and less on the differences between those with and without intellectual disabilities (cf., Henry, Keys, Jopp & Balcazar, 1996). These relationships allow core members to participate in decisions often made solely by program staff in other settings.

Another way the nature of relationships at L'Arche benefits core member's increased agency is linked to the principle that God resides in the heart of poor people. God's presence indicates the basic worth and value inherent in a person with an intellectual disability. Recognizing the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities as L'Arche does is largely countercultural, serving as a deliberate message to the larger society that relationships between people with and without intellectual disabilities can be ones of mutual respect. Steeped in this philosophical stance, relationships are characterized by an interdependence in which each party seeks to promote the increasing capacity of the other. Two distinct but interrelated dynamics emerge from these types of relationships found at L'Arche.

Establishing shared emotional bonds between people who initially have different amounts of power means that those with greater power can accord *power to* core members and core members can seek increased *power through* the same channel. With respect to assistants allocating *power to* core members, the meaningful, faith-focused connections that develop at L'Arche typically result in the core member's expressed hopes and dreams having greater meaning to assistants than they might in more traditional group home settings more preoccupied with service-delivery. We know one core member who is enormously pensive. In fact, he is quite slow to respond relative to many others, which means that his wishes are less often noticed and/or solicited in some settings. However, at L'Arche where others who believe his friendship reveals God's presence to them, they regularly seek his opinions and give him ample time to respond. The nature of his relationships results in assistants giving him

greater control over his life than he may have in other settings. With respect to core members gaining *power through* relationships with assistants, these relationships provide core members greater access to powerful channels. For example, while often not full participants in important community decision-making bodies, core members nonetheless have indirect access to influencing these bodies as their cares and concerns are brought forth by assistants who are part of those bodies. In this way, people with intellectual disabilities whose perspectives have been neither solicited nor considered in decisions in many settings throughout history now through their more egalitarian relationships with others have a means through which to begin to access powerful bodies that affect their lives. This indirect path to power may not ultimately be the most effective nor desirable means through which to attain greater personal influence. Instead, obtaining power through others is superior to lacking access altogether and can represent one positive beginning.

Of greater note is the transformative effect of these reconfigured relationships on core members. This *transformation* is embodied in L'Arche's "comfort, confirm, challenge" process. A key tenet of L'Arche is that accepting people as they are, with both their pain and beauty intact, helps reveal to them their own self-worth and can help them realize their full humanity (Vanier, 1992). Many people with intellectual disabilities have been socially rejected throughout their lives, leaving them with great interior suffering. At L'Arche, years of walking side-by-side in faith-based relationships are characterized by a constant focus not on problem-solving but rather on a gentle, continuous presence. This comforting is able to help core members find inner peace as they learn that they are worthy of receiving love from others (Vanier, 1992). With this inner serenity, core members come to recognize their own self-worth and begin to realize that they can be agents, not just pawns. They become more self-efficacious and thus more ready to take positive control of their lives. These transformative relationships quietly but surely lead core members to a place where they can feel safe confronting their fears or trying things that they had repeatedly been told they cannot accomplish. Transformations of this sort involve empowerment through the spirit of community and faith in others that are emphasized in a setting like L'Arche.

One core member, Pascal, exemplifies this tri-fold process of comforting, confirming and challenging. Pascal lived most of his life in an institution where he was not highly valued. When he first came to L'Arche, he was quiet and reclusive. He often hid in a corner during guests' visits. At his new home, friends stayed by his side as he suffered

from his past injustices. They affirmed his talents and worth as a person. Over time his self-concept grew and this man began to blossom. Today, he is usually the one who greets visitors at the door, welcoming them to his house and helping them make themselves at home. His evolution into a person who shows social initiative quickly transferred into other settings in which he began to more actively participate and take initiative. For example, he has recently become increasingly vocal about his desire for a new job and fought to make that goal a priority for his future. Assistants at L'Arche first gave safe refuge to Pascal's inner pain, soon followed by consistent affirmation of his worth. That comforting and confirming allowed him to successfully challenge himself and his surroundings. He transformed his once hidden talents for welcoming others and his potential for more meaningful work into realities.

These dynamics at L'Arche evidence a synergy in which a developed sense of community, predicated on respecting, loving, and connecting deeply with one another, is able to foster and coexist with an empowerment that does not necessitate destructive competition and conflict. Core members' gains in control over their lives may threaten assistants' misperceptions about their role as assistants (i.e., that they are there to direct not accompany) and decrease their ability to control life at L'Arche. However, since these gains occur within a setting in which relationships are highly valued, they are accomplished in a way that does not destroy the very connections that helped core members achieve these human victories.

### ***SENSE OF COMMUNITY ERODES EMPOWERMENT***

The interplay of these concepts does not always bear such positive fruit. Experiences at L'Arche also reveal the unending challenge of and barriers to integrating goals of empowerment when building community assumes primacy. Here, we identify and expand on three influences and characteristics of L'Arche communities that present significant challenges to promoting empowerment for core members.

One challenge community building poses to empowerment is that life sharing often means that *group decisions may trump individual desires*. In such instances, individual members do not necessarily have their own desires met, having instead to go along with the decision made by the group. For instance, it occurs rather frequently that core members have competing desires. It may be something as simple as deciding whether to go to the beach or the movie theater one afternoon or

something more significant such as whether to select a tropical or a more temperate holiday location. Constraints on resources and an emphasis on life sharing can make it impossible and/or undesirable for each person to have his or her way. Instead, a compromise must be achieved in which one person either relents to the other option or an alternative is selected. However, coming to agreement thwarts at least one person's ability to spend their time as he or she desired. Take for example Veronica, whose housemates wanted to visit southern France for their annual summer vacation. Her increasing age made her more sensitive to heat and the beach was decidedly not her first choice. However, since everyone else wanted to go to the beach, she agreed to it and set about identifying ways to remain cool and enjoy the vacation.

Some core members have felt stifled by constant community and have elected to pursue other living options that better reflect their wishes. Other core members feel that the benefits they derive from life sharing outweigh the costs of compromises. In fact, sometimes following the group path can lead to deeper relationships that are ultimately much more comforting, confirming and challenging. Overall, this is a choice that each community member must make for him/herself. At L'Arche the conclusion is most often that one gains far more through intimate connections centered in faith than by a life of greater focus on one's own needs and solitude.

A second challenge community presents to empowerment is that, as with any countercultural attempt at social change, L'Arche struggles to renegotiate external power dynamics from larger societal and religious contexts that inform the community (cf., Bond & Keys, 1993; Foster-Fishman & Keys, 1997; Gruber & Trickett, 1987). They stem from negative societal attitudes that challenge the position that persons with intellectual disabilities have abilities and from mixed messages about the limitations of people with intellectual disabilities in religious teachings. These messages of deficit and deficiency can infuse disempowering dynamics into the relationships among members and the organizational structure of L'Arche.

With respect to disempowering relationship dynamics, general societal attitudes hold that people with intellectual disabilities are less able and thus in need of protection (Dywbar & Bersani, 1996). This *pejorative message* can be further exacerbated by L'Arche's reliance on some early Christian scriptures which, while at times affirming the common humanity of people with intellectual disabilities, have also identified them as weak members of society (Smalley, 2001). In fact, many teachings suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are "holy innocents" or eternally-childlike incapable of sin and perhaps equally incapable of direct-

ing their own lives (e.g., *Matthew 11:25*) (NSW CID, 2004). For centuries, people with intellectual disabilities were denied sacraments due to their perceived lack of reasoning abilities (Smalley, 2001). Such a perspective advocates that people with intellectual disabilities cannot take intentional action due to a lack of cognitive ability (and thus not be held responsible for any actions taken). It largely ignores both the cognitive abilities that *are* present as well as other available strengths such as social and emotional intelligence. While L'Arche does uphold the intelligence of the heart found in people with intellectual disabilities (Vanier, 1992), holding mixed regard towards people with intellectual disabilities may challenge the formation of relationships which are empowering to core members. It remains the case that core members are people living with intellectual disabilities and this reality must be held in awareness. A central challenge of L'Arche is to maintain this view alongside a simultaneous awareness of the resources of people with intellectual disabilities and an orientation that promotes their ability to shape the direction of their lives.

Another product of these pejorative messages is that relationships can take a hierarchical form in which assistants have power over core members, despite genuine care present. Although all members at L'Arche are encouraged to recognize their brokenness in their spiritual journey, the weakness linked to an intellectual disability (i.e., that of a challenge in cognitive ability) clearly, for most, separates the brokenness of core members from that of assistants. Relationships can be characterized by dynamics in which core members are treated like assistants' children rather than peers, regardless of the presence or absence of age differences. Many distinctions are readily made between assistants and core members that fuel power differentials, despite the presence of a philosophy that would seemingly eradicate such distinctions. For example, whereas core members usually engage in external work or day activities, assistants remain at the home where they continue to make and implement decisions in the absence of core members. Fewer core members are usually involved in decision-making structures, both permanent and transitory, than might be expected given the values of L'Arche.

These power differentials become evident when there is discord between core members and assistants over small matters of everyday life and larger life choices. For example, when core members make decisions that assistants consider to be poor decisions, the lack of power of core members relative to assistants may emerge and be used to limit core member's control over decisions. The relative powerlessness and subsequent overprotection of core members emerges when an assistant does not allow a core member to go alone to a nearby coffee shop as she/he

feels it is not safe for the core member to go, despite little objective risk. Overprotection also occurs when a core member is strongly discouraged and sometimes prohibited from an unhealthy habit such as tobacco chewing or from a perceived risk like driving a car. While at times it is beneficial to have people in our lives who help us to live more healthy, less risky lives (e.g., quit smoking), these actions, which would rarely be directed with such intensity or power at an assistant, effectively deny core members opportunities to exercise or learn to exercise control over their daily lives. An instance in which the benefit to the core member was less clear happened when one woman, who had a driver's license, joined the community and was told she should not bring her car since she "didn't know her way around" the new area. Although the community may not have directly forbidden her to drive, they were able to use their relationship with her to influence her to act as they wanted. While this woman could have been supported in her desire to learn her way around the area, she was not. Instead she was needlessly protected.

The seemingly good intentions of assistants grounded in a desire to share life and maintain the safety and well-being of core members, nonetheless reduce core member's opportunities to make "risky decisions" (Perske, 1972) by using relationships with core members to control undesired activities. While it is understandable to want to safeguard those we love, consistently protecting core members rather than identifying means to support their autonomy has received significant criticism as paternalistic and disempowering (Ellis, 1992). When the community focuses on the needs of the core members and pays less attention to their strengths, rights, and capacities and opportunities for self-determination, then a sense of community may be created but one that empowers core members is absent (cf., Rappaport, 1981). This dynamic of unequal, nonreciprocal, need-based caring emerges with some frequency in L'Arche communities. It is more likely to occur if assistants are less familiar with the disability rights movement and its related principles and if leaders are not actively promoting the similarity and equality of core members. Furthermore, the emergence of this dependency dynamic contravenes Alinsky's maxim that warns against disempowering others through misdirected help. Alinsky (1946) asserted that help not be given when individuals could do the task themselves. In a nonmutual caregiving relationship the carers' primary concern is to provide help, not to recognize and develop the talent of a person with a disability. Consequently, there may be a tendency for the caregiver not to acknowledge and enhance the abilities, self-worth and independence of an individual with intellectual disabilities.

The final challenge to empowerment emerges because of *differential commitment* to these two major principles. L'Arche's commitment to building a sense of community is visible and successful; its attention to and achievement of empowerment is clearly less so. While an organization may accomplish much where its focus lies, it may be more difficult to attain, with equal success, more distal goals. Since the goal of empowerment is of less concern to L'Arche, it may be more of a challenge to adopt practices that counter societal pressures to perceive people with intellectual disabilities as in need of protection. L'Arche has many promising principles and practices that support the empowerment of people with intellectual disabilities within a developed community. Yet it cannot be identified as an organization fully committed to promoting the increased empowerment of core members. For example, its leadership is not consistently concerned with achieving this goal, and it draws community members from settings largely unfamiliar with the ideal. This equivocal stance does not erase the value and promise of communities such as L'Arche but asks how they can perhaps be strengthened in order to achieve a variety of goals seen as important to people with intellectual disabilities.

### REFLECTIONS

This conceptual narrative we offer based on our experiences, while limited in its exhaustive contact with L'Arche communities worldwide, highlights the complexity of the relationship between sense of community and empowerment in a faith-focused context. L'Arche has provided our conceptual exploration with a home base rich in lived experience, allowing us to explore the complexities in both building community and empowering people (Rappaport, 1981; Riger, 1993). Our analysis suggests the utility of exploring tensions and synergies of ideas beyond their surface-level interactions, and of using participant-conceptualizing, in order to more fully understand the nuances of their interplay (Bennett et al., 1966). This narrative is not a final account but rather a means to generate hypotheses about how to integrate two principles with seemingly opposing values. Moreover, we recognize that L'Arche itself struggles to fully implement its guiding principles and simultaneously respond to important social trends. However, its imperfections do not preclude it from providing an inspiring model for how we can successfully live in relationship with diverse people and seek to better empower those accorded little power in society. Quite the contrary.

Our account provides additional evidence that relationships can be an important component of empowering people with intellectual disabilities (Carnaby, 1998). There is the possibility that empowerment predicated on faith-centered relationships may generalize to other groups; it may be that many people with less power in other settings may discover great benefit to using relationships in order to gain power. If this is the case, we may want to further consider how we can create connections that empower. Perhaps it is critical that these relationships be created within a culture that embraces and affirms a positive stance towards persons with intellectual disabilities and their right to have the dignity to take risks in their lives, as L'Arche is partially able to provide. If this is the case, attending to how to build such relationships between mainstream and marginalized groups may generate important results. Furthermore, subsequent to developing social ties which promote individual's strengths and resources, the individual may then be placed in a better position to contribute to that relationship. A reinforcing feedback loop would thus be instilled into this relationship. For example, as L'Arche builds interpersonal connections for core members that celebrate their talents, core members may build skills that allow them to be better friends themselves.

In using relationships to empower marginalized groups, maintaining the type of focus noted above must be done in tandem with avoiding dynamics that subvert the objective of empowerment. One dynamic to be avoided is losing individual voices of core members in the process of group decision making, particularly when there are power differences present among various groups. To counter too much of a de-emphasis on individual desires and offset any tendency for one faction to dominate, it is critical to attend to power differentials and balance power over time and across subgroups and individuals. It is also crucial for diversity of individual expression to be valued, encouraged, celebrated and sustained. The positive paradox is that interpersonal depth is most empowering when it affirms our uniqueness. In turn, our own individuality adds great value to our relationships. L'Arche's commitment to promoting core members' unique contributions is one way to encourage valuing individuals' worth, a more healthy community dynamic.

A second relationship dynamic to avoid highlights the constant struggle between dignity of risk and protection. We often want to support persons whom we care about in making positive life choices. However, consistently applying pressure that removes a person's freedom of choice is dehumanizing and manipulates interpersonal connections to limit self-determination. Likewise, relationships that seek to empower must attend to the more subtle forms of disempowerment that can come to char-

acterize relationships. Gentle suggestions made by significant members of social networks hold much greater weight than suggestions made by more distant members; coercive statements may easily be disguised as benign support and should be limited. L'Arche may be particularly susceptible to the emergence of this undesirable dynamic of soft control.

In our analysis, we focused on the differential effects of a sense of faith-centered community on core member's increased mastery over their lives. As core members increase their skills and feelings of self-efficacy, one goal they may work towards is a closer relationship with God. As core members achieve this goal, their lives may come to reflect greater efforts to enact God's will through their own acts. Such a transformation may develop greater moral courage among core members and lead them to work increasingly towards social justice, much in the way Reverend Martin Luther King did. In places of faith such as L'Arche, this transformation would be considered progress towards group goals. While this too builds community and is one way to contextualize the aims of empowerment (Maton & Rappaport, 1984), care must be taken that members make such steps of their own will, free from undue influence. A premature push towards group ideals without ensuring that the individual chooses those ideals as their own may simply repeat past patterns of control, and perhaps even coercion and abuse, of people with intellectual disabilities.

Empowerment's link to sense of community has become more central as the concepts have been further explored. However, these associations often go unacknowledged in individual-centered contexts. Many people and settings ignore that empowerment is often borne of *interdependence* rather than *independence*. In actuality, our connections to one another and to our faith often help us gain greater control over our individual lives. Looking at human relationships through the prism of the L'Arche community, clearly illustrates these fundamental, paradoxical links between community and empowerment.


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