The disarmed community

Reflecting on the possibility of a peace ecclesiology in the light of L’Arche

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
op gezag van de rector magnificus prof.dr. V. Subramaniam
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie van de Faculteit Religie en Theologie
op woensdag 14 november 2018 om 11.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

doors

Jason Reimer Greig

geboren te Winnipeg, Canada
promotor: prof.dr. H. S. Reinders
copromotor: prof.dr. F. Enns
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ........................................................................................................................................... 7

**Dissertation Outline** ............................................................................................................................... 10

**Methodological Considerations** ........................................................................................................... 14

  *An Emphasis on L’Arche Inspired by Vanier’s Theology* ........................................................................ 14

  *A Pneumatology Grounded in the Trinitarian Economy* ....................................................................... 16

  *On Labels and Disability Language* ..................................................................................................... 17

  *On People with Intellectual Disabilities as “Masters” and “Teachers”* ............................................. 19

  *An Acknowledgement of Being a Concrete (and Often Sinful) Church* ............................................. 20

**Chapter 1 The Quest for an Inclusive Church: Liberal Citizenship and Intellectual Disability** ...................... 23

**Methodological Considerations** ........................................................................................................... 24

  *On Being Liberal* ................................................................................................................................ 24

  *On Sources* ............................................................................................................................................ 26

**Understanding Liberal Inclusion** ......................................................................................................... 28

  *Inclusion as Participation, Access and Equality (of Opportunity)* ....................................................... 29

  *Whose Inclusion and Access: Lacunas in an Anthropology of Liberal Citizenship* ......................... 31

**Nancy Eiesland and the Disabled God** .................................................................................................... 34

  *Eiesland’s Goal: Converting the Church into a Liberating Body of Justice* ..................................... 34

  *Eiesland’s Approach: Disability Rights and the Minority Model of Disability* ................................. 36

  *A Church of Subjects and Actors: How Inclusive is Eiesland’s Access?* .......................................... 37

**Church Statements on Disability** .......................................................................................................... 39

  *A Church of All and for All* ................................................................................................................... 40

    *Inclusion as Embodying the Wedding Feast* ....................................................................................... 40
Towards A Truly Participatory Church through New Understandings of Disability ...... 42
Making Worship Rather than Relationships Accessible........................................... 44
Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities.................. 46
A Church which Advocates for and Guarantees the Rights of People with Disabilities .. 46
Inclusion as Full and Active Participation.............................................................. 47
Integrating those Considered Disabled as Less than “Realistic Optimism”............... 49
Going Further: Towards an Ecclesiology beyond Inclusion.................................... 51
Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 53
Chapter 2 – The Story of L’Arche: Becoming Witnesses to God’s Peace .................... 56
Methodological Considerations ............................................................................. 57
Beginning with Experience rather than Ideas ......................................................... 57
Vanier as Authoritative Voice and Interpreter ....................................................... 58
A Western-Centered History .................................................................................. 59
(Story)Telling L’Arche’s History: Historiography in a Theological Key................. 60
Founding: Building an Ark for the Oppressed ..................................................... 62
Encounter: Inspired by Mystery and Suffering ....................................................... 62
Call: Sharing Life Together Guided by the Holy Spirit.......................................... 64
Friendship: Creating a New Family with the Devalued......................................... 65
Expansion: Growing into God’s Horizons............................................................... 67
External Expansion: Opening up to the World...................................................... 67
Internal Expansion: Opening up to Being ............................................................ 71
Deepening: Being and Becoming Countercultural Signs of Hope......................... 75
Living a Fragile, Counter-Cultural Existence ....................................................... 76
Wisdom Communities and Signs of Hope ............................................................. 79
Renewal: Witnessing to God’s Peace .................................................................... 83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The “Subtle Threat” and the Need for the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Befriending Difference as a Peace Witness</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3 Disarming the Heart: Jean Vanier’s Vision of Peace</strong></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Considerations</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Vanier as Christian Philosopher</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace as Experiential rather than Theoretical</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walls: Discerning Warfare in the Heart</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fear of a Wounded Heart: Violence as Communication</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructing Walls and Creating Enemies</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Need to Compete</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarming the Heart: The Process of Transformation towards Peace</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberation through Weakness: Knowing the Truth</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Members as Prophets of Peace</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology, Aristotle and the Holy Spirit: Placing Vanier in the Literature</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Vanier’s Vision of Peace</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace as a State of Communion</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace as Human Telos and Eschatological Goal</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace as a Dynamic Process and Practice</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs of God’s Peace: Being and Becoming a Witness of a Peace Culture</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving the Enemy: Welcoming Difference in the Spirit of Encounter</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being and Becoming a Community of Marginals: Witnessing to God’s Peace in a Strange Land</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Studies, Biblical Studies and Personalism: Placing Vanier in the Literature</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Chapter 4 Like Water Running Forever Over Rock: Becoming Friends of Time in L’Arche’s Peace Culture

**Methodological Considerations**

- On Sources
- Culture as a Particular Way of Life

**Becoming Oriented toward Communion: The Habits of Peace in L’Arche**

- Mutuality – The Bond of the Community of Friends
- Trust – Hope in God’s Providence
- Patience – Bearing Life with the Other
- Tenderness – Nonviolence and the Body

**The Practices of Peace in L’Arche**

- Welcome – A Mutual Hosting of the Other in Truth
- Story-Telling – Remembering People Well
- Prayer – Bringing the Day to an End
- Forgiveness – Taking the Time to Reconcile with the Enemy
- Celebration – Experiencing the Eschatological Banquet

**Schools of Peace: L’Arche Communities as Alternative Peace Cultures**

- L’Arche as (a Peace) Culture
- L’Arche as “Alternative Space for Cultural Being”
- L’Arche as a Culture with a Different Time

**Conclusion**

# Chapter 5 Befriending Time: Telling Time in the Odd Peace of L’Arche

**Clock Time**

- The Nature and Experience of Time: Fast and Empty
- The Ascendancy of “Clock Time”
Life in Clock Time: Wasted Lives, Alienation, and Desperation ............................................. 171

Experiencing Time in L’Arche: Gift and Opportunity for Disarmament ................................. 174

Time as Gift Given for Peace ......................................................................................................... 175
Time as Full and Contemplative ................................................................................................... 176

Befriending Time: Learning How to “Waste” Time with “Wasted” Lives ............................... 178

L’Arche as a Community Living and Telling Time Eschatologically ..................................... 180

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 182

Chapter 6 Living on the Frontier: The Foundation of an Eschatological Peace Ecclesiology
.......................................................................................................................................................... 184

Methodological Considerations .................................................................................................... 185

L’Arche as “Embodied Parable” for the Church ......................................................................... 185

A Broadly Hauerwasian Approach ................................................................................................. 186

Making Normative Statements about Christian Life and the Church ....................................... 189

Answering the Research Question ................................................................................................. 190

Becoming God’s Disarmed People: Vanier’s Peace Theology .................................................. 191

Habits and Practices: The Shape of L’Arche’s Peace Culture ..................................................... 194

Shifting the Perspective: The Ground of a Peace Ecclesiology Informed by Jean Vanier and L’Arche ........................................................................................................................................... 197

Founded on the Trinitarian Economy ......................................................................................... 198

The Vision of God’s New Community ........................................................................................... 200

Mission – Sent to Anticipate the Fullness and Reconciliation of the Kingdom ......................... 203

Temporality and the Odd Eschatological Peace of the Kingdom of God .................................. 205

The Holy Spirit as Eschatological Guide ....................................................................................... 205

The “Timeful” Nature of God’s Peace ........................................................................................... 209

Living Time at a Human Pace ....................................................................................................... 211

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 212
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 7 Witnessing the Peace of God: Practical Elaborations of a Peace Ecclesiology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking its Cue from L’Arche ........................................................................................................ 214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Becoming a School of Peace: The Habits of the Timeful Church</strong> ............................................. 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mutuality</em> – <em>Befriending the Other without Fear</em> .................................................................... 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Patience</em> – <em>The Grace to Endure Life with the Other</em> ............................................................. 217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Trust</em> – <em>Having Faith in God’s Providence and Promise</em> ............................................................ 220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tenderness</em> – <em>Gentle Encounters with Other Bodies</em> ................................................................. 221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performing in God’s Time: Practicing Peace in the Timeful Church</strong> ........................................... 223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hospitality</em> – <em>Baptism and Welcome at Life’s Edges</em> ................................................................. 223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Story-telling</em> – <em>Hearing, Preaching, and Performing God’s Narrative</em> ........................................ 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prayer</em> – <em>Remembering God and Keeping the Sabbath</em> ............................................................. 228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Forgiveness</em> – <em>The Restoration of Friendship and the Washing of Feet</em> ...................................... 232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Celebration</em> – <em>Eating Together in God’s Inoperative Time</em> ....................................................... 234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong> .................................................................................................................................... 237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summing Up: Towards a L’Arche Inspired Peace Ecclesiology</strong> .................................................... 239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong> ............................................................................................................................ 245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary</strong> ....................................................................................................................................... 275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Jesus came to change a world in which those at the top have privilege, power, prestige and money while those at the bottom are seen as useless. Jesus came to create a body. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, compares the human body to the body of Christ, and he says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the body. In other words, people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church. Do we really believe that the weakest, the least presentable, those we hide away – that they are indispensable? If that was our vision of the church, it would change many things.¹

Like other people called disabled, those labelled as intellectually disabled have experienced much exclusion. One can argue that those with cognitive impairments have undergone the most virulent forms of segregation and marginalization, whether by the practice of infant exposure in late antiquity, or the more modern methods of institutionalization or selective abortion. The difference embodied by persons considered intellectually disabled, which has persistently resisted integration into societies ancient and modern, has more often than not resulted in their elimination, omission, and/or separation from the wider social body.

A response to this experience of exclusion has come recently from the self-advocacy of people labelled disabled. Since the 1960s the political activism of various groups within the disability rights community – including those with cognitive impairments – has fought for the right to participate in all aspects of society. The demand for “inclusion” encompasses all aspects of social life, from access to buildings to equal opportunity employment and beyond. Although not always consistently, late modern societies in the minority world have recognized this right of inclusion. This recognition usually manifests itself through the passage of legislation protecting the rights of those considered disabled, as well as safeguarding these persons from discrimination and prejudice. Under the banner of “social inclusion” some political communities go further, seeking out and actively bringing in persons left out of mainstream society. For many groups

advocating for social inclusion, peace and justice can only be manifest when *all* persons can participate and be full members of society.

Although often not a leader in the drive towards inclusion for those with various impairments, the church\(^2\) has attempted to make a space for persons previously excluded due to their bodily difference. Many churches now recognize the exclusive practices they once maintained, and seek to make congregations more welcoming and open. The Roman Catholic parishes of St. Alexander in Cornelius, Oregon, St. Joseph in Hastings, Minnesota, and St. Rose of Lima in Chula Vista, California are good examples of this desire to be more inclusive particularly for persons labelled intellectually disabled. These churches have adapted liturgies and sacramental programs, and encouraged persons diagnosed with genetic disorders to help distribute the eucharist and serve at the altar.\(^3\) Through both accommodating needs and reaching out to those previously excluded, these churches have successfully created a more inclusive space for persons with cognitive impairments. A church living and witnessing to the peace of Christ strives for everyone to exercise their gifts and contribute to the Body. These congregations are authentic success stories in facilitating greater access to the rites and communal faith life of the church.

Yet is this valiant attempt at “inclusion” enough for the Body of Christ? Should the church be content with merely creating a space where people labelled intellectually disabled can “participate” and have an “equal opportunity” to receive the sacraments? Under an inclusion framework, does the church go far enough in moving beyond people with cognitive impairments as targets for “special ministries”? Is the “more” or “enough” language even sufficient in accounting for the place of those considered intellectually disabled in a church practicing “just peace”? Or does the church require a different orientation and imagination to be the community called by God to witness Christ’s reconciliation of all creation?

Another approach exists, one potentially not just more hospitable to excluded impaired persons but also offering a gentle challenge to ecclesial reflection and practice. I will argue that the theology of Jean Vanier and the praxis of that theology in L’Arche communities dedicated to

---

\(^2\) Throughout this dissertation, the use of “church” will refer to the catholic, Christian community stretched across space and time. “Church” (as capitalized) will refer to particular ecclesial communions (e.g., Roman Catholic Church, Episcopalian Church, Mennonite Church Canada, etc.) as well to as specific local faith communities (e.g. St. Mark’s Roman Catholic Church).

his theological vision present a way of relating to persons considered intellectually disabled that goes “beyond inclusion” towards friendship and communion. When these communities faithfully – even if imperfectly – live out their vocation, they embody a peaceable Body that welcomes difference and befriends enemies. Thus the overall research question of this dissertation will ask: What might be learned from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities as implied in the work of Jean Vanier for the project of developing a peace ecclesiology? Taking its cue from Vanier’s theology and its practice in L’Arche communities that seek to live Vanier’s vision, what might be the shape and content of the church when it incorporates L’Arche’s insight on peace and disability?

Through becoming friends rather than just “clients” or fellow autonomous citizens, Vanier and others in L’Arche discovered not just a more welcoming space for persons with disturbing forms of difference. More importantly, placing these “core members” at the center of communal life deeply impacted the imaginations and structures of the global movement. Befriending the often devalued “strangers” of modern societies facilitated transformations in persons’ and communities’ moral understandings at the most profound levels. In this way, Vanier discovered in L’Arche a way of being a body deeply in tune with the ecclesial reflections of Paul in his Corinthian letters. Being this body meant much more than “equal access” and rights to the sacraments. In his experience of L’Arche, Vanier found a vision of the church as a place of friendship and belonging, where the nondisabled increasingly perceived many with cognitive impairments as masters and teachers in being human and witnessing to God’s peace.

Vanier understands L’Arche as being given a mission to embody this Gospel peace to the world through sharing life together in community. Although begun as a “sanctuary” and “rescue project” for persons devalued in society, the theologically-informed story of L’Arche reveals how its identity grew into being a community attempting to live and witness to God’s peace. This mission centers in personal conversion, the transformation of psychological wounds as enemies into a reconciliation with individual vulnerability through an intimate encounter with the difference of the other. For many, this process came through entering into mutual relationships with core members, whose transparent fragility helped nondisabled assistants to face and ultimately accept their shadow selves. The successful undergoing and reception of this transformation requires a community living a particular kind of time, a temporality which can appear odd in many contemporary societies. Recognizing that reconciliation comes through this
temporality helped Vanier understand how Gospel peace is a peace the world cannot give (John 14:27). Yet persons in L’Arche committed to Vanier’s theology experienced this peace as the peace of the Trinity, the ultimate source and guide of authentic community life.

Those communities grounded in Vanier’s theological vision offer the body of Christ an experience and practice of peace that can potentially renew and enhance theologizing on the church’s own peace witness. The church has the potential to see in these L’Arche communities a living embodiment of its own theology, and draw from the habits and practices of peace L’Arche receives and performs for its own faith life. As the inbreaking of God’s future into the present, the Holy Spirit gifts the church with a path into the new age of the kingdom. The Spirit’s presence presents with its true source and end: the friendship love of the Trinity which makes the church into an eschatological community. Oriented by an imagination grounded in the eschaton, the church is called to witness to God’s peace through being his body living on the “frontier” between the old and new creation. When the people called out of the world live God’s time, the church journeys slowly enough to recognize friends from those previously considered “strange/ers.” In so doing, the body lives a reconciliation with the enemy and dangerous difference that shows the world a way of peace and beyond the necessity of violence. The church too often fails in its mission to embody God’s peace, preferring to live in the empty and desperate world of clock time. Yet the Holy Spirit remains with the Body, calling it to truthfulness and fidelity. For a church committed to living and telling time eschatologically, the friendships received from those considered intellectually disabled might even foster the conversion needed to become God’s friends and friends of time.

**Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation will proceed through the following six chapters. Chapter 1 considers intellectual disability within the context of social and ecclesial models of inclusion. The question here inquires whether a peace ecclesiology that recognizes the presence of persons labelled as intellectually disabled in the church can use the philosophy of “social inclusion” as its foundation. I offer a picture of the guiding principles behind liberal forms of social inclusion, which includes an implicit anthropology and convictions about the good life. This “anthropology of liberal citizenship” promises empowerment and access, yet also contains
lacunas which threaten to exclude rather than include persons labelled as intellectually disabled. I then discuss theological and ecclesial attempts to address the exclusion of those called disabled. Through analyzing Nancy Eiesland’s influential *The Disabled God* and ecclesial statements on disability and the church, I argue that these attempts at inclusion strongly cohere with the liberal model. These works valiantly attempt to move the church towards a transformed hermeneutic and a more accessible church. Yet their assumptions of empowerment through agency and rationality leave out many persons limited or lacking in the robust subjectivity needed to fully participate in the normative frameworks these texts offer. The church needs an orientation that goes “beyond inclusion” to the communion and attentiveness that seeks belonging rather than liberal forms of “equality.”

A different narrative and social imaginary of how the church might relate to and host people with cognitive impairments is given in chapter 2. In this chapter I give an interpretation of the history of L’Arche, an international federation of communities where those considered intellectually disabled and nondisabled assistants share life and faith together. My research question for chapter 2 asks: What might a theologically-informed interpretation of L’Arche’s history reveal about the movement’s mission and identity? I present the story of L’Arche as consisting in four phases. The movement begins with Jean Vanier welcoming men with impairments to live with him, the way he felt called by God to alleviate the devaluation of persons he encountered in institutions. A quick phase of expansion followed, both externally through the development of communities throughout the world, and through the welcome of people considered profoundly intellectually disabled. This latter welcome expanded the moral imagination of the nondisabled by forcing them to slow down, and understand humanity as much by being as by action. The success of L’Arche forced communities into a phase of deepening in the movement’s identity and mission. A changing world and ever present service bureaucracies carried with them tensions that brought communities to their limits, as well as affirming their counter-cultural character and their need to rely on God’s providence. By the time of 9/11, Vanier and others in L’Arche recognized the movement as a witness to God’s peace. This fourth phase explores a theologically-informed L’Arche as a school of peace, radically welcoming difference and offering a vision for the renewal and rebuilding of the church.

Chapter 3 presents Jean Vanier’s vision of peace, and the process of transformation that accompanies God’s “disarming” reconciliation. The question at the heart of this chapter
inquiries about Jean Vanier’s philosophy and theology of peace as based upon his experience of founding and living in L’Arche. In his quest to understand the roots of violence, Vanier considers the importance of early infant-parent bonds in grounding persons in a secure self. Yet the inherent brokenness of the human condition results in the development of a fearful heart, which constructs walls and creates enemies in order to validate an insecure psyche. Vanier describes the path to liberation as a “disarming of the heart” through an acknowledgement of the Christian truth of human being: that despite individual brokenness every person is precious and loved just as they are. Through receiving the gift of friendships with persons thought intellectually disabled, the shadow side is awakened for many nondisabled assistants. At the same time, these friendships help assistants accept their own vulnerability as a mode of availability for relationship. I then investigate Vanier’s vision of peace, understanding it as having three main characteristics: first, as a state of communion, welcoming difference in the spirit of friendship; second, as a human telos and eschatological goal, imagined as a wedding feast; and third, as a dynamic process and practice, seeking out the other and building community with the devalued. Understanding peace in this holistic and robust fashion results in a commitment to being and becoming signs of God’s peace in a world focused on competition and power. Communities of peace try to witness to difference as God’s gift rather than curse, and perceive of encounter and dialogue as forms of authentic Christian mission. I also attempt to situate Vanier’s discussion of peace within other disciplines such as psychology, peace studies, philosophy, and biblical studies. Vanier fits within much of this thought, with his theocentric emphasis giving him the greatest distinction from secular reflections on peace.

A discussion of L’Arche as a particular “peace culture” follows in chapter 4. Chapter 4’s question asks: What are the communal habits and practices that embody, illustrate and form persons in L’Arche’s peace culture? Drawing particularly on the rich narratives told by persons in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theological commitments, I point out four habits which orient persons towards a communion of hearts characteristic of peace: spending and “wasting” time together fosters a mutuality which recognizes the other and creates bonds of friendship; walking the path of disarmament together infuses a trust in the truth which inspires a hope in God’s future and a daring to live the “impossible”; patience comes through an intense bearing of life with the other and living at a pace of life which can wait for transformation; encountering and caring for bodies trains persons in a tenderness and nonviolent orientation
towards all material reality. These habits come through the communal practices of *welcome*, *story-telling*, *prayer*, *forgiveness*, and *celebration*. These community activities form persons in L’Arche communities reliant on Vanier’s theology just as much as official formation sessions, and exemplify how Vanier understands peace primarily as something to be experienced and lived rather than merely conceptualized. Practicing peace forms communities into peace cultures, which offers a way of living often at odds with the dominant societies that host them. Time and again nondisabled assistants perceive core members as “leaders” and “prophets” of peace in L’Arche. Assistants readily speak to how core members slow persons down to live a more human temporality, and often embody the habits characteristic of persons disarmed.

Chapter 5 looks at L’Arche’s peace culture and the “oddness” it can display within some of the dominant cultures it inhabits. My question here concerns how the theology and practices of L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments compare with the cultural environment of modern society. A crucial aspect of this theology and practice that easily lends itself to comparison with contemporary societies is the experience and conception of time. Many people in late modernity experience time as both fast and empty. This living of time produces alienated and desperate persons, as well as “wasted lives” who cannot “get up to speed” with mainstream society. In contrast, persons in L’Arche experience time as a gift given by God for fostering relationships and undergoing disarmament together. To live life fully requires not a war against the clock but becoming “friends of time” attuned to the fullness and contemplative nature of time rather than its emptiness. I then investigate how Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities’ telling and experiencing of time relates to God’s peaceful and eschatological kingdom. Persons living in the eschatological age inaugurated by Jesus mean that they have all the time in the world for welcoming the other and forming community, two essential elements of a Vanier’s vision of peace. As the masters in the slow, gentle time of God, core members often exemplify what God’s “odd” peace looks and acts like.

In chapter 6 I begin to consider an ecclesiology which strives to live out the heart of L’Arche’s peace culture. For this chapter my primary question asks: How might the insights from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities as discerned from the work of Jean Vanier be developed as the ground of a peace ecclesiology? The ground of the “timeful” church is founded on the Trinitarian economy, the particular events of God that incorporate persons and communities into God’s continuing story. Birthed out of Israel’s covenant with God, the church
anticipates and points to the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus and made present through the Holy Spirit. The church as the community living between the aeons sees people and the world differently, and gives the world an alternative to violence through its mission to be God’s timeful people.

Following from this look at the church as an eschatological community called to embody God’s peace, chapter 7 looks at some of the practical implications of how this might shape the church’s life and witness. In this chapter, my question examines the ecclesial habits and practices that announce and exemplify a peace ecclesiology that takes its cue from L’Arche. I understand the four habits of mutuality, trust, patience, and tenderness given in L’Arche as equally applicable to the church. By befriending the other without fear, patiently bearing joy and suffering with the other, trusting in God’s providence and promise, and tenderly encountering other bodies as sacramental manifestations of God’s love, the church embodies and witnesses to the odd peace of Jesus. In the same way, the five practices of peace in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology are equally relevant to the church. Practicing God’s time happens particularly in gathered worship, yet also spills outward in timeful activities in the broader culture. Responding to grace through ecclesial practices like baptism, preaching, singing, footwashing, and the eucharist trains Christians in the habits which bring God’s eschatological future into the streets and institutions of the modern world. Christian communities then offer practices like adoption, Sabbath keeping, and debt forgiveness as an extension of their mission to witness to the slow and strange peace of God.

Methodological Considerations

An Emphasis on L’Arche Inspired by Vanier’s Theology

A significant aspect of this dissertation concerns habits and practices in L’Arche that embody a commitment to being a peace culture that witnesses to God’s reconciliation for and in the world. Much of the grounding of these habits and practices come from the philosophical and theological commitments of Jean Vanier, L’Arche’s founder and, therefore, a particularly authoritative voice in the international movement. Vanier has ceased for some time in being the international leader of L’Arche, and always sought for communities to develop structures in
relative autonomy, while also striving for a sense of common purpose and practice which marked a unified global federation. Even so, Vanier’s theological insight has carried great weight in L’Arche’s history, and arguably set the tone for many communities in how they understood a way of community life faithful not only to local contexts but also to the revelation of the Gospel. While others in L’Arche have reflected theologically independently of Vanier and have instituted their interpretation of the Gospel within communal practices, much of this reflection remains guided and rooted in Vanier’s philosophical and theological commitments.

However, not all communities pursue Vanier’s theology of L’Arche with the same commitment or intensity. This variance in theological commitment could have many sources, such as existing in a non-Christian context, or a lack of psychological energy due to crises or trauma, or particular persons in leadership being unable or unwilling to incorporate theological reflection into community structures. Due to the relative autonomy communities have, few (if any) rules exist demarcating how theological communities must be in their speaking about and living L’Arche. Thus not all communities would understand themselves (at least overtly) as the kind of witnesses to the Gospel which Vanier mentions and proclaims. Yet other persons in L’Arche would agree with Vanier’s assessment and commitments, and seek to order their common life accordingly.

In the same way, a similar variance in commitment applies to how particular communities do or do not cohere with the practices advocated by a L’Arche theology inspired by Vanier. L’Arche communities less dedicated to live from Vanier’s theological emphasis would be less likely to follow the practices which emanate from this vision of common life. Communities less committed to living L’Arche theologically might still perform practices such as hospitality and celebration, but perhaps more from a humanist foundation than the one Vanier and others in L’Arche advocate.

The variance in theology and practice of L’Arche communities worldwide means that the movement cannot be seen as a monolithic entity. Therefore I should recognize that the way of life in L’Arche I describe and delineate represents more particular communities attempting to live out Vanier’s theological commitments than a comprehensive account of the state in L’Arche today. That my illustration of these practices come from stories within concrete communities means that they are not abstract generalizations but living examples. My approach also means that there may be communities with different practices and a way of life less reliant on Vanier’s
theological foundations. This limitation, however, should not necessarily deny the practical theology happening within concrete communities and prevent those practices from being sources of renewal and insight for a peace ecclesiology.

To account for this caveat, I will sometimes qualify L’Arche throughout this dissertation in order to be clear on the kind of communities I am referring to. For example, I will use the language of “communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments” or “Vanier-grounded communities” to denote those communities operating out of a similar theological approach as Vanier. My reference to L’Arche in more general terms, especially in chapters 4 and 5, will mostly denote to these communities as well.

_A Pneumatology Grounded in the Trinitarian Economy_

Throughout his oeuvre, particularly those writings which have a Christian character, Vanier often alludes to the necessity of L’Arche being open to and animated by the Holy Spirit. While he never claims to be or demonstrates being a systematic theological thinker, Vanier repeatedly mentions the importance of the Holy Spirit as inspirer, guide, teacher, advocate, and purifier in the journey of the human person to her/his ultimate end. Vanier grounds this emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian economy, as the power of Jesus alive in the world. Thus Vanier’s understanding of the Holy Spirit remains firmly in the Christian theological

---

4 While Vanier never calls himself a “theologian” or enunciates his thought out of an explicit theological lens, he repeatedly refers to L’Arche as “God’s project” and as a “gift of the Holy Spirit.” To the extent Vanier theologizes, particularly around L’Arche, he does so as a Christian person who discerns God through living community and in the lives of marginalized persons. In this way, Vanier’s “theology” is less concerned with systematic thought than with following Jesus and learning to live the way of Christ in ordinary life. For Vanier, L’Arche exists fundamentally as a “theological project,” inspired by God, and thus any philosophical, anthropological or psychological insight he draws from life in community all stems from God’s providential sustaining of L’Arche. On Vanier’s personalist and Aristotelian background which informs his theologizing, see chapter 3. Also see Hans S. Reinders’s practical explication of what he calls Vanier’s “theological realism” in “Being with the Disabled: Jean Vanier’s Theological Realism,” in _Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader_, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 467-511.


tradition, with a particular focus on the Spirit’s role in communicating God’s truth to persons and giving them the energy to live the peace and newness of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{7} The peace ecclesiology implicit in Vanier’s thought and the practice of it in communities which follow his theological emphases strongly relies on this traditional and dynamic pneumatology.

My account of the church in chapters 6 and 7 will be grounded in a similar Trinitarian view of the Holy Spirit. Jesus sends the Spirit of God into the world to both bind members together into a Body and continually push them into the “new aeon” of God’s kingdom. In this way, the Holy Spirit is both sanctifier and truth-teller, revealing Christ’s redemption of the world and bringing the future into the present. As Stanley Hauerwas claims, “To be made holy by the work of the Holy Spirit is to be made part of a community of truth that makes friendship possible in a world of violence and lies.”\textsuperscript{8} Through grounding my peace ecclesiology in the Trinitarian persons, I understand the agency and activity of the Holy Spirit as crucial in any account of the church’s participation in the \textit{missio Dei} as an eschatological witness to Christ’s peace.

\textit{On Labels and Disability Language}

This dissertation will inevitably include a discussion of persons considered disabled. Due to this fact, a brief explication of how I connect disability with these persons is more than appropriate. I do not identify as a disabled person but, like many, use the term “disability” as a way of differentiating or identifying other persons. As disability theorists have rightly called into question the simple, often taken for granted notions of “disability” as physical, mental, or sensory defect, I affirm the importance of clarifying my own use of language.\textsuperscript{9}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Vanier, \textit{Drawn into the Mystery of God through the Gospel of John}, 285-6; \textit{Community and Growth}, 124, 145, 166.
There has been a continual evolution in the terminology which categorizes those who fall under the domain of “disability.” Authors using the “social model” of disability stress the difference between “impairment” and “disability.” In this sense, impairment denotes the lack of function in a particular area of the body, whether it be non-functional limbs or eyes, or inhibited brain function. Impairment is contrasted with “disability,” which represents the barriers society erects and maintains which prevents accessibility for persons with impairments. Thus “disabled persons” indicate not persons with impairments but those who are discriminated against and excluded due to their non-normative embodiment. Others wish to use “person first” language as a way of considering those with impairments primarily as people rather than objects. Under this rubric exist “people with disabilities,” thereby also granting that particular impairments, while not ultimately characterizing persons, remain an aspect of individual’s identities. L’Arche communities have developed their own language of “core member.” This terminology developed as a way of differentiating L’Arche from the common service provision language of “resident,” “patient” or “client.” At the same time, it also captured for many the desire to place the lives of persons considered intellectually disabled at the center of communal life as core elements of L’Arche’s mission and identity.

This dissertation will assume the social model distinction between impairment and disability, and therefore I will at times refer to “people with cognitive impairments.” I will also use the L’Arche term “core member,” particularly when discussing how the nondisabled experience and perceive the presence of those called disabled in their communities. However, in regards to disability I will not speak of either “disabled people” or “people with disabilities.” Instead I will refer to persons “considered” or “thought to be” or “called” intellectually disabled. I choose this language as a way of signaling that disability ultimately stands as a label for categorizing certain persons as different based merely on bodily and functional features. Labels can provide assistance, are sometimes necessary, and can even be more liberated options; “core members” can equally be considered a label that enhances rather than denigrates particular people in certain contexts. Yet these labels must always remain provisional and ultimately secondary. Labels easily overwhelm persons’ identities, particularly for those not able to affirm or deny the categorizations others place on them.

A bold insight of people in L’Arche is the claim that people with intellectual disabilities are teachers in what it means to be human. Vanier never tires of stating how even people like Antonio and Edith, those labelled as profoundly disabled and thus often left outside moral considerations of personhood, led him to the truth of his being. Few core beliefs of L’Arche so contradict popular notions of freedom, identity, and subjectivity. When core members appear less as defectives to be cared for than exemplars to learn from, the contemporary reflexive self no longer represents the ultimate goal of being human. Vanier attributes the transformations of persons he has seen as coming time and again from the daily presence of persons with disabilities in community life. Many in L’Arche refer to core members as “masters,” meaning not that of persons being in a position of power over others but as exemplars who form and mentor others in the truth of the gospel. This perspective on people with intellectual disabilities pervades the culture of L’Arche and acts as one of its distinctive features, particularly in the realm of human service provision.

Yet one must exercise caution here. For the sincere attempt at seeing core members in a bold and new way can instead simply re-categorize them as “special” agents of a divine will. Some perceive people with cognitive impairments as being exemplars in this way, but more as passive visual aids who somehow give off an aura of love for non- or less disabled people. Authors like Vanier, Henri Nouwen, and theologian Michael Hryniuk can at times see core members in this essentialist way, especially when they are not careful around their language regarding persons with cognitive impairments as “healers” and “teachers.” At their least careful, these authors can give the impression that core members somehow heal merely through their presence, and thus relegate their mission to simply that of healing more able people. Vanier and others most likely never intend this patronizing and categorizing language. However, this impression can still be discerned in much of their reflections on the place of people called disabled in L’Arche.

---

A potential corrective to this potential misunderstanding lies in L’Arche’s strong emphasis on relationship with people with cognitive impairments. Just as Vanier argues for core members as teachers and masters, he also forcefully underlines that this perspective can only exist within the context of mutuality and friendship. Thus French theologian Christian Salenson offers a slight corrective to Vanier’s claim that people with disabilities rest at the heart of the community. Salenson argues that instead it is relationship that is at the heart of the community, and the transformation and healing that happen occur less through core members than through the presence of the Holy Spirit within the relationships of persons. “It is because of the relationship that each person, in his life shared with people with disabilities, is called to face again his own humanity, a humanity likewise shaped by the experience of weakness, suffering, woundedness and fragility.” Thus while core members may have a particular gift for drawing persons into transformative relationships of friendship, this gift applies to every person via their own creatureliness. The transformation of persons in L’Arche occurs in what Martin Buber called the “in between” space created in an encounter of “I” and “Thou” relations. People with intellectual disabilities act as masters in their availability which comes through their truthful need for others. The subsequent encounter of persons in the initial mode of care creates a space of mutuality where others can experience their own brokenness and mutual dependence on God and others. In this light, core members act as teachers and exemplars when their gift of availability creates transformative friendships, which help to see oneself and the other truthfully.

An Acknowledgement of Being a Concrete (and Often Sinful) Church in via

This dissertation will primarily see the church as a school which forms persons and communities in a particular culture through the cultivation of habits and the performance of communal practices. Approaching the church this way means accentuating the importance of what Healy calls the “concrete church”: “a distinctive way of life, made possible by the gracious action of the Holy Spirit, which orients its adherents to the Father through Jesus Christ,” and

---

which “takes concrete form in the web of social practices accepted and promoted by the community as well as in the activities of its individual members.”13 The concrete church acts in time through God’s grace in local contexts. Giving the concrete church a central place in ecclesiological reflection means focusing not so much on ecclesial institutions or abstract conceptions of an ideal church, but rather acknowledging faith as a way of life lived in communities of human persons. This emphasis is not meant to denigrate or overshadow the “mystical” dimension of the church as the “communion of saints” stretched across space and time; the church as “mystical communion” remains one legitimate image of the Body of Christ. In addition, ecclesial institutions and structures have a place in fostering and maintaining the church’s catholicity. My own focus on the concrete church comes because of the way it stresses the embodied nature of ecclesial life, and that how that life is shaped, practiced, and continually (re)constructed through the graceful action of the Trinity.

Yet turning to the concrete church also requires acknowledgement of its infidelities and complicity to sin. The history of Christianity readily attests to the way Christians have acted in ways highly contrary to the church’s beliefs and ultimate allegiance. Fernando Enns thus makes a distinction between the “believed” church and the “experienced” church, not as two separate entities but as aspects of the one church in relation and tension with each other.14 The presence of sin within the body does not negate the Trinity’s presence and work within the visible and empirical church, but it does require that the church take its sin seriously. In this way, Healy understands an acknowledgement of the church’s ecclesial sinfulness as an aspect of its theological and social witness.15

The concrete church that confesses its sin and recognizes its departures from faithfulness stresses the contingent and in via nature of the church. As acknowledged throughout church history, the pilgrim church is on a journey rather than having fully arrived. Even as the ekklesia lives in the new aeon of Christ, it still has one foot in the old aeon of the world. “The eschatological ‘not yet’ reminds us that until the end of the church’s time it remains imperfect and sinful, always ecclesia semper reformanda or semper purificanda.”16 Thus the concrete

15 Healy, Church, World, and the Christian Life, 8–9.
16 Ibid., 10.
church remains essentially “timeful,” given the time to learn and practice the gospel of peace despite its missteps and infidelity. Staying true to its eschatological character means realizing that the church is never finished, and must always remain focused on its ultimate telos in the midst of its call to praise and witness.
Chapter 1 The Quest for an Inclusive Church: Liberal Citizenship and Intellectual Disability

People with disabilities have been encouraged to see our needs as unique and extraordinary, rather than as society-wide issues of inclusion and exclusion. Accessibility then means the availability of the same choices accorded to able-bodied people. It also means opening the means of ‘normal’ to the ordinary lives of people with disabilities. Accessibility as used here refers to social-symbolic, physical, and legal inclusion in the common life.¹

From its founding, the church has at various times and places desired to serve the poor and provide hospitality to the stranger. As a site of God’s presence in the world, the church has been called to understand itself as a place for everyone to belong and receive God’s gift of salvation. This welcome and invitation to community has often extended to those labelled as disabled.

Inclusion has become a rallying cry in some churches in regards to disability. Drawn from wider societal discussions on an authentic response to social exclusion, some churches’ championing of inclusion represents an attempt to make a space for people with impairments to fully participate in its social life, as well as the site where persons often thought “defective” can communicate their divinely given gifts. These ecclesial communities seek to ground just relationships in their congregations on a belief in inclusion, which then bases their theologies of empowerment for those oppressed by being considered disabled.

This chapter will attempt to discern the nature of the inclusion churches wish to employ in their desire to liberate persons with various impairments, in particular to see how these models of inclusion account for those with cognitive impairments. The question for this chapter asks whether a peace ecclesiology that recognizes the presence of persons labelled as intellectually disabled in the church can use this form of “social inclusion” as its foundation. I will begin by discussing and analyzing liberal notions of inclusion. The liberal conception of inclusion’s heavy reliance on the goal of participation and equality of opportunity fitfully includes those with physical and sensory impairments. Yet this model’s implicit “anthropology of liberal

citizenship” throws a long shadow on those persons lacking the capacities of rationality and agency required to achieve its stated goals. Then I will turn to the work of Nancy Eiesland, who first brought the insights of sociological models of disability, along with the activist thrust of the disability rights movement, into the domain of liberation theology. While Eiesland’s integration of these two streams into theological reflection contributes to the church’s reasoning around disability, her heavily reliance on the liberal paradigm does little to challenge the anthropological assumptions which fail to make its freedom accessible for those considered intellectually disabled. I follow this discussion of Eiesland with a look at two ecclesial statements: A Church of All and for All and the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities. The theological and practical insights these statements bring has much to contribute to those in the church called disabled. Yet the accessible church implied and stated in these texts mirrors in many ways the anthropology of liberal citizenship, and does little to go beyond a welcome that encompasses more than accommodated worship, modified programs, and technological aids. These activities certainly represent noteworthy acts of inclusion. However, they risk making those lacking the robust subjectivity needed to be “subjects” and “actors” mere attendants in a space rather than mutual, Christian friends. Thus these ecclesial statements advance some goals of those seeking further disability inclusion, yet potentially still exclude other persons equally in need of the church’s liberating message and community. Another ecclesial orientation based more on communion and attentiveness potentially offers a more hospitable church that goes “beyond inclusion” towards friendship and belonging.

Methodological Considerations

On Being Liberal

At various points in this chapter, reference will be made to the “liberal” paradigm or vision of inclusion. Yet liberal as a late modern term denotes anything but a single or simplistic

---

2 I borrow the term “anthropology of liberal citizenship” from the work of Hans S. Reinders. See his Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 42–44.
meaning. Thus the need to clarify what this chapter understands as falling with the domain of being “liberal.”

Identifying oneself as “liberal” can mean in some contexts membership in a political party. Liberal can also denote a more permissive moral orientation, opposing more restrictive or “conservative” moral understandings and practices. Liberalism can also mean a political philosophy, centered around the institutions and ideals which govern particular nation-states. Related to this political understanding is considering liberalism as a form of moral reasoning enacted through social structures and practices.

This chapter will use the term liberal primarily in this last context. Robert Song believes that modern liberalism contains five main aspects. First, liberalism considers humans as essentially “sovereign choosers” and agents of the good, and thus the most apt at conceiving and self-realizing the good life for themselves. Secondly, liberalism adheres to the fact-value distinction, which differentiates between positive statements to facts and normative statements to values. In so doing, liberals understand morality as being about the autonomous creation of norms rather than focusing on a morality determined by “nature.” Thirdly, typical liberal modes of thought include individualism and an abstract universalism that can see certain truths as valid for all times and places. Fourth, liberalism understands reason as the appropriate tool for the discovery of truth and settling of disputes, as well as the instrument to facilitate individuals’ self-interest and to maximize utility. Fifth, typical forms of liberalism contain a notion of progress toward a humanly determined ideal. The first four of these aspects all assume a particular anthropology, which requires certain capacities to realize its goals, reason and subjectivity being the most crucial. Without these faculties, persons could not employ the agency needed to move toward authenticity and make their self-created good real.

Linked to this anthropology is a particular concept of freedom. Song understands the central values of liberalism to be equality and liberty, the latter having a particular importance in its negative sense. Although Song does include Immanuel Kant and F. A. Hayek in his discussion of liberalism, his summary does have a strong Anglo-flavour. For works that include more extensive considerations on continental liberalism, see Guido de Ruggiero, The History of European Liberalism, trans. R. G. Collingwood (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959, 1981); Richard Bellamy, Liberalism and Modern Society: A Historical Argument (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Pierre Manent, An Intellectual History of Liberalism, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Richard Bellamy,
one’s own good, done in negotiation with other persons through the social contract. That liberty can either come through a “laissez-faire” approach, or be guaranteed by the state through offering support and equal opportunity to exercise one’s freedom. What both interventionist and non-interventionist approaches share is the belief that once equality – that basic condition of respect owed to every person – is assured, persons then have the freedom to pursue their own good. Societal and political arrangements which restrict the ability of individuals to determine and realize their own good stand as oppressive structures. Liberation in this oppressive context involves eliminating the discriminatory barriers which prevent persons from exercising their right to pursue self-realization.

While liberalism emanated from philosophical theories of political governance, this chapter will use the term not only for a system of thought but also what philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “social imaginary.” For Taylor, a social imaginary consists of “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectation.” \(^5\) The theory of liberalism, along with its anthropological assumptions, has to a profound degree penetrated the social imaginaries of late modern, western cultures. This integration into late modern societies prioritizes certain narratives and defines particular horizons of imagination of ordinary persons, both helping to define social practices as well as infuse them with specific moral understandings. Thus while many people would not identify themselves as being “liberal” due to their religious or political affiliation, their tacit adherence to many of the basic tenets of the liberalism as cited here makes them ready followers and practitioners of the liberal social imaginary. \(^6\)

*On Sources*

This chapter’s discussion of the church and the inclusion of those considered disabled will focus primarily on three texts, one theological and the other two ecclesial. The first is the

---


\(^6\) On the process of early modern philosophical and anthropological theories becoming the dominant social modernity in the West, see Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 4.
late theologian Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. I begin with this work because of the impact it has had upon subsequent theologians reflecting on God, the church, and disability. *The Disabled God* represented the first substantial treatment on the potential intersection of the disability rights movement and liberation theology, and how these together might act to make the church more inclusive. An increasing amount of Christians have taken up further Eiesland’s call for an accessible church, receiving much inspiration from her “disabled God” and demand to recognize persons with impairments as actors rather than objects. Thus *The Disabled God* represents a suitable place to begin regarding becoming an inclusive church and what that community might look like.

The Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network’s (EDAN) *A Church of All and for All* follows the analysis of Eiesland’s book. I have selected this ecclesial statement on the church, disability and inclusion firstly because EDAN’s origin within the World Council of Churches means that the document attempts to include the perspectives of many ecclesial communities. That *A Church of All and for All* originated out of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission also gives the document a certain authority, and has enabled it to reach churches to a global extent. EDAN’s ecumenical and global scope helps it not to be tied to merely one ecclesiology, but tries to represent the commonality of Christian thought across cultures, alongside of its desire not to deny difference through abstract universalizing. Certainly, many other ecclesial statements on disability exist and could be consulted, yet a more in-depth analysis of these documents remains outside the scope of this dissertation. Another reason to focus on EDAN’s text is because of the substantial treatment of theological and ecclesiological themes it discusses. Few other ecclesial statements offer an examination of similar length. That the document includes intentional language around inclusion and access makes it particularly relevant for the discussion in this chapter.

As an ecclesial community not officially a part of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church represents a significantly large ecclesial community which has also done reflection in regards to disability and the church. Therefore this chapter’s look at inclusion in the Roman Catholic Church will consider the theological and ecclesiological work done by the United States

---

Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).⁸ The Holy See has produced texts and theological reflection around disability as well.⁹ I have chosen the USCCB documents not only because they precede attempts by the Holy See to circulate ecclesial reflection on disability, but also because texts from the USCCB employ more intentional inclusion and access language rather than the traditional paternalistic and charity orientation of the Vatican documents. In this way, the USCCB documents represent a more “progressive” vision of including those with impairments in the ecclesial body. At the same time, these texts maintain many of the theological and anthropological principles of the works produced by the Holy See. Thus these U.S. attempts at reflection around disability and inclusion do not contradict more magisterial responses, but build on them in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church’s late modern, liberal context.

Understanding Liberal Inclusion

Few contemporary words have such traction – not just in regards to disability but other socially marginalized populations – as that of “inclusion.” One could argue that inclusion has become a descriptive adjective for the “good society” in the liberal, late modern West. Yet as Arie Rimmerman points out, social inclusion has been greatly under theorized.¹⁰ Thus while the language of inclusion is widespread, authors rarely include a substantial discussion on the contents of their vision of inclusion. Inclusion’s inextricable connection with exclusion means

---


that a discernment of the makeup of inclusion must come from what persons and communities understand as the correct response to social exclusion. Thus understanding inclusion requires excavating notions of the “good society” from explicitly stated goals on including at risk and alienated persons and groups. Unearthing the nature of inclusion from liberal articulations of the good society reveal that, while the access and participation liberal societies advocate may offer inroads for those considered physically disabled, its promises may not reach those lacking the capacities needed to exercise the robust form of subjectivity understood as human in liberal anthropologies. This lacuna in liberalism’s liberationist goals does not necessarily negate the benefits which inclusion brings to persons labelled intellectually disabled, but only reveals inclusion as insufficient in itself to guarantee the good life for all persons.

_Inclusion as Participation, Access and Equality (of Opportunity)_

For most, inclusion stands as a social process and goal of equality and justice for all persons. Implicit in this understanding is an acknowledgement of the undesirable reality of social exclusion, a situation where individuals and communities are pushed to the edges of society and left with diminished opportunities for participation and access to power. The European Union defines social inclusion as “a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights.” As a process in response to social and economic poverty, social inclusion is inextricably linked to social exclusion. Thus the thrust of inclusion emanates from the deprivation of marginalized persons in society.

The response to exclusion by liberal societies lies in discovering those excluded from mainstream society and offering them the support they need to enjoy the “normal” or “good life”

---

11 Hans Reinders was one of the first authors to argue this point extensively. See _Receiving the Gift of Friendship_, especially chap. 2.
of western culture. Aspects of the good life revolve around the values of autonomy, economic self-sufficiency, self-realization, respect and dignity, and individual and communal recognition. Participation and equality of opportunity are key goals for the inclusive society. Enabling everyone to participate fully in the normal aspects of social life – education, housing, employment, the arts, etc. – benefits both marginalized persons as well as the larger community which draws on their skills and resources. The constructed solidarity of modern societies provides equality of opportunity through advocating and implementing programs which assist in bringing excluded persons into society on a level playing field. Inclusion also modifies and/or expands institutions to make them more accessible to marginalized persons.

Underlying this goal of fuller participation and greater opportunity is an extension of the fundamental rights of late modern citizens to excluded persons. Recognizing the civil rights of marginalized persons stands as a basic form of justice in liberal society, which equalizes the excluded in the social contract which governs political relationships. As opposed to merely bringing people into society, David Byrne advocates for a “stronger” type of inclusion, which also seeks to discern the societal relationships of power which maintains unequal class structures. By so doing, inclusion means not only providing a place for the excluded to participate, but also tries to guarantee a more robust equality by challenging those who create the exclusion in the first place.

As some of those persons considered excluded from mainstream society, persons called disabled represent targets for policies and programs of inclusion. The most vocal advocates for the inclusion of people with disabilities has been the disability rights movement. A main goal of the movement rests in reducing the attitudinal and physical barriers imposed on them by an able-bodied society, which have excluded them from participating in social life. An ableist society not only creates architectural structures which prevent entry into the halls of power and decision-making, but also imposes the social norms of the able-bodied majority, which produces the discriminatory stereotypes which keep those considered disabled in positions of lower status. Persons with impairments experience inclusion when they can access previously inaccessible buildings, and when their voices can be heard and perceived as equal. Through gaining access to institutions and levels of power people considered disabled can participate in society and improve the quality of their lives.

---

Many persons considered disabled and their advocates understand independence and self-advocacy as crucial dimensions of the inclusion process. Empowerment must begin and continue in individual persons; any program or social support should have autonomy as its goal. As Gillian MacIntyre points out in her look at inclusion policy in the U.K., inclusion means “having the support to make choices about one’s own life and to pursue these choices without encountering disabling barriers.”\(^{14}\) This drive toward independence must exist for people called intellectually disabled as well. MacIntyre insists in the need for social workers in “empowering people with learning disabilities to take control of their own lives.”\(^{15}\) Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes agree, demanding the need to “include disabled people at all stages in the planning, delivery and control of these services.”\(^{16}\) By reducing the barriers to participation, an inclusive society enables all people to realize their full potential and makes the world accessible to the good life of western societies. Barnes and Oliver see the commitment to a robust inclusion as leading to “a world in which all human beings, regardless of impairment, age, gender, social class or minority ethnic status, can coexist as equal members of the community, secure in the knowledge that their needs will be met and that their views will be recognised….It will be a world which is truly democratic, characterised by genuine and meaningful equality of opportunity, with far greater equity in terms of wealth and income, with enhanced choice and freedom, and with a proper regard for environmental and social continuity.”\(^{17}\)

*Whose Inclusion and Access: Lacunas in an Anthropology of Liberal Citizenship*

Through a commitment to the equal rights of all their members, societies committed to inclusion promise full participation and an opportunity to pursue what they envision as the good life. In the programs which target the excluded and offer them the support needed to enter into mainstream society, inclusion promises a place for everyone. Many disability advocates attempt to also unmask and tear down the attitudinal barriers which leave them in a devalued status.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 83.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 102.
When these obstacles are removed, a way becomes open for all persons, impaired or not, to participate in social life and realize their full potential.

While this form of inclusion promises full participation and access for all, a closer look at its basic tenets may reveal a society less inclusive than it purports. The assumptions of autonomy, agency, and self-representation which underpin western forms of inclusion, form the basis of what Hans Reinders calls the “anthropology of liberal citizenship.” In this framework, the human being is fundamentally identified as a “choosing self.” For the choosing self, the good life requires the kind of freedom and community which provides individuals the suitable milieu to create and maintain their own lives, in the way they deem most appropriate and authentic for themselves. One could say that the goal of inclusion in this anthropological framework consists in providing the social environment that frees individuals to choose the ways they want to both achieve self-realization as well as participate in social life. Two capacities stand as crucial in making good on inclusion’s promises: rationality and agency. Entering into the social contract requires the ability for abstract reason which privately assents to participate in the norms and rules of society. This participation also assumes a level of agency which seizes the new opportunities presented, as well as offering its contributions toward the productive aspects of liberal culture.

While the inclusion of liberal societies grants a renewed opportunity for persons with physical and sensory disabilities to participate in society, the prospect for those considered intellectually disabled represents potentially a more exclusive social milieu. Martha Minow argues that the need for rationality inherent in a conception of society as a social contract ultimately excludes many of the persons it attempts to include, people considered intellectually disabled particularly so. Likewise, Reinders argues that in the anthropology of liberal citizenship, the individual freedom grounding agency in disability rights literature has become a “hyper-good,” in turn making the inclusion of those called profoundly intellectually disabled extremely difficult. These biases exist even in the “strong” forms of inclusion which attempt to

---


remove the exclusionary elements within society; the choosing self implicit in this anthropology remains unaltered. According to Reinders, what results is a “hierarchy of disability,” with those persons most limited in rationality and agency existing on the bottom rung of the ladder. In this model of inclusion, persons who can speak for themselves may indeed benefit from the equal opportunities in liberal society, but those with more intellectual impairments potentially remain even farther away from the good life. When flourishing in modern liberalism becomes a competition between competing goods based on self-interest, persons considered intellectually disabled appear as the great outliers. Not only do many of these persons not possess the agency required to assert their power and enact their version of the good, but often even lack the rational capacities needed to self-determine their preferences to begin with. The authentic desire for liberal society to include these persons in society runs up against its own competitive norms, resulting more often than not in continued social marginalization and exclusion.

Thus the great promises inclusion offers appear less than full for those called intellectually disabled. Much good has come from the desire to bring those excluded because of their cognitive impairment into the goods of liberal society, and many persons labelled intellectually disabled have benefited from the greater opportunities for work, education and housing which inclusion paradigms advocate. However, the values of autonomy and agency at the heart of a liberal social imaginary fail to include those lacking the robust subjectivity required to realize these goals. For those in particular states of dependency and who lack significant capacities for agency, the assurance that equal opportunity leads to the freedom for


23 On the “emotivist” dominance of morality in modernity, see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Recent “agonist” thinkers seek to critique and go beyond the Rawlsian and Habermasian political consensus by advocating a politics oriented to the continual contestation of power. These political theorists draw on the conception of the Greek agon or contest as the place where differences are not transcended or eliminated but confronted. In this way, certain kinds of conflict stand as beneficial to the pursuit of democracy. Agonist thinkers assume an ineradicable pluralism of values which creates political conflict among different groups in society. As opposed to the Rawlsian and Habermasian goal of achieving rational consensus, agonists understand democracy as existing from the conflictual passions of various others, who see the other not as enemy but as fellow adversary. For more see William E. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Edward C. Wingenbach, Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy: Post-Foundationalism and Political Liberalism (Burlington, Ver.: Ashgate, 2011); and particularly the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?,” Social Research 66, no. 3 (Fall 1999); On the Political (London: Routledge, 2005); and The Democratic Paradox (London: Verso, 2009).
individual self-realization can appear as an empty promise. Guaranteeing the rights and dignity of these persons remains an important task of justice, but cannot on its own achieve the relational bonds included in the good life. The rights and freedom pledged by the liberal paradigm can often bring persons thought intellectual disabled mere attendance rather than deeper forms of belonging.

**Nancy Eiesland and the Disabled God**

It is difficult to overestimate the influence theologian Nancy Eiesland’s work has exercised among those working at the intersection of theology, disability, and the church. Among those scholars in the burgeoning field of theology and disability, as well as among advocates for more inclusive faith communities, Eiesland’s *The Disabled God* has achieved something akin to canonical status. Therefore discerning Eiesland’s conception of access will be important in seeing whether she can transcend the rational and agential biases in the liberal model of inclusion.

**Eiesland’s Goal: Converting the Church into a Liberating Body of Justice**

Eiesland has two primary goals in writing *The Disabled God*. First, Eiesland demands a more welcoming and accessible church for people called disabled. Eiesland pulls no punches relating how the church historically and presently has marginalized impaired persons and prevented them from full participation in church life and decision making. “Rather than being a structure for empowerment, the church has more often supported the societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism. For many disabled persons the church has been a ‘city on a hill’ – physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.”

Becoming a liberating community for persons called disabled means not only removing the physical barriers to participation, but also the attitudinal images and biases of an ableist mindset. The church must repent of its discriminatory attitudes and practices toward persons with impairments, and enact “liberatory change and make the church a body of justice

---

24 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 20. Remaining citations in this chapter will be included in parenthetical references in the body of the text.
for people with disabilities” (69-70). When the church can acknowledge its sinful actions and disabling theology, it makes a space “possible for people with disabilities to struggle for full-bodied participation in God’s community and for others who care to cease their conscious and unconscious practices of injustice and turn their energies to doing justice” (70). Whether through discriminatory practices of ordination or the imposition of disrespectful interpretations of healing narratives, the church has marginalized the bodies and stories of people considered disabled. In order for the church to be a place of justice, it must acknowledge its complicity in injustice and enter a process of conversion that authentically welcomes all persons.

Secondly, Eiesland wants to offer transformed images and practices that enable the church to be this new place of justice for people called disabled. At the forefront of the symbolic changes Eiesland offers is the “disabled God.” The church’s usual image of a perfect and able saviour can only place those with impairments in a negative light, as victims of the fall and in need of the church’s charity. As a response, Eiesland offers the image of the resurrected Jesus, still bearing the wounds from his crucifixion. “In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully capable with the experience of disability” (100). In his revealing himself as Savior not as unblemished angel but as wounded friend, Jesus identifies profoundly with those who not only experience disability but the corporeality which comes from being human. Eiesland sees in this image of Jesus a way for all persons to reclaim embodiment as the center of experience and faith. The church practices this transformed understanding of Jesus through the Eucharist, which remembers Jesus’s broken body as the site of grace and redemption. “An altered body practice of the Eucharist is the evidence that the grace of God comes through bodies. Hence, it is at once a call for justice and a recognition of the value of unconventional bodies” (115). Through a renewed theology and re-imagined practices, the church can offer the liberatory space where all bodies can be themselves.

When the church moves toward these two goals, it creates what Eiesland calls “two-way access” (20). A converted church empowers persons with impairments and provides access to hitherto inaccessible social practices and religious symbols of salvation. In so doing, the church
gains access to the “social-symbolic lives of people with disabilities,” whose unconventional bodies expand horizons of the human and transform distorted images of the divine. Proclaiming a theology and practice of liberation from those called disabled thus has the potential to free all persons from deleterious social stereotypes and false theologies.

_Eiesland’s Approach: Disability Rights and the Minority Model of Disability_

The method Eiesland uses in moving toward this two-way access comes from the disability rights movement and scholars examining the sociological dimensions of disability. Eiesland places her analysis within the “minority-group model of disability,” which understands “that the physical and psychological restrictions that people with disabilities face are primarily due to prejudice and social discrimination, and only secondarily to the functional limitations or emotional disturbance related to our physical impairments. Hence the locus of the problem of disability is neither the psyches nor the bodies of individuals with disabilities, but rather it is the system of social relations and institutions that has accomplished the marginalization of people with disabilities as a group” (62). As persons set aside as “defective” by an ableist society, persons considered impaired form a disadvantaged minority group, who experience societal oppression through paternalism, social aversion, and sometimes overt violence (63-4). Impaired persons in turn internalize these oppressive social attitudes, and resign themselves to live the “tragedy” and “overcomer” narratives imposed on them. Although Eiesland wishes to note the non-universality of impairment, she also follows the minority model in claiming that the uniting factor for impaired persons is their common experience of ableist oppression.

Eiesland accentuates how the growth of the disability rights movement in the 1960s and 70s helped to both advocate for the civil rights of the disabled, and spurred the sociological paradigms of disability which followed. The prime goals of the movement lie in redressing discrimination and exclusion, demanding more opportunities for independent living, and making self-advocacy the prime orientation and approach with political and institutional authorities (54-7). The political toil of the movement culminated in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. Eiesland underscores the importance of this legislation by referring to it as the “emancipation proclamation” for those considered disabled, quoting the ADA’s major goals as “to assure equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living,
and economic self-sufficiency” (19). Rather than look for exemptions to the ADA’s provisions, the church should be following the legislation as a model for institutional transformation. In addition, the church should also be taking cues from social models of disability in reworking theological symbols and conceptions of disability. “Recognition of the sociopolitical dimensions of physical disability is vital if we hope to restructure and reconceive contemporary theology about disability and to ground a liberatory theology of disability in the individual and collective bodies of people with disabilities” (50). Only by integrating aspects of the social model in its theology, along with raising its voice with and taking its voice from the disability rights movement, can the church become a place of real inclusion and liberation.

A Church of Subjects and Actors: How Inclusive is Eiesland’s Access?

While Eiesland never provides a full-length discussion on how she understands access and inclusion, her privileging of the disability rights approach to justice for those called disabled offers clues as to the content of her liberation. Like many authors advocating wider social inclusion, the language of participation and equal opportunity pervade Eiesland’s book. Eiesland reiterates that access should not be confined merely to physical infrastructure, but must include taking part in all aspects of “normal” social life. Access should be understood not just in regards to buildings but more “as participation, as well as mobility, throughout society as a legally protected right. People with disabilities have been encouraged to see our needs as unique and extraordinary, rather than as society-wide issues of inclusion and exclusion. Accessibility then means the availability of the same choices accorded to able-bodied people. It also means opening the means of ‘normal’ to the ordinary lives of people with disabilities. Accessibility as used here refers to social-symbolic, physical, and legal inclusion in the common life” (28). This inclusion also comprises access to “positions of power” and an incorporation into “all levels of participation and decision making” (79, 104).

26 In her discussion of the duplicitous practice of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) regarding ministry and persons with impairments, Eiesland mentions how the ALC’s biggest problems in not hearing all voices came from its indifference or hostility towards both the disability rights movement and the social model (79-81).
27 The critique of Eiesland in terms of access and persons called intellectually disabled given here is significantly influenced by Reinders discussion of The Disabled God in the light of profound intellectual disability. See Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 165-80.
Underlying Eiesland’s access is the need for the capacities of rationality and agency which enable persons to advocate for their own needs and raise their own voices in telling their own stories. The themes of self-representation, personal empowerment, and self-determination underscore Eiesland’s path to liberation. Eiesland understands the ability to define and relate one’s own disabled experience as crucial in the transformation toward a more just and inclusive church for those thought disabled. Following the disability rights movement, Eiesland understands self-empowerment and representation as the mode to personal and ecclesial liberation. “A liberatory theology of disability comes from the perspective of persons with disabilities and addresses other people with disabilities as the center of its concerns….It represents the permanent effort of persons with disabilities to incorporate ourselves in time and space, to exercise our creative capacity, and to assume our responsibilities within the church” (87). Concomitant to self-advocacy must come the church’s acknowledgment of impaired persons “as historical actors and theological subjects,” where access represents not charity or goodwill but simple justice (67).

The strong agential and rationalist orientation at the heart of Eiesland’s liberatory theology places her firmly within an anthropology of liberal citizenship, and thus leaves her model of inclusion vulnerable to the exclusion of those lacking these capacities. While she advocates a strong model of inclusion, which attempts to discern the institutional power arrangements which maintain ableist norms and practices, her emphasis on self-representation and empowerment throws a long shadow on those considered more profoundly intellectually disabled. Eiesland demands access for impaired persons to the norms of liberal social life, whether it be the doorways to buildings or institutions of power. That this access must require the discourse of autobiography means that others unable to speak can easily get left behind, left in a limbo status in a liberal paradigm which prizes autonomy and self-determination so highly.

This risk applies not only to persons but to the church as well. In her schema, Eiesland places the emphasis on persons called disabled to represent themselves and call for the political changes needed to make the institution just and inclusive. The church’s role appears to consist of merely acceding to outside demands, being apparently empty of any liberating theology or practice of its own. While being a relational body, the inclusion demanded by Eiesland centers primarily around access to structures where people can exercise their own wills. Thus while Eiesland understands that the “struggle for justice entails the physical practices of relating to and
caring for people with disabilities as central to the mission of the church,” this mainly “entails making program, buildings, and ritual spaces accessible for those whose bodies need specific care. It means creating and supporting paid positions for advocacy within denominational structures” (111). Certainly, physical accessibility and political lobbying at various institutional levels have some importance in making an accessible church. But this orientation does little to alleviate the relational poverty experienced by many persons called intellectually disabled. As Reinders points out, many persons with cognitive impairments need less equal access than friends, the exact thing that a rights-based activism cannot deliver.28 In contrast, Eiesland’s ecclesiology opens up many paths for people with physical and sensory disabilities, but offers less for others considered disabled. The anthropology of liberal citizenship undergirding Eiesland’s church reform may even unintentionally marginalize those with cognitive impairments further by overlooking gifts not aligned with liberal notions of individualism and autonomy.

In overlooking the relational richness of faith communities in her approach toward a liberatory theology, Eiesland repeats the liberal model by assuming that once persons with impairments get in the door and equality of opportunity is provided, justice takes place. Eiesland’s paradigm never questions liberal citizenship’s choosing self, and its belief that liberation lies in exercising its own agency as the path to freedom and liberation. Self-representation and rational subjectivity surely represent human goods. But the choosing self’s claim of agency as “hyper-good” inadvertently leaves people considered intellectually disabled far from liberal forms of the good life, merely targets of the church’s “special needs” ministry of charity and beneficence. This irony rarely surfaces among Eiesland and others who wish to ground their inclusive church upon the liberal paradigm. The church she presents offers a liberatory space for autonomous agents to act upon their wills, but remains much more ambivalent for those whose gifts lie more in the realm of trust and receptivity to grace.

**Church Statements on Disability**

I now turn to an analysis and discussion of two different ecclesial statements on the place of those considered disabled in the church: *A Church of All and for All* and the *Pastoral*

---

28 Ibid., 6.
Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities. These statements, representing the World Council of Churches and the U.S. Roman Catholic Church respectively, attempt to offer the theological and hermeneutical principles needed to welcome persons with impairments, as well as propose strategies for making the church more inclusive. The task in this section consists in unearthing these models of inclusion by first understanding what the texts seek to accomplish, and then deriving their vision of inclusion from what they perceive as the ideal embodiment of an accessible church. By placing these visions of inclusion alongside the lives of those considered intellectually disabled, one sees their similarity to the liberal paradigm, and the concomitant problems they raise regarding authentically including persons with cognitive impairments.

A Church of All and for All

The World Council of Churches (WCC) document *A Church of All and for All* emerged out of a 30 year process exploring how the church might become a more inclusive community. Theological reflection on disability began through the Faith and Order Commission – the WCC’s theological reflection group – in 1971, discussing mainly issues of practical inclusiveness for those considered disabled. The formation of the Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network (EDAN) in 1998 moved the discussion forward to look more deeply at theological themes as they intersect with disability. EDAN’s reflection led to *A Church of All and for All* in 2003 as an “interim statement” on the global church’s journey towards becoming a welcoming and inclusive community.

Inclusion as Embodying the Wedding Feast

As a group which attempts to inform churches on an ecclesial theology and praxis of inclusiveness, EDAN’s goals in writing the document reflect these two concerns. The authors – identified as written by “disabled people, parents and others who experience life alongside them in various ways”\(^{29}\) – wish to first note how the church often does not reflect a welcoming

\(^{29}\) Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network, *A Church of All and for All: An Interim Statement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003), accessed April 18, 2016,
community, and where people called disabled remain excluded. Through disabling theological interpretations, the church has built walls of separation and prejudice. By excluding impaired persons from its midst, the church denies its own reality and mars its goal in glorifying God (30, 86). The document asserts instead that the “Church is called to be an inclusive community, to tear down the walls” which segregate and alienate those called disabled (Introduction).

Reflecting God’s love requires that the church welcome everyone as a gift and as having gifts to share, witnessing to God’s compassion for and in the world. “The integration of disabled people within the church gives testimony to God’s love as expressed by all His sons and daughters. It can also be an example and an inspiration in those societies in which disabled people suffer from humiliating marginalization” (83).

Incorporating new theological interpretations into the church makes communities ready to “struggle for the full realisation of disabled persons” (70). This struggle should exist equally alongside other social justice efforts like peace, the environment, and equality for women and children. Inclusion here represents not a question of generosity or beneficence, but of basic justice. The church accomplishes this justice not through “pity or mercy” but through “compassionate understanding and opportunities to develop [impaired persons’] vocations, possibilities and abilities” (69).

The document spends most of its time looking at various theological themes, as a way of giving churches new resources in making them more inclusive of members considered disabled. A Church of All and for All acknowledges that traditional interpretations of disability often have adhered to standard narratives of deficit and loss, thus colluding with societal attitudes which have led to exclusion and deprivation. In response to this complicity, the writers seek to reinterpret theological themes in a new light, which sometimes requires a “hermeneutic of suspicion” (35). An example of this new hermeneutical lens is seen in their discussion of healing. While Christianity has traditionally seen the disabled as defects in need of cure, using Gospel healing narratives as rationales, the authors respond by differentiating physical curing from a holistic healing which affirms persons’ equal status in the community (36-40).30 The


30 The statement qualifies this interpretation somewhat by saying that Jesus never made this social-physical distinction, and that both physical restoration and social reconciliation occurred at the same time (42).
authors also wish to challenge conceptions of the imago Dei which emphasize rationality and intellect, thus excluding those who lack this capacity. Instead, the imago Dei must be understood in a more corporate sense, tied up with the Pauline image of the Body of Christ. In a nod to Eiesland’s *Disabled God*, the document points out that being made in the image of Christ means an identification with his corporeal existence, which included disability. Thus “[s]ome aspects of God’s image in Christ can only be reflected in the Church as the Body of Christ by the full inclusion and honouring of those who have bodies that are likewise impaired” (29). The equal dignity which comes from being a member of the Body means that every one of its members is a gift and has a gift to share, communicated through the mode of interdependence in the community of faith.

The document’s reflections around praxis mainly revolve around making worship more welcoming and accessible. As the “most evident expression” of the gathered community, the church’s common worship is the “work of the people” and the most apt place “to accommodate the participation of all the gathered body” (74). The preaching of the Word and liturgical metaphors need to pay attention to how they may contain damaging images for those considered disabled, as well as proclaim new understandings of disability, vulnerability, and theology. Placing more emphasis and energy on non-verbal modes of response opens participation up to those who worship more with their bodies than with their minds, in addition to awakening that same response in others who may be overly confined to a rational form of faith. By modifying and accommodating liturgies to the particular needs of those considered disabled, the church embodies the wedding feast where all are welcome to experience the communion of God’s friendship.

*Towards A Truly Participatory Church through New Understandings of Disability*

While the EDAN document provides theological interpretations on disability and the church, the social model of disability also lies within its hermeneutical orientation. In their discussion of alternatives to purely biophysical curing in the healing narratives, the authors understand disability as a “social construct” and Jesus’s actions as a liberation of stigmatized persons through including them back into the saving community (39-40). As a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” the disability perspective confronts and repudiates perspectives on the imago Dei
which overly rely on reason for grounding conceptions of the human person (34-5). The text emphasizes and prioritizes the “new ways of understanding disability emerging in society,” noting how churches have tended to ignore these interpretations and challenge the church to take this more social model seriously (16-17). Acknowledging the diverse nature of disability experience and embodiment, the text also claims a unity amidst difference regarding persons called disabled through their common “minority status” as oppressed and marginalized persons (6). As empowered persons united in a common struggle for justice, impaired persons now claim success at “conscientization” in the churches as they take their place as “subjects of actors of reflection or action” (Introduction). The authors repeat the disability rights claim that articulation of disability experience must come from those who live or accompany those with impairments. As institutions which too often have assumed an ableist norm which has excluded persons, the churches, rather than those considered disabled, must repent of its sin and change its attitudes and architecture to be a more inclusive community.

While the goal of inclusion stands front and center in the text, the exact nature of what that inclusion looks like is not discussed. Yet clues can be discerned from the embodied ideals which the authors elucidate churches should seek. Like the liberal model of inclusion mentioned above, participation is a key marker of what an inclusive community’s shared life. A main goal of *A Church of All and for All* lies in enabling “the churches to interact with the disability discourse and help the churches address inclusion, active participation and full involvement in the spiritual and social life of the church in particular and society in general” (Introduction). This robust engagement assumes an access to buildings, leadership, and ecclesial practices, which manifests the fundamental values of equality and dignity at the heart of the Gospel message and the churches work. A community advocating and living this inviting hospitality creates a place where everyone is welcome and where everyone can share their gifts. The text’s closing prayer elucidates succinctly their understanding of an inclusive God and the church’s call to witness to him: “May we who are made in your image, O God, mirror your compassion, creativity and imagination as we work to reshape our society, our buildings, our programmes, and our worship so that all may participate” (89). The church acknowledges persons considered disabled as subjects of theology rather than its objects, and thus makes the changes needed to facilitate the sharing of their gifts demanded by their status as equal children of God.
While *A Church of All and for All* employs more theological language and images, it still reflects and advocates to a great degree the inclusion seen in the liberal paradigm. Agency and equal opportunity dominate the document, assuming that participation requires primarily a lowering of the institutional and attitudinal barriers which prevent access. The authors mainly settle for changes to theologies and practical logistics, believing that a transformation of these dimensions of ecclesial life will enable each person to find their place, exercise their gifts, and realize their full potential. Like the dominant liberal view of inclusion, the authors appear to presume that transforming structures and mindsets will do the work of providing the “equality” needed to enable full participation and accessibility. This inclusion supposes a church of “subjects and actors,” integrated into the community, and thus able to seize their place and make their contributions to the Body. The EDAN document should be commended for its hermeneutical work, which can assist in seeing previously stigmatized persons in a new light. Yet at the heart of *A Church of All and for All* remains an inclusion of excluded persons into a community understanding liberation as a liberal form of freedom.

Inclusion and access of this sort are certainly goods to be sought after and achieved. Yet how adequate this model is for those called intellectually disabled remains a question. The document goes beyond Eiesland by noting the presence of persons with cognitive impairments in the church. However, the document does little to suggest how these persons might be included in the church beyond mere accommodation and attendance. The text’s section on church as a community epitomizes this liberal view of inclusion (73-83). Discussion in this section focuses exclusively on logistical changes to make communal worship more accessible for persons with various impairments: re-configurating the liturgical space (74); use less “disfiguring” metaphors in proclaiming and preaching from the Word (75-6); using more “sensory experience” in worship (77-8); making individual assistive devices, braille and large print bibles more accessible (80); seeing more people with disabilities in liturgical leadership to show “the disabled that he/she has

---

31 Persons called intellectually disabled are mentioned in context of selective abortion (5); historically exclusive conceptions of the imago Dei relying heavily on intelligence (23, 35); as persons who exemplify the challenge disabled persons present to society through their highly unconventional bodies (57); and as persons sometimes excluded from full participation on an assumption that they do not understand verbal communication (75), as well as persons who worship more with sensory experience (77).
access to leadership according to his/her abilities” (81); and loosening overly rigid rules of behaviour for those who cannot sit for long periods of time (82). On their own, these ideas have value for facilitating the worship experience for some persons considered disabled, and thus are to be commended. Yet to resign the church as community to mere technical accommodation risks making the Body look primarily like a group of individuals gathered to worship each in their own way. This section mentions nothing about how members within church as a koinonia relate and commit themselves to one another. In their emphasis on the giftedness of every person, the text does mention the innate relational gifts of everyone, as well as having to learn receptivity, but place more emphasis on the agential gifts normally assumed with contributing and participating in social life (53-5). Stressing subjectivity over ability works well for those whose impairments limit them physically, and thus show how reflection on their disability experience offers richness to the church. But then what about those Christians severely limited in the capacities needed for this kind of subjectivity? While the text notes the “challenge” disability offers a world built on perfection and success, it never questions the “challenge” persons considered profoundly intellectually disabled present to the dominant liberal social imaginary.

Offering ideas to help persons considered disabled worship, like advocating a view of inclusion based on participation and equal opportunity, surely stands as a worthy task. Yet considering community mainly as accessible worship significantly limits the model of inclusion A Church of All and for All offers. In the end, this model risks leaving persons thought intellectually disabled as mere targets for “special needs ministry,” where relationships end once they walk into the sanctuary or church building. The liberal paradigm cannot provide the robust commitments needed to understand and fully welcome those not able to readily identify themselves as “subjects and actors.” Like Eiesland’s vision of liberation, freedom for the authors of A Church of All and for All appears centered on those who can exercise their freedom through agential capacities. This rational, subjective, and agential bias of the document makes its ecclesial vision thus ultimately inadequate in fundamentally welcoming and relationally encountered those thought intellectually disabled. The “integration of disabled people within the Church” (83, 87) advocated by EDAN’s text offers great potential for those excluded because of their physical and sensory disabilities, yet unconsciously maintains the “hierarchy of disability” which keeps those with intellectual impairments “out in the cold.”
Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has made significant contributions on the place of persons called disabled in the church, and on how parishes might become more welcoming and inclusive communities. On November 16, 1978, the USCCB released a Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities. This statement has served as a basis for the U.S. Roman Catholic Church’s subsequent reflections on the church and disabled persons: an affirmation of the statement on its ten year anniversary in 1988; Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities in 1995; and Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion in 1999. The following section will rely primarily on the original pastoral statement, as the following reflections are mainly affirmations of this document.

A Church which Advocates for and Guarantees the Rights of People with Disabilities

The USCCB claims as its goal in the Pastoral Statement in seeking to better understand persons with various impairments, in order to serve them better and help facilitate their full well-being and development. The church’s work includes re-examining discriminatory attitudes which look down upon the difference of these persons and cordon them off into a different kind of humanity. Christians must see those considered disabled with the eyes of love and justice, recognizing the gifts they have to offer the church. Christian love sees beyond “walls of strangeness” and affirms the common humanity that accepts rather than denies or overlooks difference. When the Christian community embodies this orientation, it helps achieve the goal of “their integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life” (1). Bishops recognize that the church has not always taken the lead in responding to the needs of people called disabled, but rather acted “only after circumstances or public opinion have compelled us to do so” (6). In the ten year affirmation of the Pastoral Statement, the Bishops see inclusion as a test of an authentic church, with practices of exclusion requiring conversion. “We

32 USCCB, Pastoral Statement, par. 3. Subsequent paragraph citations from this text in this section will appear as parenthetical references in the body of the text.
proclaim that if any disabled person is prevented from active participation, the church community is incomplete. We call upon church leadership throughout the country to encourage conversion of mind and heart, so that all persons with disabilities may be invited to worship and to every level of service as full members of the Body of Christ.”

Yet the church’s tradition of ministry to people with impairments, along with its strong social justice stance, gives the bishops a “realistic optimism” regarding the place of the church in providing the milieu where every person can develop to their full potential (35).

The most fundamental way that the church responds to persons considered disabled comes through the defense of their rights. Picking up on the importance of rights language and claims championed by John XXIII, the statement connects these “inalienable rights” as human persons with the democratic principles of the U.S. nation (8). The church must not only affirm these rights but seek to make them real in the Christian community and wider society. Every member of the Body has a responsibility to serve the personal and social needs of those called disabled, whether it be through visiting the shut in or advocating for those who cannot speak for themselves. As followers of Jesus, Christians are called to emulate his concern for the marginalized and for those forced to live on the fringes of society. This concern includes an invitation and welcome to those who seek participation in the ecclesial community, assisting them in finding security in the human family (12). The Bishops emphasize the promotion of education around disability from the parish on up to seminaries and dioceses, by so doing helping to facilitate the loving attitudes needed to embody ecclesial inclusion and Christian hospitality.

*Inclusion as Full and Active Participation*

The nature of that inclusion and hospitality can be discerned through how the bishops articulate the ideal conditions present for people considered disabled to be full members of the community. The theme of “integration” pervades the statement. Integrating people with impairments consists of an invitation to take part in the community’s life. Once within the community, those considered disabled “are to become equal partners in the Christian

---

33 USCCB, *NCCB Resolution*. 
community” (13) on the basis of the equal dignity they share with all human persons. This equality includes the same possibilities for holistic development, notably in “equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services” (10). The opportunity for participation includes that of access to ecclesial ministry, whether as lay persons or ordained clergy (17). For most, integration requires merely issuing an invitation to participate in community life and following through on its demands. Yet for others, “full participation can only come about if the Church exerts itself to devise innovative programs and techniques” (14). Through the modification and accommodation of catecheses and liturgies to the needs of particular persons, everyone can take part in the community and realize their full potential as children of God. This entails the required attitudinal shifts needed, where an inclusive parish concerns itself not merely with physical accommodation but making its ways of thinking accessible as well. Pastoral ministers should “develop specific programs aimed at forming a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all of God’s people around the table of the Lord.”

Access to the sacraments plays a big role in this integration and participation. As essential forms which bind persons together in communion, the sacraments must be “completely accessible” to all persons called disabled (23). As baptized persons, all Roman Catholics with impairments share the equal dignity which gives them the “right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community.”

Echoing the call from Vatican II on reforming the liturgy, the bishops demand that “Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.” Ministers should never assume they know the intentions of those with more severe impairments, particularly in denying them access to the sacraments. Rather celebrants should consult with the person directly, or with those persons who know the impaired persons well. Limitations in the use of reason should not automatically bar persons from baptism, the Eucharist or confirmation. Means other than oral communication suffice to denote intention, and cases of doubt should be resolved in the right of the baptized person to receive the sacraments.

---

34 On the principle of equal dignity of all persons, see USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments*, par. 1.
35 Ibid., par. 6.
36 Ibid., par. 2.
37 Ibid., par. 3.
In regards to anointing, the bishops emphasize that “since disability does not necessarily indicate an illness, Catholics with disabilities should receive the sacrament of anointing on the same basis and under the same circumstances as any other member of the Christian faithful.” All in all the goal remains to be as “inclusive as possible” in all areas of church life, from evangelization and catechesis to celebrating the sacraments together.

By integrating all persons into the Body through inviting participation and making the sacraments accessible to all, the church as an inclusive community recognizes those thought disabled as ready to take their place and confidently offer their gifts. In this kind of community, inclusion empowers persons to ministry for and with others. “People with disabilities are not looking for pity. They seek to serve the community and to enjoy their full baptismal rights as members of the Church” (33). Through raising its voice with those persons called disabled struggling for justice and equality, the church shows its commitment to follow Jesus and embody the *koinonia* which welcomes everyone and offers them a place of belonging.

*Integrating those Considered Disabled as Less than “Realistic Optimism”*

Aspects of the inclusion articulated and advocated by the USCCB differ from the dominant liberal paradigm already discussed, some of which provide an opening for a potentially more hospitable inclusion for those called intellectually disabled. Rather than stress the difference and diversity which makes up people with impairments, the USCCB tries instead to emphasis the acceptance of difference through a common humanity which binds others together in communion. This corresponds with the personalist orientation of much Roman Catholic philosophy and theology, which recognizes persons as having a unique dignity but fundamentally made for relationship with others. Thus the bishops can affirm those considered disabled as possessing gifts and virtues, yet also extend the rights of persons to the need for social life and community. Paying attention to the social need of those with impairments not

---

38 Ibid., par. 20.
40 USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments*, par. 5.
only helps them solve practical problems, but, just as importantly, creates “an opportunity for disabled and non-disabled people to join hands and break down the barriers that separate them. In such an interchange, it is often the person with a disability who gives the gift of most value” (26). Through this acknowledgement that participation entails not only an exercise of one’s agential gifts but also encountering other persons in community, the Pastoral Statement potentially makes more space for those whose gifts center on being rather than activity. The Bishops can “celebrate the dignity of persons with developmental disabilities” not only by their presence and ministry in parishes, but by how they often exemplify the gift of “simplicity of heart.” 41 By emphasizing the social relationships with others in community as essential to human development, the bishops possibly come closer to a more robust form of welcome, which has the power to not only help persons labelled disabled move toward self-realization but also create space for mutual transformation.

Yet it remains a question how much the USCCB documents truly depart from the anthropology of liberal citizenship that dominates discussions of inclusion. The pervasive goal of “integration” suggests the work to bring an excluded population – in this case, those with impairments – into the church, primarily that they might participate in social life and develop to their own individual potential. This kind of approach too easily can stop at attendance rather than friendship. Other than the glimpses mentioned above, one receives little indication how including those impaired persons previously excluded might change the Body instead of merely augmenting it. Attempting to extend and solidify rights for people considered disabled certainly might assist in obliging others to provide basic spiritual needs. Yet how far down a rights-based approach goes in facilitating gratuitous relationships of friendship and intimacy is a greater question. In individualistic, western cultures, affirming rights can merely confirm the negative sense of freedom prevalent in the liberal anthropology: that the exercise of a person’s rights – attendance at the liturgy, reception of the Eucharist, modified catechesis, etc. – essentially finishes the church’s work. This functions fine for those with the capacities to succeed the dominant liberal forms of freedom. However, for those lacking robust forms of agency, integral development requires much more than a guarantee of the right to opportunity and participation.

Thus the “realistic optimism” cited in the Pastoral Statement might be somewhat premature. The USCCB’s inclusion still leaves those considered intellectually disabled as

41 USCCB, NCCB Resolution.
targets for the church’s hospitality ministry, subjects less for mutual relationships than special programs and technological aids. Employing the church’s social justice muscle to “work powerfully on their behalf” (35) should be commended. Yet without a greater willingness to commit to relationships of friendship rather than liberal forms of “equality,” persons considered intellectually disabled risk being mere attendants of local parishes. Acknowledging the gifts that persons with cognitive impairments bring to the church goes some way towards perceiving them as benefiting rather than only augmenting the body. However, without an emphasis on mutually transformative relationships rather than contractual ones, non-disabled persons too easily perceive the “special” character of those gifts as mere visual aids of an angelic nature. In the inclusion framework advocated by the bishops, persons considered intellectually disabled may be “integrated,” but still far from the communion which truly understands them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Going Further: Towards an Ecclesiology beyond Inclusion**

As a first step, the dominant model of social inclusion effectively provides immediate access for marginalized persons to political and economic participation. Yet while an anthropology based upon contractual relations of autonomous subjects fits within liberal forms of inclusion, the relationality within the church as a koinonia requires a different quality of relationship. As the Archdiocese of Brisbane puts it, the orientation for the church in regards to persons considered disabled leans towards communion rather than citizenship. As a community with a vision of the human person in communion with God and others, the church “is challenged to point the way beyond mere inclusion and equity.”42 Through their incorporation into Christ, persons within the Body understand themselves as perichoretically a part of one another. In this way, communion demands as much a conversion of heart than a mere invitation to the marginalized. “From the perspective of communion we are not talking about inclusion of people with disability but a transformation of the awareness of the community, a Eucharistic moment when we can see our communities in a new way.”43 Placing the focus of “inclusion” not on

---

42 Archdiocese of Brisbane, *Sign of the Kingdom: A Statement of the Archdiocese of Brisbane on Disability and Inclusion* (Brisbane: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2009), 7.

43 Ibid., 13.
persons with impairments but the local church moves the dilemma away from the individual and onto a parish that cannot welcome. “We are unconsciously assuming that we have to do the including, as if people with disability did not always belong in the Body of Christ.” A community striving for communion goes beyond the “intermediate step” of merely including persons within a church building.

When the church begins to desire communion beyond inclusion it makes a space for what theologian Thomas Reynolds calls “deep access,” the hospitality that moves beyond the “shallow access” often taken for social inclusion. According to Reynolds, fundamental to this kind of access is the mutual sharing of gifts through the recognition of vulnerability as a “lively space of creative energy, a place of Spirit.” By letting vulnerability rest at the center an ecclesiology, Reynolds steers away from a “hero Christology” which demands efficient and “successful” Christians who share gifts from a place of strength and autonomy. In contrast, Christians relate to one another as friends who mutually care for and support one another through a “being with” rather than “doing for” the other. A practice Reynolds suggests for ecclesial communities seeking to move beyond inclusion is a “spirituality of attentiveness” that learns how to listen and be present to those considered disabled. This kind of attentiveness creates space for difference to dwell, honours stories of those often devalued by the dominant culture, and opens itself to the gift of potential disruption and conversion. Reynolds sees the church as requiring a different set of criteria than often put forth by thin forms of social inclusion.

There is need for communities cultivated by more than generous attitudes and right beliefs. People of faith need apprenticeship into habits of care formed by a transformative spirituality of attentiveness with people with disabilities, habits that cultivate mutual partnerships of vulnerability open to the transformative power of God’s grace. And such grace often surprises and disrupts on the way toward transformation, coming in ways that are unexpected and uncomfortable, dislodging the sway of normalcy.

---

44 Ibid., 16.
45 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 213.
48 Ibid., 221.
Attentiveness risks exposure to something that calls us into question, undoing what has been taken for granted about us, opening up something more than we were before.\(^{49}\) A church practicing this kind of attentiveness opens itself to perceive the “gift of being” as a vocation given even to persons labelled as profoundly intellectually disabled. These persons help Christians understand how all life resides within God’s economy of grace, and “does not distinguish between human lives that do and human lives that don’t measure up against a prevailing notion of ‘quality.’”\(^{50}\)

When the community of faith not only invites persons labelled as intellectually disabled to attend its worship but also opens itself up in mutual care to receive the other’s giftedness, the church begins a process of transformation into God’s communion people. John Swinton names this the movement from inclusion to belonging. When persons belong to a community, they are recognized as irreplaceable gifts whose absence is palpably and grievously felt. As Swinton puts it, “To belong you need to be missed. People need to be concerned when you are not there; your communities need to feel empty when you are not there.”\(^{51}\) The power of belonging over inclusion concerns not only those considered disabled, but all of God’s people. Every Christian needs to realize that they belong to Jesus, and that any talk of autonomy, freedom and self-representation comes through that belonging.\(^{52}\) A crucial place for that belonging happens within the body of Christ, the community that notices and longs for you merely as yourself. “To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed.”\(^{53}\)

**Conclusion**

The plethora of statements released by the churches attests to their desire to respond to the challenge of disability, and the marginalization so many impaired persons face in late modern

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 222.
\(^{50}\) Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network, *The Gift of Being: Called to be a Church of All and for All* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016), accessed August 17, 2017, http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2016/the-gift-of-being, 20. This EDAN document seeks to intentionally go beyond inclusion language by grounding its theological position on the language of creation. This shift in emphasis is a significant and welcome change, and one that certainly moves away from the assumptions of an “anthropology of liberal citizenship” which appear in *A Church of All and for All.*
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 184.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
societies. The work and witness of Nancy Eiesland opened the way for Christian theology to incorporate and build on sociological understandings of disability and the disability rights movement. Churches have taken the subsequent call to make their communities more accessible and as models of inclusion. As faith communities attempting to embody the inaugurated reign of God, churches desire to make their buildings, worship services, educational programs, and relational life a place where “every disabled person has the opportunity to find peace with God.”\(^5\) This includes those considered intellectually disabled, persons particularly devalued in western cultures.

Yet a look at Eiesland’s theology, as well as the ecclesial statements of EDAN and the USCCB, has revealed the church requires a different orientation in regards to persons with impairments. The central question for this chapter revolved around whether a peace ecclesiology that recognizes the presence of persons labelled as intellectually disabled in the church can use the philosophy of “social inclusion” as its foundation. Social inclusion can be employed by the church, but only in a very limited sense for those with cognitive impairments. The heavy reliance of Eiesland’s, EDAN’s and the USCCB’s work on the pillars of the liberal paradigm of inclusion – participation, equal opportunity, self-realization etc. – provides a way in for many persons with physical and sensory impairments, yet potentially throws a lengthy shadow on those lacking the ability for robust forms of subjectivity. Emphasizing accommodated worship and new theological paradigms is an important work of the church and should be encouraged. Yet these tasks do not necessarily touch the social poverty of many persons thought intellectually disabled, for whom relationship and presence may facilitate more well-being than modified programs and technological aids. A community which stops at the guarantee of Christians’ rights to worship and the exercise of their abilities assumes the liberal belief that once “equality” has been established, each individual has been freed to pursue their own goal of self-realization. For those persons lacking the capacities of rationality and agency which can animate their own conception of the good, the dominant liberal mode of inclusion risks leaving them as mere attendants in a church of individual, acting subjects. As a first step, inclusion in this mode potentially prepares the church to welcome persons marginalized by society due to their unconventional bodies. The church certainly needs to make buildings and attitudes more hospitable as to have persons with impairments present within congregations. However, as a

\(^5\) EDAN, A Church of All and for All, par. 8.
final goal inclusion as a guiding paradigm cannot move the church toward being a koinonia of mutuality and transformation. The end of communion rests on different assumptions than that of “equality of participation” and citizenship. A church of communion understands the inherent giftedness of all lives regardless of condition or function, and understands its political mission to extend far beyond policy change and the gaining of individual rights. While social inclusion can pave the way for legislation that provides a certain kind of access, it can never legislate friendship and the mutual sharing of vulnerability in a community of belonging.

Seeing and receiving the gifts of persons considered intellectually disabled requires a community which can move beyond mere contractual understandings of being an ekklesia, towards the church becoming a Body of communion. The mutuality inherent in the relationships means that persons grow in Christ through encountering other persons in a spirit of friendship and attentiveness. This community witnesses to liberation less through theological interpretations and modified architecture – as important as these tasks may be – than by being a Body being transformed through quotidian relationships between very different persons. In accord with the thought of theologian Stanley Hauerwas, this church does not have a social ethic but is a social ethic.55 The church’s commitment to peace and liberation must be seen to be believed, a lived embodiment less of a theory than a story.

One federation of communities which presents such a witness is L’Arche, communities where persons with and without intellectual disabilities share life and faith together. L’Arche offers the church a potential site of liberation that goes beyond the liberal model of inclusion for those considered disabled, and toward a Body of communion and witness of peace. The following chapter will begin by looking at L’Arche’s story, and seeing in it the work of God to not only offer a shelter to those excluded because of their cognitive impairment but to reveal to everyone the true path to peace and liberation.

---

Chapter 2 – The Story of L’Arche: Becoming Witnesses to God’s Peace

The founding of L’Arche in 1964 was part of [a] journey: its mission is to give a home to the homeless and respect to those who have been rejected. I wanted to share my life with those who were weak, and with them to create communities of peace.¹

The Holy Spirit created L’Arche…to reveal to an age obsessed with achievement that the essential value of each person lies, not in intelligence, but in the heart. God has chosen to manifest himself in a particular way in people with disabilities, through their fragility and the simplicity of their hearts.²

L’Arche is not a solution to a social problem. L’Arche is a sign that love is possible, and that we are not condemned to live in a state of war and conflict where the strong crush the weak.³

While some churches have been busy discussing and attempting to implement the special ministries needed to include people labelled intellectually disabled in congregations, another group of faith communities has arguably been going beyond this vision for over fifty years. In 1964, the former naval officer and Aristotle scholar Jean Vanier also recognized the injustice perpetrated against those considered disabled and had a keen desire to “do something.” His seemingly small response of buying a house and inviting men from a local institution to live with him would subsequently act as a seed of transformation stretching beyond anything he could imagine. In the pilgrimage of faith which followed, Vanier and others in L’Arche would discern a vision of a shalom community often articulated but rarely lived out: the weakest and most rejected persons of society as the core of a Christian koinonia commissioned to be and bring God’s peace to the world.

After outlining several methodological considerations, this chapter will explore the five decades old narrative of L’Arche. My question here concerns itself with asking what a theologically-informed interpretation of L’Arche’s history might reveal about the movement’s

³ Ibid., 10–11.
mission and identity. Four phases of the movement will be discerned, with themes emphasized at each stage being either integrated or transformed at later times. L’Arche’s growth from its birth as a sanctuary for people called intellectually disabled trapped in dismal institutions to counter-cultural witnesses for Christ’s peace shows a dynamic movement in pilgrimage. Vanier’s insistence on L’Arche’s dual commitments to an embodied solidarity with people with cognitive impairments, as well as a radical dependence on the providence of God, meant that the movement would remain counter-cultural enough to faithfully witness the Gospel to the world. Central to this “something” would be people called intellectually disabled, whose wisdom and gift for relationship brought down the dividing walls which separated and classified persons in society’s worthiness systems. The adventure of community engendered tensions all along the way, reconciled only through a commitment to the primacy of the Holy Spirit as the movement’s animator and source. Becoming wisdom communities with God as their source enabled communities in their calling to approximate Paul’s ecclesial vision, and act as a model for how the church might be a sign of God’s peace in the world.

**Methodological Considerations**

*Beginning with Experience rather than Ideas*

In contrast to movements born from the triumph of grand ideas and a wealth of power, L’Arche’s existence came by way of an encounter with pain and a trust in God’s providence. The undiluted truth of human experience rather than intellectually reasoned thought brought forth L’Arche into motion. Thus any attempt to interpret and account for the dynamic narrative of the movement must pay heed to the inherently experiential nature in which Jean Vanier began and communities continually carry on the “something” that is L’Arche. In Vanier’s terms, L’Arche was not an “accident” but rather providential. Although he did not fully know the way forward, his trust in God’s providence and guidance meant that he merely needed to open himself to where the Gospel might lead and then respond adequately. Abstract reason played a subordinate role in L’Arche’s beginnings. Instead, both human intuition and human pain acted as the catalysts for Vanier’s attempt to follow Jesus and live the Gospel.
Acknowledging the primacy of experience in L’Arche, both at its founding as well as continuing in the daily life of the years to follow, is the reason why this dissertation’s exploration of Vanier’s and L’Arche’s contributions to the church’s peace ecclesiology begins with narrative rather than a blueprint of core principles. Vanier’s vision of Gospel peace comes not primarily from studying books but rather from communities’ attempts to embody the Gospel in everyday life. Thus the experience of daily life as lived out for five decades in L’Arche throughout the world acts as the foundation for Vanier’s explorations on what ultimately makes for peace. Vanier’s formation in Roman Catholic spirituality as well as Aristotelian ethics shaped him in an openness to encounter reality as a place of Spirit-filled revelation. L’Arche’s eventual need for more formal structures, compounded by a closer approximation of service bureaucracies’ institutionalized rationalities, acted as tests and counter-weights to the improvised orientation of the early years. A continual telling and re-telling of the founding narrative assisted the movement in remembering God’s presence at L’Arche’s founding, as well as confirming her continual activity of a Federation on a journey. Beginning this study in the mode of story therefore attempts to remain close to the method and understanding employed by Vanier and others living in L’Arche.

Vanier as Authoritative Voice and Interpreter

As will become clear in this chapter’s interpretation of L’Arche, the voice of Jean Vanier has a particularly central place in the telling of the movement’s fifty year history. In this way, L’Arche’s history still remains deeply united with the life of its founder. At the same time, Vanier would be the first to acknowledge that L’Arche is far more than his presence or his interpretation of the movement’s history. Thousands of people have labored at the “front lines” and behind the scenes in L’Arche’s extraordinary dailiness, and have participated in forming L’Arche into what it has become. Vanier could always express his admiration for the people in the community living out what he was preaching to others, noting how much he learned from both people with intellectual disabilities and nondisabled assistants. Yet more importantly, Vanier never attempts to give the definitive history of L’Arche. Vanier has always acted more as

---

L’Arche’s prime interpreter rather than its historian, and it is in this capacity that the Federation still considers him as an authoritative voice for the movement.

Yet the lack of other narratives and interpretations from different perspectives should be acknowledged, and represents a potential limitation in the interpretation of L’Arche’s history which follows. Other first person accounts of life in L’Arche other than Vanier’s exist, and I will draw upon these narratives particularly as reported through articles in the International Federation’s journal, *The Letters of L’Arche*. At the same time, few of these descriptions attempt to document or interpret the full scope of L’Arche’s history. As of the present, none of these works carry the weight and authority which Vanier’s writings and thought continue to have in the L’Arche as spread out across the world. With time other perspectives will emerge, telling a different story with different emphases.

A Western-Centered History

The close connection of the telling of L’Arche’s history with that of Jean Vanier also means that its perspective remains a western-centered one. For all of Vanier’s travels outside of Trosly-Breuil opening him to new cultures and social imaginaries, he still remains a French-Canadian rooted in the culture of his times. While Vanier cannot be faulted for his context, the lack of perspectives from other cultures, particularly those in the majority world, represents another limitation of this chapter’s interpretation. Certainly, Vanier and others never attempted to found communities in non-western countries in an “imperialistic” fashion, and always sought to institute new communities as much as possible within their own cultural contexts. Yet these

---


new foundations were often started by young, idealistic westerners, whose attempts at orienting communities in a “liberationist” paradigm did not always sit as well with their local colleagues. The radical openness to different ways of being that persons have shown throughout L’Arche’s history towards non-western contexts does not erase the fact that they were mostly centered in the cultures of Europe and North America. Voices from L’Arche communities in the majority world are being heard and sought out in the Federation, revealing much wisdom and insight. Yet one can argue that the “power center” of L’Arche remains in minority world countries, and that the dominant interpretation of the movement’s history comes from there.

This same limitation applies for the author’s own experience. Between 1999 and 2010 I lived in two L’Arche communities in central and eastern Canada. The preoccupation with coming to terms with encroaching social service bureaucracies Vanier articulates during this period was also felt within the L’Arche contexts I participated in. Yet how this might be relevant for the countries in Honduras or Uganda, for example, is less than clear. The same applies to telling the founding story of L’Arche and of individual communities in the majority world. Western economic and cultural domination also means that it dominates methods of the communication of ideas. Thus often the only way the stories of communities and persons in the majority world are told is through Western interlockers, whether it be Vanier or others in L’Arche with the privileges and security to travel to poorer L’Arche communities. The narratives Vanier and others tell need not be immediately discounted, yet one can only hope in the future for more voices from the majority world interpreting L’Arche’s story.

(Story)Telling L’Arche’s History: Historiography in a Theological Key

This chapter will offer a portrait of L’Arche’s history from its founding up until the present. Yet instead of focusing on dates and details, the following will place the history of L’Arche in the context of a theologically inspired story. As a movement with a history, certain events occurred in particular places and times which made a distinct impression on people and led to the founding of communities. Yet those events do not remain mere archival, “dead” facts but are continually interpreted as signs of God’s providence. Akin to the early church’s theological interpretation of events in the life of Jesus through the writing of the four Gospels, the discussion of L’Arche’s history given here reports historical events but not in the modern
In this mode of historical writing, the past exists not as something to merely recount. Instead history is imbued with meaning that must be *told* to fully communicate the truth of the events.\(^7\)

By relying upon narrative historiography, one must inevitably admit to a certain selectivity in the use of events and moments that represent turning points in the story.\(^8\) The history presented here does not pretend to be exhaustive but more to point out the theological dimensions alive in the movement throughout time. Vanier continually reiterates his belief in God’s centrality to L’Arche not merely as an idea but as the source and animator of the movement. In his words, L’Arche was “founded on weakness, [it] will continue to grow in [its] mission in and through [its] fragility, and God will continue to be present. God works through our communities, and I am happy to see it.”\(^9\) As a theological community, the historiographical method employed here admits to the presented of L’Arche history as an act and result of *interpretation*, with the assumptions and limitations that interpretation entails. L’Arche’s repeated re-telling of its story is continually filtered through Vanier’s convictions and the new insights he has gleaned from throwing in his lot with people labelled as intellectual disabled. This paper will follow his lead in not needing all the factual gaps to be filled in, as well as assuming God’s presence and calling to persons and communities to radically embody the Gospel in their ordinary lives.

This orientation toward understanding L’Arche’s story as theological story is the one Vanier and others in L’Arche consistently use to speak about L’Arche as a movement, one both founded in and growing towards a fuller embodiment of the Christian narrative. Particular attention will be paid to how persons understood the mission and identity of L’Arche as it progressed. These two factors continually engaged one another, and stood for the movement as

---


\(^9\) Vanier, *Our Life Together*, 553.
counterpoints with which to both keep L’Arche faithful to its core as well as maintain the flexibility needed to be usable in the missio Dei.

**Founding: Building an Ark for the Oppressed**

The founding of L’Arche occupies a particularly important place in L’Arche’s storytelling. Time and again Vanier and other members of L’Arche point to the beginnings of the movement in Trosly-Breuil as fundamental for discerning not only the history of L’Arche but also its core mission and identity. Encapsulated within the founding narrative are the themes of providence, encounter, friendship, and community which would ground L’Arche on its subsequent journey. L’Arche’s early years reveal the movement as called to be a “rescue project” for persons devalued and disrespected, with intense life sharing as the milieu in which persons labelled as intellectually disabled might find dignity and a place of belonging, growth and love.

*Encounter: Inspired by Mystery and Suffering*

In the fall of 1963, Jean Vanier was on pilgrimage, searching for his path in life. He chose to end a potentially successful career in the navy when he found himself praying the monastic office on his night duty. Vanier then successfully embarked on an academic career, producing his doctoral dissertation on the ethics of happiness in Aristotle and subsequently teaching Aristotellean ethics at St. Michael’s College in Toronto. Yet he felt his path lay not in the ivory tower or the teaching profession. All of these experiences had formed Vanier deeply but none of them represented the place he felt called to commit his energies as a follower of Jesus. In his words, “Without having any big vision (that’s not my way) it seemed quite clear that Jesus wanted me to do something. I was – and am still – quite naïve. I didn’t ask too many questions. I was open and available; I wanted to follow Jesus and live the way of the gospel.”

Then Vanier received some advice from his spiritual director, Père Thomas Philippe. Phillippe lived in the small village of Trosly-Breuil and acted as chaplain at the Val Fleuri, an institution for men considered intellectually disabled. Philippe recommended that Vanier come

---

10 Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 16.
to the Val Fleuri and experience for himself the life and people there. Perhaps a visit would help confirm for Vanier the “something” that Jesus was calling him to do. Vanier decided to take Philippe up on his suggestion. This event would radically change Vanier’s life.

The cries of anguish and pain he encountered at the Val Fleuri horrified and fascinated Vanier. An atmosphere of sadness pervaded the institution, giving it an aura of rejection and despair. “It was a dismal place. The people who lived there had no work, and the place was filled with cries of violence and anguish.”11 Yet Vanier looked deeper, and got a glimpse of Philippe’s intuition: that behind the anguish were people searching for relationship and an affirmation of their being. In this first encounter, Vanier discerned the men asking penetrating questions: Do you love me? Will you be my friend? Will you come back tomorrow? These questions struck Vanier to the heart, and left an indelible imprint on him. His subsequent visits to other institutions only confirmed these intuitions further, and compelled him to discern a response. The conditions of these asylums, which left the men labelled disabled degraded and dehumanized, filled Vanier with an immediate sense of injustice. Yet not only was the Val and other asylums places of horror and injustice, but also contained a mysterious presence of God calling Vanier to an experience of encounter. “There was something terrifying about it but at the same time something difficult to touch, something profoundly of God….In places of horror there is a kind of presence of God. Peace and chaos – one is frightened yet captivated.”12

This linking together of mystery and suffering would prove foundational for Vanier and for the subsequent development of the movement. Many people could see the primal anguish of these people called disabled, but the usual response to this pain entailed either institutional segregation or a rejection of the men’s fundamental humanity. On the contrary, Vanier discerned in the pain a cry for communion and love that only friendship could provide. “Accidents or sickness had caused them pain and suffering, but they had been wounded even more deeply by the contempt and rejection they had known. My visit moved me very much. Each of the men I met seemed starved of friendship and affection.”13 This orientation to not run away from suffering or eliminate the sufferer but accompany him or her in love would stand as the foundation for other ensuing attempts to “do something” for people with cognitive impairments.

12 Quoted in Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, 57.
Call: Sharing Life Together Guided by the Holy Spirit

The way for Vanier now became clear: God was calling him to discipleship by sharing his life with people labelled intellectually disabled. Vanier chose to embody his sense of vocation by buying a small house in Trosly-Breuil, France and welcomed three men from the Val Fleuri, Raphaël Simi, Philippe Seux, and another man named Dany to live with him. On August 5, 1964, L’Arche officially began, with Vanier hosting a small celebratory dinner with local dignitaries and supporters of Vanier’s endeavour. After the dishes were done and the guests had departed, Vanier and the three men with disabilities remained. In Vanier’s words, on that first night “I was completely lost.”

The house possessed no bathroom, so everyone got ready for bed with water heated up on the stove. Dany proceeded to wake up every hour screaming, at one point running out of the house. Vanier could not even find a flashlight in order to search for him. Eventually they found Dany, but decided the next day that he should return to the institution. Vanier’s call to life sharing had a very inauspicious beginning.

Yet rather than be deterred by this apparent failure, Vanier continued because of his strong sense of the rightness of his “something.” Vanier’s consistent mode of operation at the beginning reveals an orientation not to the rational, boardroom planner, but rather to someone guided by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Contrary to some who might have approached this “marginalized population” in a spirit of expertise, trust in God characterized the first steps in community life with people with intellectual disabilities. The starkness of the need rather than the prospect of “success” compelled Vanier on, leading him to claim that he actually had no “reason” for beginning L’Arche.

When I welcomed Raphaël and Philippe there wasn’t a specific or rational reason – it just seemed obvious. They were crying out for relationship, and I could provide it. Practically everything I did with L’Arche was intuitive, based on the sense that this is what should be done. There was a beauty in these disabled men that was being crushed at the large, dismal, violent institution in which they had been put. These men were persons and precious to God, and so it seemed right, even evident, for me to do something about

\[^{14}\text{Quoted in Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, 61.}\]
their unjust situation….People often ask me the reasons for starting L’Arche, but I haven’t any reasons, I just trusted and loved.\textsuperscript{15}

Vanier learned from Aristotle an appreciation of reality in all its fullness, and thus helped him recognize truth even in the messiness of the world. Human experience rather than abstract principles guided Vanier as he learned how to live and form community with these men.

L’Arche could withstand the risk of living this way because of Vanier’s belief that this “something” could only exist due to the providence of God. Phillippe had given Vanier a strong formation in a mystical spirituality that had inspired Christians throughout the centuries to trust in God and serve humanity. By remembering and fostering this communion, L’Arche would have the confidence to proceed without having an ironclad blueprint for success. Vanier writes of the early years, when “a sign or a gift led us to another sign, another gift. It was as if we were walking on a road without knowing quite where it was leading. We were sure that it was leading somewhere and that it was all in God’s plan of love for the poor and the weak. I have truly experienced that if we put everything into God’s hands and try to follow the signs, things will evolve peacefully.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Friendship: Creating a New Family with the Devalued}

Vanier’s giving inspiration priority over rational planning did not mean that he had no basic foundations in regard to his moral decision-making. Fundamental to Vanier’s thinking was the basic belief in the prime value of every human person. All people, no matter their ability, religious tradition, or any other human category possessed an inalienable worth which demanded respect. For Vanier, this respect for every human person rested at the heart of the Gospel, and thus pervaded all his moral thinking. It was the extreme violation of this Gospel value which shook Vanier to the core when he visited the institutions and asylums, and which spurred him to begin his new “something.” Vanier wanted to discover a way of life which could discover the worth of the person with a cognitive impairment, thereby “restoring the humanity which had been taken away from them.”\textsuperscript{17} Jesus’s welcoming of every person as invaluable and

\textsuperscript{15} Vanier, \textit{Our Life Together}, 5–6.
\textsuperscript{16} Vanier, \textit{An Ark for the Poor}, 53.
\textsuperscript{17} Vanier, \textit{Our Journey Home}, xiii.
irreplaceable gift, particularly the weakest and poorest, acted as the antidote to modernity’s
devaluing of those deemed “unproductive” and “inefficient.” For Vanier, a commitment to the
Gospel demanded nothing less, and the need to activate this fundamental value through
embodied Christian communities appeared self-evident.18

Recognizing the need to recover and accentuate the worth of Raphaël and Philippe,
Vanier saw in L’Arche the goal of providing them with a new family, something denied to them
as well as to so many people with intellectual disabilities confined in institutions. As a place of
recognition and love, a family acted as the first community which valued each person as a gift
and provided the soil for growth in becoming human. The people Vanier visited in asylums
appeared to have anything but a home. “We want to create a family rather than a school or a
workshop where there are educators and those to be educated, those who are superior and those
who are inferior. We want to create a family where there is peace, love and friendship.”19
Vanier saw relationships of mutuality as essential in assisting persons with intellectual
disabilities in reclaiming their humanity. The intimate and organic friendships contained in a
familial environment could show Raphaël and Philippe a love deeper than anything a
“professional” could offer. L’Arche would not necessarily act as a replacement for blood
families but represented a new form of family, one oriented towards the poor and which strived
to live together a life of unity and friendship which would assist disrespected persons in learning
their blessedness and inherent worth.20

Offering and becoming this new family demanded living from a different logic from the
one dominant in many institutions and asylums. A control and containment of dissonant
behavior pervaded the asylums, making them institutions shielding the disturbing presence of
persons like Raphaël and Philippe from “normal” society. Vanier’s trust in the fundamental

---

18 One can discern here Vanier’s likely debt to early and mid-20th century French Roman Catholic personalism. The
personalist emphases on seeing the person as central in moral philosophy, acknowledging the corrosive influence of
liberal individualism on the modern self, and discerning the need for a new (Christian) civilization to witness to truth
in the moral ruin of Western Europe all find references in Vanier’s work. Vanier would have known of the
philosophy of Jacques Maritain through his living at Eau Vive. For Maritain’s personalism, see in particular
thought of personalist Emmanuel Mounier may also have exercised an influence on Vanier. See Mounier’s A
Personalist Manifesto (London; New York: Longmans, Green, 1938), and Personalism, trans. Philip Mairet
19 Vanier, Our Life Together, 22.
20 Ibid., 11; An Ark for the Poor, 18; Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989),
97-8.
goodness of these men meant living out of a patience which bears with the other in love rather than force them into a conformity to dominant norms. Thus one early observer of L’Arche notes how she was intrigued and “astonished to find a place where violence was present side by side with a peace which flowed from the violence.” Creating a new family and becoming friends with persons previously devalued and disrespected included a trust in and nonviolence with the other usually not present in institutional life. Time, presence, and gentleness represented the primary modes through which these new relational bonds could flourish, and recover the sense of dignity stolen from Raphaël and Philippe.

Expansion: Growing into God’s Horizons

Vanier’s improvised orientation based on trust in God’s providence would make him particularly open for the expanding development of L’Arche, both externally in the number of communities and members, as well as internally in the deepening of the movement’s vocation. While originally preferring to keep L’Arche small and within the walls of the house in Trosly, Vanier had enough confidence in his vision to be ready to expand his and the community’s horizons. A commitment to remain rooted in an inspired pragmatism meant that communities relied not on blueprints for development but instead let communities grow in the local places in which they were planted. This trust in providence brought persons and communities to their limits, highlighting L’Arche as an “impossible” reality dependent on God’s grace.

External Expansion: Opening up to the World

Physical growth commenced remarkably quickly. Confirmed by the joy he was experiencing with Raphaël and Philippe, in addition to the support he was receiving from French governmental departments in creating residential environments for persons called intellectually disabled, Vanier accepted the leadership of the Val Fleuri when its director unexpectedly stepped down. Vanier was again in the position of being “lost,” but received support from professionals at the institution to attempt to integrate what he was learning in L’Arche with the men at the

---

Running on his own enthusiasm along with what he understood as the gift of the Holy Spirit, Vanier would buy a house in Trosly-Breuil for sale and fill it with people. This strategy drew the ire and protest of many in the village, seeing in Vanier someone who wanted to turn their quiet town into a dispersed institution/commune. Vanier saw in this response his own lack of engagement with local people, understanding the anger as an opportunity for dialogue and practical wisdom. In this way, Vanier tried to bring the same lessons he was learning in encountering (rather than controlling) violence towards those villagers inimical to the growing project.

While the people with cognitive impairments came from the Val or other institutions, the nondisabled “assistants” (as they would later be called) came from the growing network of friends accompanying and supporting this new “something.” The impact of Vanier’s brief teaching assignments and retreat giving brought the young and old to Trosly. These persons came to see L’Arche for themselves and participant in the growing project, representing a new impulse for societal change and a Christian service to the poor. All of this without a master plan. “My role was to events as they came and let them guide me. Later I discovered that my ignorance and poverty at the beginning of L’Arche helped me be more attentive to God, and let him guide me from day to day. Had I had a clear plan, I might have been less ready to welcome God’s plan.”

Soon the growth could not be confined just to Trosly but began expanding internationally. An Anglican couple from Canada began a community north of Toronto, where the religious milieu was far more ecumenical than rural France. A Christian assistant from India

---

22 Early core member Jean-Pierre Crepieux writes about a conversation between Vanier and Philippe after Vanier was asked to take over the Val Fleuri. “Jean Vanier went to see Father Thomas to ask him if he thought that he could be in charge of a big house like that. He said ‘I’ll never manage’. Father Thomas said ‘yes you will Jean’ and all that. And I thought, he’s not that stupid, he’ll manage. And he did manage, thanks to us, because a director only manages if he’s helped.” “Portrait – A Peaceful Look Back,” Letters of L’Arche, no. 119 (Sept 2006): 13. Crepieux gives 1966 as the date when Vanier took over the Val Fleuri, but other sources usually mention March 1965. See Our Life Together, 19; Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, 70-1.
23 Vanier mentions frequently in the late 60s and early 70s a humanist optimism in the West that sought experiments in progressive and transformational living. Thus he can write the following after leading a youth retreat in Canada in March of 1967: “Many people are becoming more conscious of the problems and the challenges men and women face who are neither efficient nor productive in a world that puts such emphasis on efficiency. It is encouraging to see this new wave of humanism, people trying to discover the more profound, personal value of those who are called handicapped.” Vanier, Our Life Together, 33. For other examples, see also ibid, 108, 280, Community and Growth, 63
24 Vanier, The Heart of L'Arche, 68.
expressed interest at bringing the vision of L’Arche to her home country, yet knew that the need encompassed far more than the Christian population. Thus how could L’Arche in India be a merely “Christian” reality? For a movement so deeply grounded in French Catholicism, these situations posed great challenges and ones that brought Vanier into conflict with his Dominican spiritual father. Philippe wanted L’Arche to maintain a firm Roman Catholic identity, while always being open the welcoming others. Vanier’s practical Aristotelianism saw it differently. While Vanier recognized in Philippe a radical openness to people, he also saw him as always desiring the conversion of the other to Roman Catholicism. On the contrary, L’Arche was called to a continual “renunciation of ideology and an embrace of practicality.”

The guiding orientation to L’Arche had to rest with the faith lives of the people considered intellectually disabled, and their particular growth in maturity through their own faith tradition. For Vanier, having no “prototype” for ecumenical and inter-faith communities only meant a greater trust in God in finding a way where none appeared evident.

In addition to the founding of further communities in France, Canada, and India, Vanier found himself being called to countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East for retreats and interest in founding L’Arche communities. These new foundations moved Vanier out of the confines of western “civilization” and into the lands and issues of the majority world. Vanier’s openness to experience and living pragmatically assisted him in being open to the new contexts L’Arche was entering. Encountering the suffering of the world meant that his “intelligence and understanding were gradually opened up over the years. I have lived an expanding consciousness.”

Part of this expansion came from seeing first-hand the massive gaps between the rich and poor so evident in many parts of the majority world. In his excursions abroad, Vanier discovered a world of injustice, poverty, and violence. This included the situation of people called intellectually disabled in many majority world countries. Vanier discovered that the devaluing of persons he saw in France reflected itself in every place he went. Whether the cause of injustice came from a belief that people labelled disabled were a punishment from God or were, instead, “defective” persons, Vanier began to see people with cognitive impairments as a universally oppressed group.

---

27 Ibid., 71.
particular injustice toward people with cognitive impairments. For Vanier, the encounter with the pain and anguish of people trapped in institutions in countries like Honduras and India related to the greater violence present in the often highly unjust nations he visited.

L’Arche’s attempt to respond to this injustice through a presence with the poor also linked the movement with streams of spirituality in these countries which strove for peace and justice. The way of L’Arche was not one of “political responsibility” or advocating structural reforms. Yet L’Arche found itself in good company with others seeking liberation for the oppressed and justice for the poor. Thus Vanier speaks with great “admiration for the Church of Latin America, which is beginning to flourish in its commitment to the poor and where there are so many men and women full of courage and truth, prepared to risk their lives.”

While L’Arche looked very “unpolitical,” its way of making particular friendships with the oppressed appeared to Vanier as complementary to more “activist” movements of peace and justice. As one Guatemalan Jesuit sent to Trosly remarked, “What you are doing here is so important. We struggle to change structures and bring about greater justice in our countries. But you remind us that beyond justice there is love.”

The developing presence of L’Arche in India also influenced Vanier, and brought him into closer contact with the spirituality of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi’s commitment to a spirituality and practice of non-violence found a particular place in Vanier’s heart, and he attempted to discern how this could be integrated in L’Arche. Violence was a part of everyday reality for L’Arche, simply because the persons it welcomed often acted out aggressively, particularly those previously confined in institutions. Vanier felt that Gandhi’s own experience in confronting the oppressive powers of his time could help not only national struggles for freedom, but also members of L’Arche who had to accompany the pain of profoundly rejected people. By fostering a spirit of non-violence in community relationships, L’Arche could become “oases of peace” in violent contexts and places of war.

---

30 Vanier, *Our Life Together*, 257. Vanier wrote this in March 1980, in reference to his giving a retreat in Choluteca, Honduras, five days after Oscar Romero was assassinated in El Salvador. Vanier’s being asked to give the homily for the official memorial Mass for Romero at the cathedral in Choluteca speaks to the renown and authority he was receiving in the church not just in Trosly but globally.


Thus the horizons of L’Arche had expanded far beyond the confines and world of Trosly-Breuil. Encounters with other denominations, religions, and cultures kept L’Arche on the move, continually grounded in its Christian commitment to the sacredness of each person but also open to experiencing reality in all truth. This outward expansion stretched persons and communities to the edge of their imaginations, to the point of recognizing what Sue Mosteller called the “impossibility” of L’Arche. The rapid growth of L’Arche helped Mosteller recognize the need to rely not on “reason” but on the prudence of the Holy Spirit, who has the “wisdom of audacity” that “seeks to cross frontiers in order to attain those who are suffering the world over.”


Internal Expansion: Opening up to Being

The rapidity of L’Arche’s early physical growth matched the enthusiasm of Vanier and the optimism of those in western society eager for change. The needs were great and getting people out of institutional environments into the home setting of L’Arche offered a ready motivation to continue the project. The relationships of friendship and meaningful work offered to formerly incarcerated individuals brought life to many and growing admiration for this inspired venture. People previously seen as “unproductive” and “sub-human” were contributing to society and making their own decisions. L’Arche as a refuge provided a healing environment for people previously seen as violent defectives to become citizens of social life.

Those welcomed in the first years possessed a certain degree of autonomy and agency. Many could participate in the community workshops and gardens, and some eventually moved into independent living arrangements. Yet as the group home model began to take hold in French social services, the situation of those considered profoundly intellectually disabled became more apparent and L’Arche wondered how it might respond. In the mode of Vanier’s original inspiration, L’Arche Trosly decided in 1978 to open La Forestière, a home specifically for those persons with severe cognitive impairments. As with other aspects of the vision with no master plan, the impacts of this decision would prove to be deeply surprising and formative.

The introduction of these persons in L’Arche brought a profound shift into the moral imagination of the community. The Canadian Jesuit Bill Clarke, an assistant in the early years of L’Arche in Trosly, claims that living with people called profoundly disabled was a turning point.
in how L’Arche understood its vocation and identity. While previously L’Arche could focus on liberating the abilities of people with intellectual disabilities in order for them to participate in society, the presence of people labelled as severely intellectually disabled like Edith forced L’Arche to go beyond agency to a more fundamental reality of being human. “People like Edith have been helping to highlight and to deepen what is the very essence of l’Arche. Since Edith could do so very little on her own, she revealed even more clearly the primacy of being over doing. She also invited those around her to a more contemplative presence, without which it would be impossible to hear her inner cry and to access her inner beauty and gifts.”\(^{34}\) People like Edith moved others into a whole new world and pace of life, where time meant something different than money and production. Remaining firm in their commitment to the sacredness and uniqueness of each person meant two things: one, that the human community was expanded to include people with profound cognitive impairments; and two, that the nondisabled shared a common humanity with someone like Edith, and thus could not classify them in a different category of humanity.

The welcoming of persons like Edith affected not only individual persons but communal structures as well. L’Arche workshops welcomed people considered profoundly disabled, and brought to the fore the tension between being and doing. As one work leader commented on the welcome of someone thought severely disabled, “We wish to prove that he can be trained to be productive. If we succeed, we will be able to take more boys like him.”\(^{35}\) In his reflections on living in L’Arche in the late 1960s, James Clarke recognizes the different logics at work in this regard, understanding the “drive to produce” as threatening to overshadow the philosophy Vanier sought to instill.\(^{36}\) One logic of inclusion sought to build up the “esteem” of persons and give them the value which comes from meeting a norm of productivity, while the other wished to welcome the other as a gift whose worth lay primarily in their embodied being. Hospitality towards those labelled profoundly disabled pulled communities towards a recognition of the latter as not only more fitting for persons like Edith but for all community members.

When assistants could slow down enough to enter the time of people with profound intellectual disabilities, they began to discover that these persons had profound gifts to offer the

\(^{34}\) Clarke, *Enough Room for Joy*, 14.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 130.
world. Vanier had glimpsed early on how people with cognitive impairments represented not merely objects of charity, but also had gifts like affection, spontaneity, friendship, and trust. Understanding this with persons like Edith only confirmed this insight, and made it clear that L’Arche was not merely an organization of charity but more a community of *caritas*, a fellowship of mutual love. The way of transformation in L’Arche became marked as a mutual reciprocity, with nondisabled assistants and persons with impairments giving and receiving from one another. While many could readily understand how assistants had a “vocation” in L’Arche, Vanier and others were adamant in noting how people called intellectually disabled had their own calling. As one of the founding assistants at La Forestière, Odile Ceyrac began to understand persons like Edith or Lucien not as “problems” but as “sources of life” who called forth mutuality. Each person at La Forestière needs assistants, “who allowing themselves to be touched by the beauty and the cry, grow in love and in the competence needed to respond to this cry. Yes, they evangelise and transform us if we accept the challenge to live with them, if we welcome their great trust in us. What a responsibility, but also what a grace! More and more, we feel the need to go further with each person.”37 This “going further” arose from the original commitment to foster relationships of mutual friendship rather than helper/helped, and paved the way to discern this mutuality. For persons in L’Arche, this was merely being consistent with the way of Jesus in befriending the poor and sharing life together.

Yet being the friend of deeply rejected and anguished people also brought transformations profound but not always easily welcomed. Vanier learned this when he chose to take his sabbatical at La Forestière in the fall of 1980. Living in La Forestière’s mode of time proved conducive to Vanier’s contemplative side and gave him much life interiorly. But his sabbatical at La Forestière also revealed a darker side in him, one that he previously was not aware of or tried to deny. Confronted by Lucien’s screams made Vanier aware of the deep anguish in himself, releasing a violence that could potentially hurt weaker people. “It was as if part of my being that I had learned to control was exploding. It was not only Lucien’s anguish that was difficult for me to accept but the revelation of what was inside my own heart, - my capacity to hurt others – I who had been called to share my life with the weak, had a power of hatred for a weaker person!”38 Encountering Lucien meant that violence was not something “out

---

there” in “bad” or “poor” people, but resided in his own heart. Vanier came to realize that he intimately shared in not only the giftedness of humanity but also in its woundedness. Humanity really was totally common after all. And being in community meant that Vanier and Lucien could bear the weight of this glory and pain together, being a source of life for one another as they both strove for human maturity.

Recognizing this darkness at the heart of being human made Vanier all the more certain that God had to be at the foundation of L’Arche. Good intentioned humanism could not handle the intensity of the human condition experienced at L’Arche. Only with a commitment to and development of a spirituality could L’Arche continue to be faithful to its God-given vocation. As L’Arche expanded, its biblical spirituality was grounded particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus as proclaimed in the Gospels. Jesus’s teaching on the Beatitudes expressed a solidarity and preferential option for the poor that recognized marginalized persons as sources of life, where the mode of encounter rests in “being with” rather than “doing for.” Drawing upon his friendship with the Little Sisters and Brothers of Jesus, Vanier saw in the life of Jesus before his public ministry an example for L’Arche in including the seemingly prosaic aspects of daily life into a formative aspect of discipleship. Understanding ordinary life as a spirituality also helped underscore the importance of the contemplative dimension of faith in L’Arche. Only by entering into a contemplative space and time could assistants discern the subtle but profound transformations the Trinity was inspiring in both people with cognitive impairments and nondisabled assistants. These activist and contemplative dimensions of L’Arche’s spirituality would be grounded in what Vanier called the “two pillars” of L’Arche: the poor, with whom assistants were called to share life; and God, the only one able to bring all the asymmetries together in unity and heal the woundedness of the human condition.39

So the always provisional, yet rooted “something” of sharing life with those in pain in God’s imagination kept moving. People with intellectual disabilities were still being welcomed, but now less as helpless innocents and more as people with a mission to give to the world. These persons were still central to L’Arche not as objects of care but as sources of life, gifts of God who had the ability to transform others through relationships of friendship. By this expansion of the vision, L’Arche’s identity became one of being a “Body,” a network of friends who together offered a space of encounter and conversion. The “impossibility” of L’Arche meant a life of

39 Vanier, An Ark for the Poor, 55, 104.
daring, risk, and revelation which brought persons and communities not always to a serene garden but to the tensions inherent in living at the furthest bounds of the possible. As Claire de Mirabel notes, “Life in community means that I am always pushed to my limits – the limits of my ability to welcome, the limits of my availability and the limits of my commitment and my love for those with whom I live.” Only an openness to the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit could keep the personal and communal tensions dynamic rather than divisive, and facilitate the friendships and communion across bold and seemingly “impossible” differences. The centrality of persons considered profoundly disabled helped create the kind of contemplative milieu which facilitated the *mutual* transformations of all of its members. No longer merely a refuge, L’Arche’s expanding horizons opened up to the world and the other in the bold vulnerability of Vanier’s original intuitive orientation.

**Deepening: Being and Becoming Countercultural Signs of Hope**

Although projects were still developing and new communities being founded, by the late 1980s the feverish growth of the early years transitioned to a more methodical discernment of L’Arche’s place in society. L’Arche found more and more acceptance – sometimes even admiration – for the “something” begun in Trosly. Many began to see L’Arche as a kind of model group home environment for people with cognitive impairments, coinciding with the governmental adoption of de-institutionalization. The greater acceptance of the social service bureaucracies stood as something of a success regarding L’Arche’s way of life, yet also threatened to bring it more and more within the domain of systems and institutional models of thought.

Yet at the same time as L’Arche was being increasingly recognized as “quality care,” it also found itself coming to the limits of its ability to sustain community life. As the heroism of the early years moved towards the quotidian rhythms of daily life, communities increasingly struggled to attract and maintain nondisabled assistants. The world of the 1960s had come and gone, yet without the eradication of all conflict and violence promised by utopian idealism. L’Arche experienced the same stubbornness of the human condition in its own communities, which called for a deepening of its vision and life. Vanier and others in L’Arche would respond

---

to this tension of bureaucratic attraction and societal rejection through a call to deepen in truth of being human and affirm itself as counter-cultural wisdom communities.

*Living a Fragile, Counter-Cultural Existence*

After thirty years of being places of mutual transformation L’Arche began to be recognized not only as spiritual communities but also as new and improved models of care for those called intellectually disabled. In many ways this recognition was a hard fought victory for L’Arche’s commitment to Gospel values, and the subsequent respect and access to resources communities would enjoy accomplished much for persons in L’Arche. Yet Vanier and other L’Arche members also discerned a shadow to this newfound acknowledgment. Getting close to government bureaucracies also meant an increasing temptation to be “integrated” within a more institutional logic. As L’Arche created more structures in response to its growing complexity along with the compliance requirements of bureaucracies, Claire de Mirabel noted in 1990 how L’Arche risked turning into an institution, the very thing it had always rebelled against. “There is a great risk today of replacing personal commitment with structures.”

L’Arche harbored few nostalgic notions of a past “golden age” radically living on the provisional without government funding. Yet the choice to sit at the table with the secular social services sector entailed its own risks, ones that affected much more than money or power but the movement’s core identity.

In response to this new tension one can discern Vanier during this period emphasizing more and more L’Arche’s counter-cultural dimension. While he had always been aware of how society’s values blunted the radicality of the Gospel, the apparent “success” of L’Arche did not stop him from emphasizing the movement as an alternative to the diseases of contemporary society. The late modern values of competition, individualism, success, and affluence struck Vanier as antithetical to the Gospel, and as damaging not only to persons with cognitive impairments but to everyone. People considered intellectually disabled could only lose under this social imaginary, and be easily regarded as defective humans. Vanier was aware of the profound paradox at the heart of liberal society: while more attention was being paid to rights and support for living people with intellectual disabilities, at the same time more effort was being

---

placed in preventing their births. The hard fought struggle for recognition and justice by the
disability rights movement had not eliminated the basic fear of those with intellectual disabilities
at the heart of many cultures. Thus Vanier could write concerning a retreat he gave for young
people:

I wonder if prenatal tests and the cultural and social attitudes towards people with
disabilities increase the fear in parents of having a child that is ‘different’ – and perhaps
this fear is transmitted to their other children. Many young people are frightened of
suffering, frightened of meeting and walking with people who have disabilities. It’s true
that there is something quite crazy in our vision: we affirm that befriending people who
are weak liberates us, helps us to become more human and helps us to become closer to
God! That can seem quite exaggerated, even impossible! It is countercultural and yet in
our world there is such a need for the face of tenderness and compassion. We live in a
world of competition, where importance is given to success, a good salary, efficiency,
distractions, stimulations. Young people are often so taken up with all that is exciting
that they have difficulty seeing how much our world needs to rediscover what is
essential: committed relationships, openness and the acceptance of weakness, a life of
friendship and solidarity in and through the little things we can do.

Yet it was not only the individualistic trappings of late modernity which represented a
potential seduction. Vanier’s recognized how submitting to the increasingly present social
service systems threatened to turn the movement into the “model” institution for people labelled
intellectually disabled. Standard residential settings for people with cognitive impairments had
their place, but Vanier was clear that L’Arche represented far more than “good care.” “L’Arche
is not just a nice group home; it’s much more than that; it’s a new way of living Christian
community with the poor at the heart and centre.” A growing distinctive in L’Arche was its
emphasis on people with intellectual disabilities being at the center of the community, not merely
as objects of care but as persons with gifts of bringing people together and holding communities

---

42 For more on this paradox, see Hans S. Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical
Analysis* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).
43 Vanier, *Our Life Together*, 469.
together in unity. This was revealed through Vanier’s placing life sharing as the prime orientation for normative relationships in communities. Only through this lens could one discern the gifts of people rejected by society and facilitate the mutual transformations happening in daily life. L’Arche’s commitment to “live with” rather than “do for” meant friendship rather than “worker/client” was the goal of communal life. The slide towards the latter stood as a potential sign of the loss of fidelity to L’Arche’s charism. “The day we become no more than professional workers and educational therapists is the day we stop being l’Arche.” The “going further” in friendship with people like Edith and Lucien rather than merely housing and caring for them also applies to how the movement would subsequently grow. Vanier declined the opportunity from state bureaucracies to “franchise” L’Arche as a “model,” insisting that communities grow in their own time and space. A commitment to L’Arche as an experience rather than mere housing means that expansion must happen slowly and organically.

This emphasis on solidarity and friendship contrasted (sometimes sharply) with the language of individualistic care and “worker/client” distinctions operating within the mainstream social service sector. At the same time, Vanier’s bold recognition of people’s vulnerability and fragility went against the grain of some in the disability rights community firmly committed to stressing personal agency over physical or cognitive limitations. Yet both these perspectives often unquestioningly assumed the values of a culture obsessed with autonomy and deeply afraid of weakness. “Our communities are counter-cultural. In many countries today, excellent things are being done for people with handicaps. However, to live with people who are powerless, to become their friends, is still considered by most people, even many people in the churches, as something crazy. The gospel is truly ‘good news’ for the poor, but it appears to be ‘bad news’ for those who are rich in culture, aptitudes and possible life choices.”

---

45 This has led L’Arche in North America to usually identify the people with disabilities in their communities as “core members.” This is in deliberate opposition to the pervasive social service classification of people with cognitive impairments as “clients,” “consumers,” or “residents.”
46 Vanier, Community and Growth, 150.
48 One of the few times Vanier qualifies his language is in regard to speaking of people with intellectual disabilities as “poor” or “weak.” Here Vanier intentionally uses this language in contrast to cultural norms which normalize strength and perceive weakness only as defect. See Vanier, The Heart of L’Arche, 14–15, and An Ark for the Poor, 14.
49 Vanier, An Ark for the Poor, 99.
At the same time as L’Arche tried to maintain its distinctive identity from the institutional logic of much “service provision,” persons in L’Arche also saw in society a loss of faith in many of the radical ideals from the 1960s. This disillusionment resulted in a growing hesitancy to commit to radical projects for the poor, and instead compel persons towards more individualistic and self-centered lifestyles. Thus long-time L’Arche assistant Robert Larouche can note how by the late 1980s, “We can see that mentalities are changing and that alternative communities are not as attractive to young people as they were ten or fifteen years ago.”

L’Arche’s rapid early growth had been discerned as a gift of God; yet now communities increasingly saw themselves as stretched to the limits due to the lack of nondisabled assistants. The increased need for recruitment brought on by personnel shortages meant that the assistants L’Arche were welcoming looked much different from those of the founding years. Formed in an individualistic, secular and competitive culture, new assistants found it difficult to live in community and commit much beyond personal preference. Thus L’Arche found itself not only as a counter-culture to bureaucracies but also to liberal society in general. Alain Saint-Macary wrote how often these persons bring the fragmentation and isolation of the culture with them into L’Arche, but how communities have a practice of living which can form persons in a unified way of life.

There is a thirst for unity in many of the young people who come to join us. The era of the internet has arrived and with it the potential to link all human beings. Yet the world they come from is fragmented, characterised by competition and exclusion. L’Arche offers a way forward – a way of acknowledging the need to move towards the other and to accept the gifts she or he has to offer. A way to reconcile work and personal life, a way of living, a spirituality anchored in daily reality and of belonging to a body constantly working to achieve unity.

Wisdom Communities and Signs of Hope

L’Arche could offer this place of practice because of its stubborn commitment to the two pillars articulated by Vanier: sharing life with marginalized persons, and a recognition of God as

---

the sustainer of communities. The deepening spirituality discovered in L’Arche continued to emphasize a living and radical Jesus that both affirmed reality and frightened those stuck in modernity’s illusions. Weakness rather than strength defined true power, with Jesus’s kenotic journey the model for authentic Christian discipleship. Here the members with cognitive impairments often led the way, and through their gift for relationships provided a ready friend to accompany the trip “down the ladder” that persons in L’Arche following Vanier’s theological vision saw as fidelity to the Gospel.

Each person with a mental handicap has a message to bring to the church and to the world. He or she is essentially a heart that loves, a heart that calls us to communion and to community. In this way people with mental handicaps are prophetic and, like all prophets, they disturb. They call us to change and to let ourselves be transformed; they invite us to become more deeply human, more loving; they invite us to enter into communion and community, instead of throwing ourselves into work, hyperactivity, and seeking success, wealth and reputation. These prophets can be silent: they do not always make much noise. It is easy to ignore them, to put them aside and say that they are useless or even to condemn them to death.52

Vanier found his insistence on L’Arche living on the providence of God exemplified in many of his friends considered intellectually disabled, transforming others through their gently prophetic gifts. Increasingly nondisabled assistants recognized a maturity and wisdom in the “core members” who had lived in L’Arche, contrasting with a greater fragility among welcomed nondisabled assistants. While this appeared either illusory or naïve to outsiders, in the alternative culture of L’Arche it flowed naturally from the friendships formed and the transformations experienced by its members, whether nondisabled or persons with intellectual disabilities.

L’Arche realization of its counter-cultural identity did not mean that communities were to remain sectarian “bubbles” cut off from their host cultures and neighborhoods. L’Arche’s story had taught Vanier about the need to dialogue with the greater society, whether that was with government bureaucracies or local neighbourhoods. Dialogue always entailed risk, but the danger of becoming myopic and self-absorbed seemed an equal danger. Through its improvised, practical, and relational style, L’Arche practiced real “inculturation,” or the attempt to bring the

---

52 Vanier, An Ark for the Poor, 112.
Gospel to society through discerning the gifts and illusions of the local culture. Only individual communities could fully assess what from their environment was worth integrating and what needed to be transformed. While the dynamic and provisional style of leadership from the founding began to be tempered by the need for internal stability, L’Arche attempted to trust local communities with enough autonomy to find a place in their context, in addition to finding the common distinctives that made up the movement internationally. Inculturating the Gospel meant that communities should not hide away from their host societies, but must fully engage with their world(s). In so doing Nadine Tokar proclaims how core members like Lita in Honduras do not just receive care but exercise a mission given by God. “I see that God has given her a very important mission on earth: to transform the world, to transform us through her actions and through her way of being. Our mission is to be at the service of Lita’s vocation, and to use all that faith, knowledge and science make available to us to ensure that this life does not die, but that it grows, flourishes, spreads and transforms the world.”

A crucial aspect of the mission of Lita and other core members discerned by many assistants in L’Arche dedicated to Vanier’s theology lies in the acknowledgment of L’Arche’s conviction in their utter dependence on the presence of the Trinity. Amidst all the tension and conflict and fragmentation apparent in communities as well as society, only a commitment to L’Arche as “God’s project” can sustain the gift of community and propel L’Arche participation in the missio Dei. As Jean-Christophe Pascal mentions, “Changing realities call us to creativity but also to fidelity to the conviction that only God can save us. Our challenge is to anchor ourselves with conviction in spirituality, and in particular to maintain and nurture the contemplative dimension we learn from the people we welcome in the example of their life.”

Growing structures and more intense formation of assistants cannot replace a receptivity to the

53 While Vanier unconsciously practiced inculturation from the beginning, it is only recently that L’Arche has attempted to more deliberately contemplate its Gospel witness to larger cultural contexts. L’Arche has paid particular attention to the thought and work of Roman Catholic missiologist Gerald Arbuckle. For his articulation of Christian inculturation, see in particular Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), and Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010). On Arbuckle’s theory as applied specifically to L’Arche, see the articles he wrote to accompany L’Arche’s Mission and Identity process: “Ensuring the Future of L’Arche,” Letters of L’Arche, no. 107 (October 2001): 14–16; “From Chaos to Hope,” Letters of L’Arche, no. 112 (January 2004): 13–16; “Obstacles to Maintaining L’Arche’s Mission and Identity,” Letters of L’Arche, no. 116 (September 2005): 10–12.


Holy Spirit, something Pascal and others in L’Arche see persons like Lita often embodying more than highly “able” assistants. Claire de Mirabel emphasizes how the ultimate solution to a shortage of assistants comes when “we can only put down roots in l’Arche if we discover that God is calling us to be there, and that it is not we who have chosen l’Arche, but we who have been chosen and led to l’Arche, and that person with a handicap is the way God has chosen to reveal his face to us.”

Being communities dependent on the grace of the Holy Spirit means that L’Arche represents what theologian David Ford calls a “wisdom-seeking community” whose faith in God and commitment to friendship with one another faithfully guides it on its journey in truth. The counter intuitive dimensions of this wisdom reflect Paul’s articulation of the power of God, coming not from “human wisdom” but “taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:13). As communities centered on this wisdom, L’Arche envisioned by Vanier’s theology opens itself to a power made more real in weakness than in strength, and thus vulnerable enough to walk with the other rather than compete with them. Persons in L’Arche understand this as no romantic ideal, but a life formed in the tensions which make up the human condition. As Ford succinctly notes, “Because it responds to cries, L’Arche can never be very neat.”

As a wisdom community that responds to cries rather than saves the world, L’Arche never claims to have all the answers but remains ever incomplete. Seeing itself as sign rather than solution, persons in L’Arche dependent on Vanier’s theological vision understand themselves and their communities as needing to continually remain dependent on the providence of God for its day to day living. For Vanier, being faithful to truth could mean nothing less. Discerning truth required much more than individual human reason and the scientific method. Instead, real wisdom needed models and exemplars who witnessed the way with their lives. These exemplars knew and revealed the truth not as a possession but as a living font of communion which drew people together and helped each one grow into mature human beings. In L’Arche’s counter-cultural milieu, this often consists of people labelled intellectually disabled. Their gifts of trust, relationship, and celebration helped form members and communities into counter-cultural “signs of hope.” As communities centered on the two pillars,

---

58 Ibid., 365
L’Arche witnessed to late modern society that welcoming the weakest members would lead not to chaos but *caritas*, where each person is celebrated and society is transformed. “L’Arche is a sign that love is possible, that the weak, whatever their weakness, have gifts and a message to give. L’Arche is a sign that faith and competence can embrace and work together for the human and spiritual growth and development of each person. It is a sign that institutions can become communities when people work together in a spirit of love and unity.”

Vanier took pains to mention how being signs did not suggest that L’Arche was the answer to every social problem, but merely a light and harbinger that love and communion could prevail over violence and destruction. The emphasis Vanier placed on the exemplary lives of people considered intellectually disabled at the heart of community life showed how recognizing one’s dependence on God and others resulted in an alternative culture where the impossible practically occurred.

A community should be primarily not a grouping of shock-troops, commandoes or heroes, but a gathering of people who want to be a sign that it is possible for people to live together, love each other, celebrate and work for a better world and a fellowship of peace. A community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other. It is a sign that we don’t need a lot of money to be happy…. [W]e have to remind ourselves constantly that we are not saviours. We are simply a tiny sign, among thousands of others, that love is possible, that the world is not condemned to a struggle between oppressors and oppressed, that class and racial warfare is not inevitable.

Remaining prophetic witnesses rather than merely good service providers required sharing life with rejected persons, along with staying rooted in God’s provision. For L’Arche to fulfill its mission and identity and be the sign of God’s hope for the world, communities needed to stay humbly rooted in these markers of fidelity.

**Renewal: Witnessing to God’s Peace**

Like many others across the globe, the events of September 11, 2001 shook Vanier to the core. Being present to his “something’s” sacred history had increasingly turned Vanier towards

---

60 Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 310, 312.
a renewed commitment to peace. The founding of L’Arche represented a fundamental part of his pilgrimage in becoming a peacemaker. September 11 only confirmed Vanier’s commitment to peace, becoming an abiding theme of his ensuing thought. L’Arche’s identity as an “oasis of peace” was also confirmed, representing for Vanier a living example of confronting violence and pain with a commitment to Gospel nonviolence. The madness of 9/11 persuaded him of the importance of trying to discern the sources of violence rather than deal merely with its destructive results. For Vanier, it was not enough only to seek after the perpetrators of the attack, but ask deeper, more fundamental questions about why these men decided to kill innocent people. L’Arche had trained him in this approach to dealing with violence, where every aggressive act represented an attempt to communicate. The mutual transformation and recognition Vanier saw witnessed in L’Arche revealed more than ever how communities were signs of peace in a violent world. That peace in L’Arche meant not merely the absence of conflict but the communion of persons breaking down the (inner and outer) walls of hatred showed how these communities were needed more than ever. L’Arche’s wisdom stretched far beyond merely negotiating peace treaties. Instead, it meant a nonviolent orientation in every level of one’s relationships, even with one’s enemies. This orientation came not through a particular “technique” but through a life schooled in a radical hospitality of difference, which showed a way beyond a war of all against all.

At the same time, L’Arche found in a position of admiration from government bureaucracies, which threatened to easily overwhelm its charism with a logic of autonomy and efficiency. L’Arche appreciated having its voice heard, and attempted to take its place at the social service table as an aspect of its mission. Yet without remaining dependent on the Holy Spirit communities risked an integration into a system that steered persons toward a conformity to a social imaginary often at odds with L’Arche’s calling as envisioned by persons committed to Vanier’s theology. Being a sign to the church and world that the strangely different can lead others to a peace beyond mere “inclusion” required living a kind of gentle, nonviolent logic that can follow Christ and thus holds humanity’s vulnerability along with the resurrected body.

*The “Subtle Threat” and the Need for the Holy Spirit*
The assistant shortages and need for communal stability precipitated by a faster and more individualistic world meant that the vast majority of communities in the minority world became increasingly integrated into regional social service bureaucracies. Leaders in L’Arche harbored no naïve nostalgia for the early years but rather understood that communities’ maturation took place as much alongside the service sector as opposed to it. All communities have “played the legal game,” as a former President of L’Arche in France Pierre Mousnier-Lompre put it, seeing the need for a warm yet firm dialogue with government departments. “Certain communities who believed they could function without government funding, in the end asked for it, for the sake of the persons with disabilities and the assistants.”  

As communities of practical wisdom rather than rigid ideology, L’Arche strived to put in place more structures and enter into relationship with bureaucracies in order to enhance community life and fulfill its mission. 

Yet this increasing integration with the mainstream realm of service provision still required wise discernment. For while public authorities might not directly threaten L’Arche’s basic values, they represent what Mousnier-Lompre calls a more “subtle threat” of the kind of institutional logic which risks turning communities merely into secular service providers. After shepherding the Federation through crises and turmoil, de Mirabel saw the spectre of institutionalization looming large over L’Arche. “[T]he institutional aspect of L’Arche is weighing heavier on our communities, and administrative duties are taking up more and more time. I can’t help but to ask myself where is the novelty of the Gospel and why have I chosen to give up my life – to fill out all these reports on the quality of care offered?” As communities increasingly received the resources social service departments were willing to give them, they also began to look much less distinct from other secular agencies. The pressure to comply with bureaucracies brought with it a logic of rationality and efficiency, which threatened to rationalize L’Arche under the banner of “quality care.”

One dimension of that logic communities were affected by was a kind of bureaucratic activity which created busyness rather than fecundity. More and more persons in L’Arche note how the energy placed into administration often overwhelms the need to build an environment of call and vocation. According to Baska Pestka, this institution building brings with it an

---

62 Ibid.
Long-term assistant Tobias Gerken concurs, hearing more and more how “[p]eople think that community life being bent out of shape by the weight of agency demands.” A bureaucratic logic risks bending L’Arche into the contours of a generic group home, threatening to eclipse L’Arche’s true charism. “The ‘busy-ness’ of running the ‘business’ of community can take priority over our mission. In other words, legislative demands are limiting the possibilities of belonging to community.”

An important response to this “subtle threat” lies in a return to the providential roots of L’Arche as truly “God’s project.” Many in L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theological vision understand how only through a continual openness and receptivity to the Holy Spirit can communities wisely discern a relationship with social service systems that brings life rather than deadening rationality. As long-term friend of L’Arche Bill Clark emphasizes, anything else potentially leads to L’Arche’s ruin. “These communities can continue to be L’Arche only if they remain guided by the Spirit. Returning often to the founding story is not to cling to the past. Just the contrary, the founding story reveals what is essential so that there is freedom to let go of everything else and allow the Spirit to bring new birth.”

L’Arche communities reliant upon Vanier’s theological commitments see this abiding by the logic of the Holy Spirit as meaning not only practicing prudence with government bureaucracies. At the same time it requires a sifting of the influence and logic of the secular arts and sciences. L’Arche’s venture into the social service world also brought it into contact with activist and academic realms seeking liberation for persons called disabled. Communities found themselves with something both to offer and learn from these domains. Yet Jim Cowie reiterates how ultimately the Holy Spirit must set and ground L’Arche’s pilgrimage rather than secular disciplines like psychology or social work. “The work of the Holy Spirit will not conform to the discoveries of the social sciences and psychiatry. Nor will it always bend to the most recent trends in social care and good practice. The Holy Spirit will, through prayer, work in individual lives and in communities to bring about his purpose of growth and the goal of presenting us Christlike before our heavenly Father. Use every means to help you understand yourself and

---

your relationships with others, but let the Holy Spirit heal restore, correct and encourage you and build you up in your life together.”

Human flourishing in L’Arche could never be legislated or instituted by rules from social bureaucracies or secular sciences. Instead, quality of life for all persons in L’Arche rested on the two pillars of trust in God and a welcoming of the most vulnerable.

Being wisdom-seeking communities open to the Spirit rather than competent group homes meant becoming what Vanier calls “schools of tenderness.” These schools offer much more than “personal care.” More importantly, communities form and transform its practitioners into persons who can non-violently recognize the truthfulness of the other. “Tenderness makes me gentle and open to others, not judging them but trying to help them to grow. Tenderness helps me to believe that I myself, as well as others around me, can grow and change in spite of appearances, that the child of God in each one of us can rise up.”

Persons trained in tenderness learn how to receive all bodies as gifts, no matter the embodiment. This kind of welcome produces a patience which contemporary high-paced societies find hard to comprehend. Modernity’s focus on autonomy and agency means that persistent states of vulnerability and incapacity remain highly discordant realities, in turn making persons with severe impairments look very regrettable. Yet many in L’Arche understand the truth of the human condition to include the fragility and woundedness of the body. De Miribel sees God as giving L’Arche a mission to embody this gentleness for an impatient world, following the path of the resurrected Christ and his transformed wounds. “Our mission is to stand by these wounds, these wounded bodies and hearts, wounds in our communities and, therefore, accept being wounded ourselves and witness the life that comes from the wounds, examining our communities and each person from that Easter viewpoint, that viewpoint of faith, and receive it as a gift from God.”

Through their attempt to run according to the logic of the Spirit, many in L’Arche continually rediscover how core members manifest this kind of non-violent gentleness, and become untypical experts in community building and friendship-making. Hilary Wilson speaks for many in L’Arche when she mentions how “At first we talked about welcoming people with handicaps or learning disabilities, now many years further on it is clearly they who welcome and

---

68 Vanier, Our Life Together, 488.
69 de Miribel, “Deal With the Gap,” 22.
receive the assistants who come.” Living by the cue of core members helps assistants enter a new logic, which knows the practices which build communities of peace. “It’s right that we have to conform to high standards of care and training today but in this climate of regulation we need also to be careful not to get too busy to listen, to celebrate, to waste time together.” Journeying with people in this way contradicts traditional means toward “success” and encourages much more than “inclusion” of excluded persons. Vanier notes how being in L’Arche has brought him to a level of identification with core members where he begins to share the marginalization of many of his friends with cognitive impairments. “Over the last forty years I have learned the transforming power of people with disabilities...I realize as I get older that I have difficulty meeting so-called normal people….I can see that I am becoming a bit marginalized. I know that it is important to speak to the wider world, but it is not always easy to live in two worlds.”

Rather than wear the mantel of societal respectability that manifests a certain social status, L’Arche seeks to remain a community of “marginals,” transforming the world one heart at a time from the ground upwards. Understood as living signs of the kingdom rather than solutions for the world, L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theology attempt to live the nonviolence of the Gospel in the midst of liberalism’s logic of individualism and self-determination.

**Befriending Difference as a Peace Witness**

As wisdom communities, L’Arche has discerned more and more how its witness to peace offers both a challenge and a gift to the world. Pat Favaro claims that L’Arche is a “mission organization,” one that does not go out to foreign countries to deliver a mission as experts. On the contrary, a fundamental part of L’Arche’s mission rests in the welcome members give to nondisabled assistants, in turn forming them in the new logic of the Gospel. Here core members and long-term assistants share a common mission, illustrating the mutuality received through the grace and hard work of sharing life together.

---

71 Ibid, 97.
73 “Marginals” is Kathryn Spink’s term. See *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 250.
To many the mission of “care” manifested by nondisabled assistants is easy to grasp. Yet persons in L’Arche emphasis over and over again the charism persons labelled as intellectually disabled have received. This mission which may look strange to an anthropology of liberal citizenship, yet through friendship many members of L’Arche discern the transformative potential core members have for inculturating the Gospel in the world. L’Arche International Board President Mireya de Corrales sees how the gift of someone like Melvin from the community in Choluteca, Honduras can act as a subversive humanizer in a world growing more competitive and colder. De Corrales reflects on Alduous Huxley’s metaphor of modernity as a speeding train that one must either let pass by or get on and get swept up in its logic. When Melvin enters the train, however, he exercises his mission and interrupts the efficient train of progress with an imagination of celebration and joy. “Melvin showed me a variation on Huxley’s metaphor: when he gets into any car, he transforms that utilitarian means of transportation into an instrument of laughter and excitement. The option Huxley does not mention is for the farmer to jump into the train and work from the inside to modify the train’s course, making it more humane and more joyous. My Zone can provide the world and the Federation with a tenderness and compassion long forgotten in other societies.”

The mission of peace given to Melvin as perceived by de Corrales interrupts a logic of efficiency and progress with a celebration of friendship and joyful presence.

The central place core members like Melvin carry in L’Arche means recognizing both the tremendous challenge and gift of difference. While liberal societies prize tolerance and “inclusion,” Vanier and others in L’Arche clearly discerned the limits of many society’s commitment to these principles. The dissonant bodies of people called intellectually disabled easily disturb others confined to social imaginaries that advocate a conformity of the body to a particular “normal” image. Vanier increasingly identifies in contemporary society a “tyranny of normality,” where autonomy and agency define the human person, and where those persons not conforming to the dominant human image become regrettable strangers vulnerable to the dictates of the dominant culture.

---

We speak of the rights of the disabled to live on their own, to get married, to work or not to work as they wish; but what about the right of that person to be different, to be loved and appreciated and find places of belonging? Technology already permits parents to choose the sex of their child or to abort a child that is likely to be disabled…. [P]arents want their children to be perfect, and so they push, push, push their children to be as ‘normal’ as possible. But what of the children’s right to be different, to be separate from their parents, to be free to be whoever they want to be? 

The friendships given and worked out in L’Arche showed members how difference need not lead to inevitable conflict or bare contractual relations. Instead persons learn to welcome the gift of the other, recognizing them as fellow children of God. Andrew Yooumbe from L’Arche Uganda testifies to the power present in L’Arche to transform the relations between people across wide ranges of difference. “L’Arche Uganda is trying to witness to a peaceful co-existence with one another regardless of ethnic differences. Assistants and core members with their diverse ethnicities, languages, skills and abilities come from all parts of the country. We are a small witness of unity in diversity….We strive to live in peace and build friendship and relations with each other.”

L’Arche thus discovered that a key aspect of their mission lies in making real a commitment to unity in difference rather than conformity. Long-term assistant Jim Cargin points out how this task of L’Arche is not easy but a struggle. “[T]he best reason to keep working with our diversity is simply because our world needs us to. It may be a struggle, but the alternative can only lead to fear, mistrust and finally violence.” Even though this mission to befriend difference can appear quixotic and “unproductive,” L’Arche understands this task as manifesting a belief in communion as the end of human life. Living lives open to the other makes communities schools where the imagination can expand into horizons previously thought “impossible.” “Our communities can become places of transformation through the way we welcome each other, listen to one another and resolve conflict. Welcoming the weak, recognizing their gifts and helping them discover the meaning of their life is our way of building

---

77 Vanier, Our Life Together, 550–51.  
peace.”80 Seen as signs of God’s promised peace, L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments attempt to embody and work towards reconciliation through a hospitality of difference far beyond the “equality of opportunity” advocated by the dominant liberal paradigm.

The mission of witness given to L’Arche includes not just the world but also the church. Vanier began to see in his “something” a model for a renewed ecclesial vision. Clearly, Vanier never wanted L’Arche to become another denominational form of church.81 Yet Vanier also stressed how L’Arche offered a way of life in accord with the Gospel, which had the potential to proclaim the Gospel for a world seeking authentic witnesses of transformation. “In the midst of all the violence and corruption of the world God invites us today to create new places of belonging, places of sharing, of peace and of kindness, places where no-one needs to defend himself or herself; places where each one is loved and accepted with one’s own fragility, abilities and disabilities. This is my vision for our churches: that they become places of belonging, places of sharing.”82 Vanier saw L’Arche as attempting to be faithful to Paul’s ecclesial vision of 1 Cor 12, one which imagined the church as a Body with the weakest members possessing the greatest honor. At the same time, Vanier could only allude to how the church’s thought and practice scandalously ignored this vision. “I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church. Do we really believe that the weakest, the least presentable, those we hide away – that they are indispensable? If that was our vision of the church, it would change many things.”83 Thus for Vanier a fundamental manifestation of the church’s peace witness comes through sharing life with the weakest and most vulnerable. When the church learns how to befriend with the poor rather than exercise power over the poor, radical transformations can occur. “Maybe what we need most is to rejoice and to celebrate with the weak and the vulnerable. Maybe the most important thing is to learn how to build communities of celebration. Maybe the world will be transformed when we learn to have fun together. I don’t mean to suggest that we don’t talk

80 Ibid., 533. On Vanier’s articulation on the necessity but also shadow side of the need to belong, see Becoming Human (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), especially chap. 2.
81 “An interdenominational community does not want to become another church with its own services and sacraments. There are enough already!” Vanier, Community and Growth, 200.
82 Vanier, Befriending the Stranger, 12.
about serious things. But maybe what our world needs more than anything is communities where we celebrate life together and become signs of hope for our world.”

Vanier sees a parallel between the call of Francis of Assisi to “rebuild the church” and L’Arche’s own mission to witness to the peace of Christ. Representing two narratives of conversion through encounters with the poor, the communities of Francis and L’Arche both began as obscure attempts at Gospel fidelity. Yet just as God used Francis to inspire reform in a decadent church, so God has used this little “something” to present the Gospel in all its freshness and radicality. “We too have received a call to rebuild the Church and to work for unity between churches and between all people. We too have been sent forth on a mission today, with all our limits and fragilities, to announce the beauty and importance of people with disabilities, the importance of each person.” Responding to the cries of anguish of people trapped in dismal institutions in 1960s France, Vanier recognized the need for building homes of belonging and friendship. Only decades later could he fully recognize the resultant communities as the witnesses to peace they had become.

**Conclusion**

From its founding as a refuge for the forgotten to understanding itself as a sign of Christ’s peace, L’Arche as a movement grew as Vanier saw many of his friends called intellectually disabled grow. The primacy of inspired pragmatism over ideology meant that L’Arche’s identity was never certain, but always open to the providence of God, the one whom Vanier always has acknowledged as L’Arche’s living font. This orientation flowed from the commitment to acknowledge the centrality of core members at the heart of L’Arche, not merely as objects of care but as mutual community members, whose spiritual and relational wisdom proved transformational for Vanier and countless others. Although this emphasis could look highly “strange” to contemporary cultures bound to the primacy of agency and rationality, Vanier understood it as only cohering more closely to a biblical vision of the Body of Jesus’ disciples. The insights gleaned on this fifty year pilgrimage continually surprised people in L’Arche, leading them gradually to the discovery of a “gold mine of truth”: “We can be transformed by

---

84 Ibid., 75.
the weak and the poor, as long as we enter into an authentic relationship with them and let ourselves be led by God and to God, the God of unity, love and peace.”86 This theologically-informed interpretation of L’Arche history thus reveals the movement as a community witnessing to God’s peace in and for the world, most distinctively through the lives of those labelled as intellectually disabled. Existing much more than simply as exceptional “service provision,” the story of L’Arche shows the growth in persons and communities as providential signs of wisdom and reconciliation.

Tensions existed all along the way, ones persons in L’Arche understand as only livable and resolvable by an openness to the Holy Spirit. Through a continual acknowledgment of the Spirit as its life and wisdom, L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology could navigate through the logic of institutions and bureaucracies as well as remain faithful to its God-given mission. Being a people on pilgrimage meant a trust in God to reconcile the internal and external conflicts persons and communities faced along the way. When L’Arche faithfully remembered its story it became a sign of the peace which does not promise total security but, instead, the friendships needed to patiently walk the path to transformation and growth.

As L’Arche’s de facto phenomenologist and biblical exegete, Vanier’s vision of peace originated like all of his thought in the primacy of human experience and biblical revelation. These sources would ground all of his growing reflections on both the need for and characteristics of personal, interpersonal and international peace. Following from L’Arche’s commitment to the “two pillars,” Vanier could not imagine an authentic peace without a commitment to persons, particularly the most vulnerable, and to God, the source and final end of all peace. The following chapter will uncover Vanier’s vision of peace and peacemaking, rooted in his daily life in L’Arche.

86 Ibid., 12.
Chapter 3 Disarming the Heart: Jean Vanier’s Vision of Peace

We become more peacemakers as we let ourselves be disarmed, as we become more conscious that we are – each of us – unique....We are not alone, and we don’t have to compete. Our place in the heart of humanity and in the heart of God is assured.1

Peace does not drop out of the sky. Certainly it comes from a hidden force of God, but it comes also through the thousand efforts which we make daily, efforts to accept others just as they are, to forgive them, to accept ourselves also, with all our wounds and fragility, to discover that the enemy is within us, to discover also how to cope with our wounds, fears and anguish, and use them in a positive way.2

The theological story of L’Arche testifies to a journey from being a safe house for abandoned people to being called to witness God’s peace-making mission in the world. Jean Vanier’s pilgrimage brought him continually into situations of violence: a child of World War II; early inductee into the navy; shocked visitor of degrading institutions; ambassador of L’Arche in war-torn areas around the globe. Through L’Arche’s accompaniment of deeply rejected persons, often acting out in aggressive behavior, Vanier encountered violence in the dailiness and intensity of ordinary communal life. All the while Vanier reflected not only on what makes for violent persons and communities, but what makes for peace and authentic human flourishing. In the background lay what Vanier considered as the gospel imperative for peace and reconciliation, which Jesus inaugurated and the Holy Spirit empowers Christians to embody. Through reflecting on L’Arche’s history, many nondisabled assistants discerned how core members often demonstrated the posture needed to live God’s peace. By a commitment to the two pillars, persons labelled as intellectually disabled in L’Arche helped Vanier and others to “go further” and seek a peace extending beyond mere inclusion.

This chapter and its primary question asks what is Jean Vanier’s philosophy and theology of peace, based upon his experience of founding and living in L’Arche? The content of this

chapter falls into roughly two parts. Part one will investigate Vanier’s understanding of the origins of violence, and the process of transformation needed to proceed on the journey towards peace. Vanier perceives violence as originating in the broken and fearful self, which projects individual or group evil onto other “enemies” and feels driven into environments of competitive rivalry. The path to peace lies in what Vanier calls “disarming the heart,” the process of accepting one’s brokenness, thereby breaking down the walls of fear which divide persons and groups from one another. Part two will then relay Vanier’s considerations on the contents and practice of peace. Vanier sees peace in a holistic, threefold way as state of communion, eschatological goal, and dynamic process, often embodied less by nondisabled assistants than those considered intellectually disabled. The authentic transformation into the truth of creatureliness does not end with the individual but ecstatically reaches outward, welcoming the different and befriending the enemy. This movement exemplifies for Vanier how peace acts as a dynamic witness to the lived impossibility of the gospel: God’s gift of peace reconciles enemies, forgives perpetrators, and brings together the bitterly divided.

All of these insights cannot be separated from the lived experience of persons in L’Arche over the past fifty years. While Vanier certainly begins with some basic assumptions about human flourishing and conceptions of reconciliation, his reflections on peace come primarily from five decades of living in community. At the same time, Vanier gleans wisdom from other sources and makes insights on peace comparable in various disciplines. Thus I will also place Vanier’s discussions of peace within the broader literature on domains such as psychology, Aristotle, peace studies, and philosophical personalism. This comparison will reveal both Vanier’s coherence with much thinking around peace, as well as the distinctive approach and wisdom he offers.

**Methodological Considerations**

*Jean Vanier as Christian Philosopher*

While Vanier’s reflections on what makes for peace have increasingly been presented for general, secular audiences, it would be a mistake to believe that this has entailed a loss of his
Christian foundations. A continuity throughout Vanier’s work has been the claim that peace—or at least his version of it—ultimately comes as a gift from God. Certainly work is involved in journeying toward a state and vision of peace; Vanier is clear that peace does not just magically appear. Yet without a receptivity and availability that makes room for God, any attempts at instituting peace will either be partial at best or counterproductive at worst. Liberation will not come through the correct employment of science, technology, psychoanalysis, politics, or military force. Only God can save humanity from itself, and usher in the kind of peace which brings reconciliation and communion at all levels: between humans and God, between persons, and between humans and the created world. As Vanier boldly claims, the miracle of the resurrection “invites us to believe that peace and truth are possible. Even if the influence of Christian churches today has diminished, the message of the universal love given to us by Jesus is the deepest truth and the strongest force that can bring peace to our world.” While Vanier certainly finds common ground with secular thinkers through a shared goal of a holistic peace, his belief in that peace as a gift distinguishes him as an overt religious philosopher.

Thus one cannot ultimately separate Vanier’s philosophy from his fundamental Christian convictions. For some this orientation appears limiting, yet it should not necessarily exclude his thought from wider applicability and acceptance. Acknowledging Vanier’s Christian foundations merely shows that he, like everyone, argues from a particular perspective. While Vanier often attempts to ground concepts and ideas in universal principles, these all stem from his own Christian formation and beliefs. The paschal mystery and gospel narrative are background to his philosophizing, which clearly includes his work on peace and reconciliation.

---

3 For example, Vanier was asked to make a program around his vision of peace for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada’s public television network. This was eventually published in book form as Finding Peace (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003). While the audience for Vanier here is very public, he never hides his belief that peace ultimately comes from “a love that flows from the heart of God” (6).

4 In response to L’Arche visitors commenting on the peace they perceive among persons in community, Vanier wryly notes, “Everyone sort of smiles. Somewhere it is true that there is peace. But it is so fragile. It is all a gift. Not all of it comes from our efforts. In time we learn to see and receive the gift of our life together and the peace that is there. And somehow, in the process, we are transformed.” Jean Vanier, “The Fragility of L’Arche and the Friendship of God,” in Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008), 39. See also Finding Peace, 60.


6 Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 357.
Peace as Experiential rather than Theoretical

At the heart of L’Arche’s story is the centrality of lived experience over principled theory. Vanier spent little time planning the foundation of L’Arche, but instead began by attempting to discern God’s will in the suffering and chaotic events he was continually witnessing. L’Arche emerged and continues to live not primarily as an institution with a particular therapy but as an experience that transforms persons through encounters with people many consider regrettable.⁷

Vanier’s reflections and writing regarding peace contain this same prioritizing of experience and lived reality. Whether it was his move from being a “technician of destruction”⁸ in the navy to founding L’Arche, or learning how to respond and reflect upon violence through living with aggressive persons, or visiting and giving retreats to sometimes violent prisoners, Vanier never kept a theoretical distance from issues of peace and war. Instead, his desire and striving for peace and unity was always tested in the furnace of the messiness of daily life, whether that be in a particular L’Arche house or a war zone. This orientation to experience can partially explain Vanier’s articulation of peace not as a static state of tranquility but also a dynamic process and an eschatological goal to strive and wait for. Never tired of reminding others how the ideal L’Arche community does not exist but is made in dailiness, Vanier also notes how peace is found in God’s gifts sometimes hidden in the least likely places. “God and universal truth are not in the sky and the stars, nor in theories, ideologies and ideals. They are hidden in actual people, in flesh, mud and matter. They are hidden in the poor and the weak who cry above all for recognition and communion.”⁹ Only by living close to reality can one discern the truth of human being, and thus the conditions, telos and activities that make for peace. Vanier’s emphasis on experience helps make his vision of peace alive and moving, as well as staying rooted in the Christian story of Jesus and his continual kenotic movement toward forgotten and abandoned persons.

---

⁷ On the attempt to describe L’Arche as an experiential place of transformational encounter rather than social service institution, see Christian Salenson, L’Arche: A Unique and Multiple Spirituality (Paris: L’Arche en France, 2009), 15-19.
⁹ Vanier, Our Journey Home, 248.
Walls: Discerning Warfare in the Heart

Despite the common aspiration of a world at peace, violence, fear and oppression still occur. Many solutions have been offered and many dreams envisioned about a future without enmity and bloodshed. Yet the dominant narrative of the inevitability of war and violence remains intact, with much evidence in its favour. L’Arche’s story shows how community members seek to live peace on a daily basis, yet also aware of how easily enmity and self-interest can erode relationships and infect communities.

For Vanier, moving towards peace in persons and the world begins with an attempt to understand the source of violence. Early parent-child relationships stand as crucial in this regard, with Vanier believing that the imperfect love inherent in the human condition helps create the conditions necessary for violence and aggression. Persons build internal (and external) walls to protect the self from a hostile world, and project their own brokenness onto dehumanized others. The wounded self feels impelled towards competition and rivalry in order to prove its own worth, resulting in a “warfare of the heart” and the need to eliminate the “enemy.”

The Fear of a Wounded Heart: Violence as Communication

It was not only the events of 9/11 which inspired Jean Vanier to more deeply consider what makes for real peace. From the very beginning of L’Arche’s founding, Vanier spent considerable time and energy seeking to discern the origins of human violence and aggression toward the self and toward the other. As he notes, people in L’Arche have continually faced violence on a daily basis, whether through aggressive behaviour in deeply wounded persons or an inner violence awoken by the tremendous anguish of others. With the help of psychologists, Vanier quickly understood people’s violence as a form of communication, telling very human stories of pain, suffering, and loss. In order to experience and grow in peace, one had to try and discern the wounds which blocked the pathways to human flourishing.

For Vanier, the story often begins in early childhood. Through the influence of Philippe, Vanier recognized the mother-infant relationship as crucial in laying the foundation for a stable self. The communion experienced from receiving loving care communicates to the child their inherent and unconditional worth. However, an absence of this care creates a profound wound in
the young child. This lack of love leaves the infant with a broken self-image and sense that the self has no value. Vanier recalls how someone like Jean Paul, similar to many of the persons L’Arche first welcomed, came from this environment of profound rejection, with his moments of aggression simply communicating his psychological guilt for existing.\textsuperscript{10} Yet Vanier saw Jean Paul’s wound as only an extreme version of the anguish and inner pain constitutive of the human condition. “[S]omewhere deep in our consciousness there is a moment when we had our bliss[ful communion with our mother] and this becomes the foundation stone. But that bliss quickly became a disappointment because we discovered that our mother was not God and that our father was not God either. Our parents were also wounded and could hurt us or even reject us. And so bliss was followed by pain and our trust in communion was broken.”\textsuperscript{11} Persons then repress this pain into the subconscious, which in turn exerts a power over persons which accompanies the growing self. For Vanier, the suffering of a wounded heart represents less the defect of the violent person than a universal experience of being human. In Vanier’s theological anthropology, this broken heart represents a psychological form of “original sin.” “Christian doctrine on the wounded heart, or original sin, appears to me the one reality which is easily verified…. [I]n the heart of each of us there are divisions, fears and fragility; there is a defence system which protects our vulnerability, there is flight from pain and there is darkness.”\textsuperscript{12}

The experience of rejection communicates to the child an absence of value, and results in a fear of anything which threatens to annihilate one’s being. According to Vanier, this is where the primal fear of death arises, a fear compounded by a culture in which death can only appear as the great accident and evil.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to the fear of death, persons also experience a profound dread at those states which represent mortality: vulnerability, brokenness, loneliness, dependence. “We all have a deep fear of our own weaknesses because my weakness is what makes it possible for someone else to crush me.”\textsuperscript{14} This fear rests at the center of much human violence. Rather than aggression originating merely in self-centeredness, Vanier understands violence as beginning in the unconscious fear of human fragility. “[I]f we human beings are

\textsuperscript{10}Jean Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human} (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 137.
\textsuperscript{13}Vanier, \textit{Finding Peace}, 24.
violent, it is mainly because we are so vulnerable. Violence is a response to a wounded heart when it feels misunderstood, rejected, unloved. As soon as we feel the slightest rejection, the wound reopens and our defence mechanisms rise up.”¹⁵ For the self fearful of the death of not being, weakness and vulnerability represent enemies who threaten human flourishing.

Constructing Walls and Creating Enemies

Vanier clearly saw this process operative in the reactions that core members drew amongst the citizens of Trosly upon the founding and growth of L’Arche. Many could only associate the limitations of people with intellectual disabilities as embodied vulnerability, and therefore as living manifestations of the inevitability of death. While Vanier lamented the derision his new friends engendered in people, he also began to understand the fear and anguish others experienced upon their presence. “The more my friendship with these two men grew, the more wounded I felt by such attitudes and remarks. Gradually, I learned how our society rejected men and women with mental handicaps, regarding them as nature’s mistakes, as subhuman. There was a kind of psychological barrier which stood in the way of their being regarded as human beings.”¹⁶ Vanier understood these psychological walls as being an attempt to protect the self from its psychological enemies, represented particularly by those who embody the dangerous difference of vulnerability and brokenness. Protection of the self results in the construction of inner barriers which categorize the weak as beyond the pale, safely ensconced on the other side of the wall of difference.

Vanier observed how those on the other side of the wall represent not merely objective embodiments of death, but also noticed how others sometimes project their own vulnerability onto weaker persons. When persons cannot face the shadow of their own pain and fragility, they often shift these undesirable aspects of themselves onto others who act as receptacles for their own brokenness. In this way, the enemy within is transferred onto an external enemy. Vanier’s life in community taught him much about understanding enemies less as objective villains than as people who awoke his anguish and vulnerability. Community life reveals that enemies represent “people with whom we don’t agree, who block us, who contradict us and who stifle the

¹⁶ Vanier, Our Journey Home, 3.
treasure of our life and our freedom. Their presence seems to awaken our own poverty, guilt feelings and inner wounds; it seems menacing and brings out in us either aggression or a sort of fear and servile aggression….They endanger us, and, even if we dare not admit it, we hate them.”17 The ability of the enemy to embody the person’s deepest fears receives additional power through the creation of a group enemy, who acts as both container of individual pain as well as helps unite a community around a common danger. “Fear incites us to hide behind the walls of our heart, our group, our community….We are frightened of not being….Consumed by this fear, we seek out those who we think are preventing us from becoming what we want to be, those who are ‘out to get us.’ They are the rivals, seeking what we want.”18 Just as internal enemies become externalized in the other, so the internal walls keeping the inner pain at bay become externalized in physical structures which separate the evil from the good. For Vanier, whether the walls be the labelling of people with intellectual disabilities as sub-human or the physical walls in Palestine, both emerge from a deadly fear of human frailty. For the self threatened by difference and suffering, the world stands as a hostile place in which walls and weapons protect us from the dangerous other.

*The Need to Compete*

While the self projects its own evil onto others, it also reacts to its own experiences of rejection by seeking to prove its own worth and value. If the individual does not experience recognition from intimate caregivers, the lack of self-worth results in a drive for personal achievement. Often rooted in insecure attachments, persons seek greater acceptance through individual success and ranking systems. Vanier finds few things as detrimental to the self as the modern, western obsession with competition and upward mobility. Intrinsic to competition is the human need to prove that one or one’s group is the best, is superior to another. Yet this is merely a tactic for denying the creatureliness inherent in the human condition. “Each of us tends to run away from our lostness, to hide our fragility and vulnerability behind violence or blame or competition or independence. We live behind masks and stifle our hearts. We are, in so many ways, controlled by our fear and compulsions – our fears of rejection, judgment, not measuring

up or not succeeding. We live in a world where emphasis in education is given to individual success; where people identify themselves with what they do rather than who they are; where climbing the ladder of promotion, possessions and pleasure is prized.” A culture obsessed with competition creates a few elevated winners, but many rejected and despised losers. For Vanier, no one embodies this more than people considered intellectually disabled. These persons predominantly lose in a competitive society, thereby further cementing their categorization as deficient losers without value. At the same time, Vanier saw many persons with cognitive impairments internalize this lack of worth through their inability to climb the ladder of success.

The inherent goal of competition to conquer and best one’s opponent creates not a unified body in communion, but a rivalrous collection of lonely individuals constantly at one another’s throats. People may come together in a spirit of cooperation, but often only in order to defeat another group. As Vanier often notes, the personal need to prove one’s worth along with the western cultural imaginary of competition results in a desire for everyone to be on the “winning team.” The result of competition only adds to the fear of the other, and sets persons up for the seeds of war: conflict and hostility.

Violence breaks out in cultures of competition, where there is economic and political rivalry and the rivalry caused by civil war and international conflicts. Our education systems advocate success. To be successful in life is of course important. However, if it means only a frantic search to climb up the ladder at any cost and to show that we are better and superior to others, it is destructive; and if it means rejecting those who are weak and who do not succeed, it is also dangerous. Either we exploit other peoples’ weaknesses and crush them as we try to reach the top or, faced with the world of rivalry in and around us, we shrug our shoulders and give up, feeling incapable of doing anything useful to change the situation, or we are discouraged and just seek compensation in things like alcohol.

---

In a scarce world of us and them, where persons and nations must compete for limited resources and winner-take-all prizes, violence never appears far away. Vanier found that the alienation and loneliness competition often produces tend towards an erosion of the interpersonal and communal bonds needed to bring people together and provide the conditions for human flourishing.

While Vanier came to these insights through his life in L’Arche, the more he travelled to different countries and cultures the more he saw the same dynamic of violence. What began as attempts to find the origin of aggression in core members in order to alleviate their anguish, turned out for Vanier to be keys to understanding God’s message of peace and liberation for all creation. The individual violence of someone like Jean Paul was not separate from genocide or US military violence. “There is always warfare in the heart,” Vanier contends, where persons live in illusions of grandeur and self-hatred that force them to build walls and collect the weapons needed for security and victory. As he discovered more and more, peace required not merely institutions and treaties but personal conversion and embodied community.

**Disarming the Heart: The Process of Transformation towards Peace**

Vanier understands that the personal process of moving from the warring self to liberating communion takes time within the networks of relationships in community. The walls erected by the fearful self act as weapons to protect a fragile sense of identity and worth. What is needed for liberation is thus a “disarming” of the protective barriers which not only dehumanize others but which also imprison persons in a negative sense of self. In order to “disarm the heart” one must transition out of the controlling illusions of autonomy and constant rivalry into the graceful truth of communion and mutual dependence. For Vanier, the fullest path to disarmament lay in committing oneself to others in a *koinonia*, a site of belonging where persons are known and loved for who they are, rather than what society or others wish them to be. L’Arche represents a site for this transformation, a place of liberation where both core members and assistants experience the truth of their lives. In so doing, persons are transformed to live and perceive life in a different logic: the peace of God’s reign.

---

As Vanier regularly claims, the locus for this disarmament happens in the intense relationships formed with people considered intellectually disabled. While many assistants come to L’Arche in a spirit of “doing good to the poor,” the encounter with core members often takes people deeper into the shadow side of the human condition. When assistants first arrive, they discover their ability to love and give life to others in their role as caregivers. Yet the rigours of living community life almost inevitably lead to a surfacing of deeply repressed experiences of shame and rejection. Sharing life with persons who live their vulnerability often so transparently awakens in many assistants aspects of themselves they (and their culture more broadly) try to hide. Consumer culture gives people many options to run away from their own vulnerability, but the intense dailiness of life at L’Arche means that assistants come face-to-face with their brokenness. “How painful it is for us to look reality in the face, to discover our own fragility and our capacity for anger and hatred. The temptation is so great as to avoid or run away from those who reveal our inner limits and brokenness. The roots of much racism, rejection and exclusion are here.”

In a culture where weakness and limitation stand as the denigrated opposites of strength and perfection, community life confronts persons with the reality of their creatureliness. As long time L’Arche member Sue Mosteller notes, “Being faithful in a body of friends drags me into the experience of [others’] poverty, selfishness, brokenness and darkness, and it forces me into the truth of my own limitations, vulnerabilities, and hardness of heart.” This realization can result in an existential crisis of identity and being. The accompanying psychological anguish can include a profound grieving for the hurts of the past, as well as the failure of the person to meet the expectations of an individualistic culture of consumption and success.

Vanier often speaks about this process as a kenotic movement or going “down the ladder” on the way to truth. Exemplified in Jesus’s identification with the poor and marginalized as well as his descent into suffering and death, solidarity with vulnerable persons facilitates a surrendering of one’s false identity based on the illusions of power to one based on trust and

---

vulnerability. As nondisabled persons in L’Arche experience vulnerability, the truth of human frailty and dependence becomes clear. Only through acknowledging everyone as a mixture of darkness and light can persons fully live in the truth which leads to peace. “All human growth is about learning to let the light penetrate more deeply into the shadow areas of our being; it is allowing trust and love to conquer fear, prejudice and hate; it is finding the inner strength to live and accept our past just as it is, with its wounds, without escaping into a world of illusions and dreams.”

Contrary to the individual’s belief that he or she can prove their own worth through personal achievement, or a society which finds truth in rationality and power, meaning in L’Arche comes through recognizing weakness as a counter intuitive force capable of uniting persons in relationships of mutuality and friendship. Life in L’Arche exposes the lies of the fearful self and a conforming society with what Vanier considers the mystery of the Gospel: “L’Arche communities reveal the paradox presented by weakness and poverty. That which we reject and push aside can become a means of grace, unity, freedom and peace.” The centrality of vulnerability and pain at the heart of L’Arche’s founding story reveals the counter-cultural truth of the gospel, not as an abstract concept but as experiential actuality. Living community day by day removes any romantic gloss this gospel insight carries, drawing persons to encounter rather than avoid their own brokenness. Understanding weakness as a source of life requires a confrontation with the full of truth of one’s story, often facilitated through relationships with core members.

Acknowledging weakness as a source of life reveals how humans are meant to live not self-sufficient lives but ones in communion with others. Peace comes through recognizing mutual dependency as a liberating truth which leads persons out of constant rivalry into encounter and reconciliation. A disarmed heart no longer fears its vulnerability but accepts it as a potential mode of participation in God’s reign. As Vanier relates through a conversation with core member René, “Community life in L’Arche and Faith and Light is showing us how weakness can be an opportunity for sharing, personal encounters, co-operation and friendship. René Leroy from L’Arche in Compiègne said one day, ‘Me all alone, can’t do it.’ To welcome

---

27 Jean Vanier, The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day (London: SPCK, 2013), 85. Vanier does recognize that an acknowledgement of weakness can also close persons off, particularly when they live in states of isolation and loneliness where love is or has not been available. Vanier, Our Life Together, 510.
weakness is a sign of maturity.” Vanier continually reiterates how disarmament needs a life sharing with and openness to others, and cannot be accomplished alone. “It seems evident to me that in order to live in such difficult situations and remain open, dynamic, creative, peaceful and refusing to be governed by fear, one needs an intense community life, a community life that is poor and centred on Jesus and on the Holy Spirit. These communities, close to the poor, must become oases of peace and reconciliation.” According to Vanier, being liberated in truth requires grace so that persons “have the courage and strength to take the path of disarmament, vulnerability, and openness to others.” Without this gift received in community, Vanier found that the truth of being human can easily become unbearable, and lead to despair and incessant loneliness. Disarmament thus represents as much a communal activity than an individualistic therapy.

Core Members as Prophets of Peace

That Vanier uses the example of a core member here to express the reality which leads to peace exemplifies L’Arche’s great and penetrating insight: that being in relationship with people labelled intellectually disabled, persons often thought to be useless or helpless charity recipients, often leads others into a more truthful way of being human. “In some mysterious way disabilities – vulnerability and pain in ourselves and others – can help us become more human and to grow into greater maturity. At a very deep level people who live openly with their disabilities can heal others of their fearful needs for success and power. They are messengers of peace for our world.” Vanier continually relates stories which relate how persons often thought deeply defective embody a logic required for communities to remain united. L’Arche communities offer a site of peace for a world locked in competition, rivalry, and consumerism. Vanier sums up this insight in the reflections of assistants who lived with Antonio, someone who would be labelled as profoundly intellectually disabled. Many assistants’ relationships with Antonio transported them to a whole new world of meaning and value, one more in keeping with God’s reign and design. “I come from a competitive and conflict-ridden world,” Vanier hears in

28 Vanier, Our Life Together, 509.
29 Ibid., 268.
30 Ibid., 510.
many assistants. “I was taught to hide my weakness and limits behind a mask, and to be strong and aggressive in order to win in studies, work and sport, in order to climb the ladder of promotion. Antonio is leading me into another world, a world of love and tenderness where we respect one another, need one another, live in compassion one with another; a world where we try to help each other to use our gifts, to grow humanly and spiritually, and to find our place in the body of community.”

The friendships formed with Antonio illustrates for Vanier the eschatological wedding feast, where persons do not fear others and hide from their brokenness. In this “new creation,” the moral imagination stretches beyond the world of globalized consumerism to the united body of the peaceable community.

Living in small communities of peace with people who have a mental handicap helped me to discover this process of disarmament. Love helped me to disarm the violence and self-hatred in the men and women with a mental handicap. But they also called me to identify and disarm my own inner violence and fears; they called me to greater love. I believe more and more that in the new vision for the world, humanity is called to discover new forms of community where the poorest and the weakest members have their place; where people can truly let down barriers and learn to love one another. This mutual love will open their hearts without fear so that they can welcome all others, no matter how different.

The acceptance of the self which Antonio and others exemplify and embody for others helps those formed in the tyranny of normality disarm themselves and end the warfare inside their hearts. No longer do people need to be divided into the good and bad, the winners and losers, the friend versus the enemy. This organization into categories of humanity is not relegated to the competitive secular world, but finds its way into churches who far too often copy the wall building of fearful communities. Vanier discovered that the acceptance of weakness leads to a dropping of the psychological security walls built to protect the self, which results in the ability to reach out to others and discover the other as a friend in a common humanity. Core members show others that welcoming the stranger within assists in welcoming the other as stranger, building community and an appreciation of difference. “[I]t is my belief that in our mad

world where there is so much pain, rivalry, hatred, violence, inequality, and oppression, it is people who are weak, rejected, marginalized, counted as useless, who can become a source of life and of salvation for us as individuals as well as for our world. And it is my hope that each one of you may experience the incredible gift of friendship of people who are poor and weak, that you too, may receive life from them. For they call us to love, to communion, to compassion and to community.”

This transformed perception, which understands core members as unpretentiously demonstrating the peace of God’s kingdom, shows how L’Arche lives an alternative logic of peace. While a liberal social imaginary projects a vision of peace through power and upward mobility, Vanier found those called intellectually disabled as often living more by a different moral imagination: strength in weakness, unity through diversity, freedom through mutual dependence. Kathy Baroody, an assistant who has spent much of her L’Arche life in the West Bank, relates how her friend Ghadir offers this kind of reasoning not only to those who share life with her but for the world.

Ghadir has lived her whole life knowing her limitations. She has encountered frustration and pain. She knows what it means to be gripped by fear. She knows what it feels like to be the source of fear for people who look at her and see someone less than human. Ghadir has somehow accepted the paralysis of her body. But she refuses to succumb to the paralysis of her heart. With the joy she wants to share and the thirst she has for friendship, she has discovered the weapons that destroy fear. She didn’t spend years and years and billions of dollars on research. She simply realized that each moment is a gift, and invitation to enter into relationship with others. Ghadir has created a little world of peace. A little world where each person is welcomed. A little world of healing. A little world where gratitude is possible.

Vanier warns again and again that without being in relationship with persons like Ghadir and Antonio, it is all too easy to live in the illusions of the broken self and mainstream society.

Many of the nondisabled in L’Arche perceived core members as coming to a mature welcome of

---

34 Vanier, From Brokenness to Community, 9–10.
their vulnerability, and thus demonstrating for others the truthful logic of the Beatitudes. Only persons confronting and embracing the truthfulness of creatureliness can abide in the kenotic space of the gospel. Vanier perceived time and again core members as those “prophets of peace” who awaken others into an acceptance of their own vulnerability, leading the way to mutual friendships and the breaking down of dividing walls.36

**Psychology, Aristotle and the Holy Spirit: Placing Vanier in the Literature**

Vanier’s insight on the movement towards disarmament comes not only through living life in community for over fifty years. In addition, modern psychology and his studies on Aristotle have also influenced Vanier’s discussions on the origins of violence and the process towards peace. At the same time, Vanier makes clear that without the grace of the Holy Spirit, all attempts at liberation will ultimately fail. Psychology and moral philosophy remain key sources of wisdom, but in the end must find their place in a theocentric vision. The following section will explicate the influences these sources exercise on Vanier, and how his own theory fits within their particular domains.

*Psychology.* The importance Vanier placed on discerning the origins of violence means he understands psychology as a tool for both comprehending human behaviour and facilitating the disarmament of the heart. Philippe and others at the Eau Vivre community introduced Vanier to some psychological theory, which became a source of insight in living with deeply rejected persons.37 Nondisabled assistants found this wisdom important in calling everyone to freedom and growth, and employed psychologists to facilitate an understanding of people that went beyond their external behaviour.38 Early psychologists like Léone Richet and Erol Franko

---

38 On early attempts to seek the assistance of psychologists in trying to understand people with intellectual disabilities, see Bill Clarke, *Enough Room for Joy: The Early Days of l’Arche* (Toronto: Novalis, 2006), 103-116.
taught Vanier how the violence sometimes displayed by core members acted as a form of communication that called less for containment than transformation.\textsuperscript{39}

Vanier rarely draws overtly from psychological theory, yet aspects of his thought align with the stream of psychology known as “attachment theory.” First developed by psychologists like John Bowlby, attachment theory emphasizes the importance of the mother-infant relationship in the creation of a stable self.\textsuperscript{40} The communion experienced with what psychologist D. W. Winnicott called the “good enough mother” communicates to the child their inherent and unconditional worth.\textsuperscript{41} These attachments give the infant a firm basis for the self as well as a foundation for future relationships. However, without this love and care one will not have a secure basis from which to relate to others. In addition, a deficiency in care could hinder the self’s ability to regulate powerful emotions, and produce harmful degrees of anxiety and depression. Vanier has acknowledged the importance of Bowlby and others in the importance of parental love in the early childhood development.\textsuperscript{42} For many nondisabled assistants in L’Arche, the experience of living with persons like Eric and Antonio confirmed many of the insights of attachment theory.

The intimate attachments formed through early parent-child relationships has relevance not just for individual maturity but also for intra- and inter-group relations. Ervin Staub recognizes intimate attachments as a basic psychological need, which helps to facilitate the “prosocial orientation” needed to welcome and work with others.\textsuperscript{43} When this attachment does not happen, children often develop negative forms of identity that need to demonize and


scapegoat others to fortify a fragile self. The highly competitive nature of western society can exacerbate insecure attachments and feed the perception of the other as a hostile opponent. The process of scapegoating others involves a projection of one’s existential anxiety onto the other, and results in “enmification” or the creation of enemies as reservoirs for unwanted aspects of the psyche. Staub and others recognize the importance of “cross-cutting relations” between groups as helping to facilitate a more inclusive conception of being human which limits us versus them comparisons and reduces the projection of invidious stereotypes which often leads to violence. According to Julia Kristeva, recognizing rather than demonizing the stranger within awakens us to the humanity of the external foreigner, and helps us encounter their difference rather than eliminate or “integrate” it. Kristeva understands psychoanalysis as crucial in removing the pathology of “strangeness,” thereby preparing persons to welcome the foreigner in their otherness as fellow stranger.

Aristotle. While Philippe represents one source for the recognition of the importance of psychology, Vanier’s work on Aristotle represents another. Vanier claims that Aristotle helped him understand how psychology intersected with spirituality and ethics in attempting to

44 Ibid., 299.
understand the inner blockages which impeded persons in moving towards liberation.\textsuperscript{49} Aristotle recognized that human beings have a fundamental desire for happiness which directs all human behaviour and pursuits of the good. Vanier understands Aristotle as confirming the psychological insight that a unifying principle lies at the root of all human action.\textsuperscript{50} For Aristotle that ultimate human desire is happiness (NE 1095a17). Aristotle’s belief in the human as a soul-body unity means that an understanding of and arrival at happiness inextricably includes living well. Hence the need to understand human being not merely through abstract theory but by observing human behaviour, particularly in those who live in a way commensurate with the \textit{telos} of happiness. Those who embody this end live from and cultivate the virtues, which form the “inner structure” required to live fully and humanly.\textsuperscript{51} The virtues regulate human desire away from excess or deficiency and towards the \textit{logos} in which persons discern their true end. Vanier considers Aristotle’s discussion of the virtues as a detailed analysis of human psychology.\textsuperscript{52} Aristotle shows how the desires or appetites can control persons and hinder the achievement of the soul’s ultimate aim.\textsuperscript{53}

Although he mentions Aristotle’s emphasis on education as a means of formation in the virtues, Vanier does not discuss the importance Aristotle places on what we would call “early childhood development” for human flourishing. Charalambos S. Ierodiakonou sees Aristotle affirming that the formation of a mature personality requires loving care from infancy.\textsuperscript{54} Ierodiakonou draws on examples from the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} which emphasize the importance of the father’s ruling-guiding love (NE 1161a), along with the affectionate care of the mother (NE 1159a, 1166a). The prominence Aristotle puts on the formation of the child cohere with Vanier’s emphasis on early parent-child bonding. This emphasis also shows how human growth demands much more than individual rationality and autonomy. Pauline Chazan claims that Aristotle’s psychology shows how habituation and upbringing are just as important as rational arguments in regulating the appetites and arriving at human maturity.\textsuperscript{55} Vanier does note the

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{49}]Jean Vanier, \textit{Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle} (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001), xiii.
\item[\textsuperscript{50}]Ibid., 8.
\item[\textsuperscript{51}]Ibid., 20.
\item[\textsuperscript{52}]Ibid., 110.
\item[\textsuperscript{53}]Greek psychoanalyst Charalambos S. Ierodiakonou understands the “appetite” in Aristotle as corresponding to what modern psychology describes as the instinctual drives. \textit{The Psychology of Aristotle, the Philosopher: A Psychoanalytic Therapist’s Perspective} (London: Karnac Books, 2011), chap. 4.
\item[\textsuperscript{54}]Ibid., 76-80.
\item[\textsuperscript{55}]Pauline Chazan, \textit{The Moral Self} (London; Routledge, 1998), 65.
\end{itemize}
difference between Plato and Aristotle on the role of the family in regards to the *polis*, with Aristotle seeing the family as the “cradle in which men [sic] must prepare themselves to work justly in society.”56 The family stands as a crucial place of formation for persons, orienting them not only towards human excellence but also the common good.

*The Holy Spirit.* Despite Vanier’s positive evaluation of the benefits psychology provides on the journey towards human maturity, ultimately he recognizes that all understandings of human behaviour must be *theologically* oriented. The story of L’Arche reveals the tensions involved along the way in both being open to the secular world while also remaining rooted in being “God’s project.” In the end, for Vanier the Holy Spirit rather than modern psychology stands as the ultimate guide in growth and freedom. Only those open to the Spirit “can help people go beyond their search for psychological peace and their own identity, so that they can listen to the call of God and of those in distress, and enter into covenant with them.”57 Theologian Michael Hryniuk exemplifies this view of interpreting psychology through a theological lens. Hryniuk describes the process of transformation nondisabled assistants undergo in L’Arche, understanding it as a liberation from ontic shame towards life-giving communion. L’Arche as “a metaphysical parable of the life of Trinitarian communion” embodies the mystery of God’s economy achieved not through power but “redemptive vulnerability.”58 This theologically centered psychology transforms both the means and end of growth. Healing shame comes not merely through individual therapy for the goal of personal autonomy, but comes through relationships with others for the ultimate goal of communion with God, the other and all creation.

**Jean Vanier’s Vision of Peace**

The topic of peace, not just in L’Arche but more broadly, has increasingly occupied Vanier for the last 20 years. Yet despite all his writing on the subject, Vanier never offers a conclusive definition of peace, or a sustained reflection on the contents of peace. However, by

---

looking through his *oeuvre* one can discern a vision that, while growing through time, remains relatively consistent and coherent.

At the very least one can see that Vanier understands peace as far more than the mere absence of conflict, balance of competing forces, or static states of tranquility. A far more complex and multi-faceted view emerges, encompassing both the individual and society, including past, present and future, and understanding peace both as condition and as action. The following section will look at how Vanier sees peace, and discuss it under three headings. Firstly, Vanier perceives peace as a state of being, most appropriately characterized as communion. Secondly, for Vanier peace also represents an eschatological goal and human *telos*. Thirdly, peace is also a dynamic process or activity lived out in daily life. Understanding peace in this way represents far more than a liberal form of “inclusion,” but rather a robust communion that welcomes the stranger and forgives the enemy.

*Peace as a State of Communion*

The concept of unity, or more appropriately communion, summarizes above all for Vanier what peace is and looks like. Vanier rarely uses the common pairing of “peace and justice” but more often speaks of “peace and unity.” For Vanier, communion implies a welcoming of persons as they are, walking with the other in truth rather than expecting conformity to an external norm. In this way, Vanier clearly differentiates between a coercive unity which demands sameness versus a peace which makes room for the other’s difference. Violence destroys the fabric of unity, dividing the body through fear and abuses of power. In a community in which individuals or institutions exert power over others rather than with them, communion and trust can rarely flourish. In contrast, a body in communion recognizes the difference of the other as a gift, created in love by God as a sign of the goodness of all creation. Vanier understands Paul’s reflections on the Corinthian Body as a manifestation of the authentic unity which emanates out of communion.

No longer are they rivals, living in competition. No longer do they see differences as a threat, but as a treasure. They live in harmony with each other; they no longer need to

---

59 For examples, see *Our Life Together*, 371, 408–9, 480; *An Ark for the Poor*, 11; *Finding Peace*, 65–66; *Drawn into the Mystery*, 24.
attack each other but, on the contrary, they need each other with their different gifts. When we discover the riches of interdependence, we are no longer alone; we are together, helping one another, each one with his or her differences and gifts. Only then can that which is most profound in each one be awakened, bringing new life to the vulnerable hearts, often hidden behind walls of aggression and defence, but capable of welcoming God and others, without losing what is most precious in self.\(^60\)

Vanier also recognizes the need for “positive peace”, i.e., the need not only to eliminate violence but provide an environment where people can develop to their full potential. Yet rather than base justice strictly on contemporary notions of rights and law, Vanier instead stresses the requirement for relational harmony in order for people to grow and mature. Like Aristotle, Vanier understands relationships of friendships rather than ones based on a social contract as uniting a *polis* and providing the means for justice.\(^61\) A community united means that it can then provide the foundation for justice: the flourishing of individuals and communities. Cultures of peace contain those qualities of the good – belonging, recognition, friendship, security, work which contributes to the community – that assist persons in their journey toward freedom and maturity.

As a body of friends rather than autonomous individuals, a society at peace means much more than a thin “inclusion.” Belonging and mutuality characterize peace far more than an “equality of opportunity” that enables persons approach the norms of modern society. For Vanier, peace means “trying to create a society not in the form of a pyramid but as a circle, where the weak as well as strong have their place and find dignity and meaning to their lives, and where there is mutuality rather than rivalry.”\(^62\) This kind of communion relies on an orientation towards friendship which engages the other in a spirit of mutuality. Vanier discovered that for many devalued persons recognition and belonging facilitated an empowerment far more powerful than liberal assertions of rights. Thus in the midst of the Paris student protests in 1968 Vanier asked core member Dédé, “What is peace?” “Peace is to be here,” Dédé replied.\(^63\)


\(^{61}\) Vanier, *Made for Happiness*, 170. However, Vanier does critique and go beyond Aristotle at this point by assuming perfect friendship as possible with persons considered intellectually disabled, whereas Aristotle would confine that friendship to virtuous persons of equal value and status (73). In this way, while Vanier relies much on Aristotle’s moral philosophy, he also rejects much of his social theory. For Vanier’s considerations of the shortcomings of Aristotle’s ethics, see ibid., 183-95.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 41.
Peace as Human Telos and Eschatological Goal

The seeming omnipresence of violence in the world can contribute to the common notion of peace as merely the ceasing of hostilities. Yet peace also exists as a goal of a community’s concept of the good and human life, one which spurs persons on to embody their own ideals. As Vanier notes, “Peace is not a question just of stopping this or that catastrophe, but of rediscovering a vision, a path of hope for all of humanity.”\(^{64}\) Only communities which remember and retell their stories have the expanded moral imagination necessary to envision a future different from the dominant tale of the inevitability of warfare. Christians would call this the eschatological dimension of peace: the inbreaking but not fully complete consummation of the kingdom of God. Although Christ has already inaugurated the peaceful reign of God, Christians acknowledge the kingdom’s “not yet” character, and thus present before their eyes the destination for their pilgrimage of faith. This vision of eschatological peace serves not to dull believers into a detached pining for a transcendent escape, but forms their lives as a community attempting to embody the Gospel of peace and makes them ready to see and receive the Holy Spirit.

One of the images Vanier speaks of in regards to a telos of humanity is the eternal wedding feast. “The final goal of humankind, to which we all aspire, is that unity where there will be no more struggle and warfare. Struggle implies the possibility of being vanquished and oppressed, and thus to be isolated. The wedding feast is the final goal of all struggle since it is the celebration of love and unity.”\(^{65}\) In God’s future, humanity lives a unity where mutuality, friendship and communion make violence and war untenable. This vision of peace consists not of a stoic tranquility, but of joy and hope and celebration. Keeping the image of the wedding feast before people’s eyes means that celebration does not happen after all the conflicts and struggles have been solved. Instead, celebration but must be a practice, fruit, and goal of God’s peace.

In his spiritual commentary on the Gospel of John, Vanier contrasts the Christian telos of the wedding feast with the contemporary dominance of economics and the market. Vanier notes

how Jesus’s cleansing of the temple in John immediately follows upon the wedding at Cana, presenting two different aims of being human. On the one hand lies humanity’s “final destiny” in the “eternal wedding feast of love,” where persons are transformed and friendships are celebrated. Yet Vanier understands the commercialization of the temple as a symbol of the way today’s globalized economy has made money an “end in itself,” commodifying bodies and making shopping malls rather than churches common gathering places. An orientation towards celebration rings throughout Vanier’s implicit eschatology, thus giving his notions of peace a strong character of festivity and joy.

**Peace as a Dynamic Process and Practice**

Perhaps the aspect of peace that Vanier emphasizes and speaks about the most is the dimension of peace as a dynamic process. Vanier never promises a peace that guarantees pure, conflict-free bliss. Rather, Vanier argues that conflict remains an aspect of the human condition because of change being inherent in life itself. In this way, peace is as much a human work as a state of being. “Peace is not so much about suppressing conflict as it is about working through it, in a dialogue where each group or person feels respected, not put down or treated as someone inferior.” The dynamic nature of life means that Christians must also have a dynamic vision of God’s peace, continually reflecting anew upon what the Holy Spirit teaches the community of faith. Only a reliance upon the Trinity can give believers and the church the energy to move into the abandoned places of violence and despair, loving the enemy and welcoming the despised.

If peace is a crucial human labour, then it requires practices which faithfully embody and participate in God’s reconciliation. Rather than announce a vision of an individualistic, inner peace, Vanier persistently articulates a communion that reaches out and engages the other, particularly those most vulnerable. For Vanier, “real peace” means “meeting those who are different, appreciating them and their culture, and creating bonds of friendship with them.” A commitment to peace entails crossing boundaries, and discovering the gift of others through listening. This movement leads to a communion of hearts, which helps persons to see one

---

67 Ibid., 65-7.
69 Ibid., 41.
another through the lens of a common humanity and thus work together for the common good. A peace culture consists of the welcoming of those strangers of contemporary societies, offering a site of radical hope and meaning in a disenchanted and commodified world. The daily efforts at forgiveness and reconciliation at the heart of reconciliation means that Vanier understands peace as a way of life, in addition to peace as a state of being achieved once and for ever.

For Vanier, persons learn about and do peace not primarily through abstract concepts but in small communities of friendships committed to reconciliation and the welcoming of difference. For this reason Vanier understands community building as a form of peace and peacemaking crucial for the modern world. “I am more and more convinced that hope for our world lies in the creation and deepening of small Christian communities centred on Jesus and on the poor and the weak, communities where we learn how to walk on the path of forgiveness and of welcoming those who are different.”70 However, in the individualistic societies of the minority world this living peace often goes against the grain, therefore remaining hard, Spirit-inspired labour. Yet only these kinds of community can weather conflict non-violently and go beyond a tolerance indifferent towards the stranger.

**Signs of God’s Peace: Being and Becoming a Witness of a Peace Culture**

Because Vanier considers peace not only a state of being but a dynamic process, he believes that peace cannot remain isolated to individual tranquility but must ecstatically move towards a participation in God’s redemptive work. The personal liberation which comes from accepting one’s own fragile humanity is only a piece of God’s salvific intention for all creation. Receiving the gift of peace means being drawn into the ongoing process of both personal and communal freedom, which seeks encounters with those previously considered enemies in order to emulate Christ’s friend-making mission. For Vanier, the goal of L’Arche as well as that of the church is to be and ever become cultures of reconciliation. That witness inevitably includes welcoming strangers and befriending enemies.

*Loving the Enemy: Welcoming Difference in the Spirit of Encounter*

---

For Vanier, a crucial element of peace comes when difference shifts from being a threat to becoming a treasure to be valued. After having accepted the stranger within oneself, a participant in God’s peace reaches out in welcome to those strangers of culture, stamped with the societal marks of disturbing difference. For Vanier, this hospitality stands as an integral part of becoming persons and communities of God’s peace. “[E]ach one of us is called in an urgent way to become a man or woman of peace and reconciliation wherever we may be. We are called to open our hearts and minds to people who are different from us and who disturb us – to let the Holy Spirit come into our beings and take away our fear of others, so that we may become less intimidated in welcoming others and listening to them.”71 Peace happens when persons can begin to tear down walls of estrangement by an authentic encounter with the other in a spirit of friendship and mutuality.

This work of dialogue and conversation with those who are different is one of the great fruits as well as activities of peace. Persons and communities of reconciliation have truthfully looked at themselves, discovered their own brokenness and belovedness, and can therefore approach the other with the humble confidence needed to listen deeply. Truly meeting the other leads to what Vanier calls the “sacrament of encounter,” which meets “with the other as an equal, person to person, and in mutual respect for difference.”72 For Vanier, this kind of encounter offers a new sign of sanctity for Christians today as it presents not a triumphalistic and proselytizing church but a kenotic Christ who so respects the other that he will love and even give his life for the enemy.73 Thus the ultimate goal of encounter is not a powerful victory over the other, but the mutuality and deep communion that comes through the growing bonds of friendship. Vanier believed that an authentic befriending of one’s own inner enemy inside a community of friends naturally leads to a befriending of those society rejects and despises. This form of morality is grounded in a relational vision of peace which knows the need to go beyond contractual justice and more in the direction of recognizing the other as friend, as “an/other self”

one can never control or categorize yet who calls for communion and mutuality.\textsuperscript{74} Abiding by
and living into God’s peace means moving into those abandoned places of society in the spirit of
encounter. This meeting with the other saves lives by making friends, thereby relaying through
one’s presence a message for and of the other: that it is good that he or she exists, so good that
one might even give one’s life for him or her.

\textit{Being and Becoming a Community of Marginals: Witnessing to God’s Peace in a Strange Land}

Yet the gospel friendships demanded and created by the Trinity can appear highly
dissonant and strange to a culture whose narrative acclaims power, success, and autonomy as the
path to peace. Welcoming the weak and most vulnerable can exercise a transformation on
persons that places value on things which can severely contradict the social imaginary of
western, liberal societies. As Vanier notes, being drawn into God’s peace can be like entering a
strange land. “[W]hen we get committed to those who are excluded or marginalized, we run the
risk of being criticized by our family and friends. To leave the culture of friends and family is
like going into another world.”\textsuperscript{75} Reflection on L’Arche’s story revealed how living in
community can transform persons into “marginals,” persons much more critical and
uncomfortable with a world at warfare. As a marginal, one has new friends, new masters, and a
new vision of the good life, all exemplifying Jesus’s truth in saying that he gives a peace the
world cannot give (John 14:27). According to Vanier, a community committed to God’s peace
can look very “odd” to those accustomed to the conformity which accompanies the tyranny of
normality. Not only does this community love the enemy, but it also begins to move toward an
identification with those supposed defectives previously considered useless. Not only do they
share life together, but their strange friendships lead persons to believe in weakness and
vulnerability as aspects of human life which facilitates availability. Fundamental to the
experience and insight of L’Arche is the claim that this transformation of persons into marginals
committed to God’s peace happens through relationships with vulnerable persons. “Becoming a
friend to a marginalized, excluded person is an act of self-imposed exile from most of the

\textsuperscript{74} Vanier’s indebtedness to Aristotle is clear. See Vanier's discussion of perfect friendship in Aristotle, \textit{Made for
Happiness}, 65–72.

\textsuperscript{75} Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human}, 80.
world.” By willingly allowing themselves to be drawn into the friendships inherent in authentic peace, persons offer what some might call a “strange” narrative in comparison to the one promulgated by an anthropology of liberal citizenship.

Understanding a participation in God’s peace as an exilic movement speaks to how Vanier understands the believer’s and church’s relationship with the world. As a community committed to reconciliation and unity, the church must not become tempted to emulate cultures which use power and control as the way to peace. Instead, as persons living in exile Christians must dedicate themselves to the peace of the city not as rulers but as marginals, called to a different allegiance and a new master: Jesus Christ and his way of being peace. Vanier believes L’Arche can be an example of this exilic polis, communities of pilgrims making friends with the despised and rejected. At its best, L’Arche embodies “a vision to be like the yeast in the bread of society, and where the weak heal the strong,” rather than contemporary examples of successful institutions: “well-constructed, well-known monuments, glorious cathedrals, prestigious universities, efficient hospitals.” Vanier reminds Christians of the pitfalls that have accompanied the church whenever it has attempted to appropriate the devices and forms of power the world employs to institute peace. As pilgrims Christians are called to a different telos and use different instruments of facilitating peace, all exemplified by Christ’s kenotic character and the Holy Spirit’s uncontrollable presence in the world, particularly in those persons often considered the least “capable.”

A community not reliant on worldly forms of power to express and embody its vocation knows that witness rather than success determines its fidelity to its telos. L’Arche’s commitment to an ordinary yet profound presence to one another shows the humble truth of the gospel: through accepting and acknowledging the fundamental dimension of human creatureliness, persons recognize the need for one another which builds community and sets the pathways of peace. This living in the truth results not only in healed individuals, but has the potential to change the whole social order through a witness to an authentic conception of the human good.

76 Ibid., 96.
78 For example, Vanier points how the conversion of Constantine in 313 led to the building “of huge palaces and beautiful buildings became more important than being attentive to the poor and seeing them at the heart of the Church….The dominant cultures of society slowly penetrated the life of the Church.” Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John, 236.
What begins in community through relationships of friendship can echo out into the farthest reaches of a world longing for unity and peace.

As fears and prejudices diminish, and trust in God and others grows, the community can radiate and witness to a style of life which will bring a solution to the troubles of our world. The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters. The response to injustice is to share. The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope. The response to prejudice is forgiveness. To work for community is to work for humanity. To work for peace in community, through acceptance of others as they are, and through constant forgiveness, is to work for peace in the world and for true political solutions; it is to work for the Kingdom of God.\(^79\)

As Vanier continually insists, often the ones most responsible for keeping the community faithful to its mission have been core members. Persons in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology repeat time and again how people like Antonio and Ghadir exercise their gifts and help create the spaces of availability needed to let the Holy Spirit transform hearts and structures. Rather than march on the streets or negotiate in conference rooms, L’Arche’s peace witness consists of different kinds of work: celebrating lives, forgiving opponents, and befriending enemies. While a world committed to power and money conceives of loving the enemy as ridiculous or dangerously naïve, persons in L’Arche strive to live out enemy love on a daily basis, proving that nothing is impossible for a people committed to God’s reconciliation.

Yes, this is the impossible love that Jesus comes to announce in order that humanity work towards unity. This way of non-violence, forgiveness, and reconciliation, of acceptance of people who are different of total commitment and identification with the poor, given as a gift of the Holy Spirit, will shake all the foundations of societies closed in upon themselves: dictatorships or unbridled liberal capitalism. It will be a new force given by Jesus in love where hate is transformed into forgiveness and enemies into friends. This transformation will take time, for the Kingdom grows little by little like a seed; it is founded on love and on communion.\(^80\)

\(^{79}\) Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 99–100.

Peace Studies, Biblical Studies and Personalism: Placing Vanier in the Literature

The consistent focus on experience over theory Vanier maintains in his work extends towards his discussions on peace. Vanier spends little time on academic analyses of peace and reconciliation, but instead emphasizes the concrete and lived experiences of unity and the welcoming of difference in L’Arche, as well as in examples of other persons and communities throughout history. However, ideas and concepts from the broader literature on peace sometimes cohere with Vanier’s work and can offer fruitful areas of comparison. The following discussion will see how Vanier’s work on peace differs or coheres with the disciplines of peace studies, biblical studies, and Christian personalism.

**Peace Studies.** Like Vanier, the discipline of peace studies has sought to define peace as much more than the absence of war. Royce Anderson understands peace in both its negative and positive dimensions as “a condition in which individuals, families, groups, communities, and/or nations experience low levels of violence and engage in mutually harmonious relationships.”

This holistic understanding means that peace must include far more than legal treaties and the cessation of hostilities. Michael Allen Fox understands peace as including three dimensions: one, as a state of being which includes both the absence of violence as well as the presence of a nonviolent cultural milieu; two, peace as a *telos* or goal which embodies a community’s ideals and vision of the good life; and three, peace as a process or action lived out in the everyday as a way of life. Vanier’s understanding of peace as communion and a dynamic process, which includes an eschatological dimension and vision, aptly fits Fox’s holistic concept of peace.

Elise Boulding sees this sustainable and holistic peace as needing the existence not just of international diplomacy or nonviolent individuals but also *peace cultures.* Peace cultures promote a caring and well-being for persons and communities through patterns of belief, values and behaviour, as well as through nonviolent institutional arrangements. Boulding points out the importance of smaller communities and voluntary associations in peace cultures, who provide

---


the kind of personal and communal recognition impossible in a society based on mere contract relations. A similar emphasis on recognition exists in Vanier’s work, as he saw first-hand how sharing life together in community facilitated a recognition through friendship that went far beyond anything “rights” could accomplish. Peace cultures also operate out of a different vision of persons and societies, one with an imagination that can go beyond the necessity or inevitability of violence. Boulding calls these visions “utopias,” narratives which remind communities of a real and open future without violence and oppression. In many ways, L’Arche certainly fits this description of a peace culture living out of a different narrative of community and human flourishing. Vanier’s belief in humanity’s telos as the eschatological wedding feast represents a similar nonviolent communal vision.

A difference between Vanier and many peace thinkers lies in the ultimate source of peace. Vanier certainly would share with Fox and others a hopeful understanding of persons and societies, which maintains peace as a truly attainable goal and within the reach of individuals and communities. Yet Vanier also realizes that peace as fundamentally a gift given by a Creator which must be first of all received from another. Most of peace studies literature stays on a purely immanent plane, making peace a project for an educated and rational humanity. Thus Fox can claim that “Peace does not require of us that we be perfect, but rather, that we discover and affirm the better side of our nature. That would truly be the ultimate triumph of human intelligence.” Vanier certainly argues for peace as a personal and communal task to be performed, yet also insists on the graced and transcendent nature of peace as fundamentally a received gift.

Biblical Studies. While his commentary on the Gospel of John remains his only work explicitly concerned with a biblical source, the Bible as a whole pervades Vanier’s oeuvre, with Vanier’s discussions of peace being no exception. Vanier rarely mentions peace in regards to shalom, yet his holistic vision of peace fits with the interpersonal, international, and cosmological

---

84 Ibid., 171. Boulding draws here upon the thought of German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and his Community and Civil Society, ed. Jose Harris, trans. Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887, 2001).

85 Boulding, Cultures of Peace, 29–32, 55. Argentinian nun Margarita Moyano makes a similar observation about L’Arche in the context of liberation and the emergence of a church of the poor. “Believe me, you in L’Arche are busy giving a place to utopia, a place of fraternity, love, joy, dignity, tenderness, peace; signs, anticipating the new times we are promised.” “A Reason for Hope,” Letters of L’Arche, no. 77 (Fall 1993): 17.

86 Fox, Understanding Peace, 280.
implications of the Old Testament conceptions of peace. In his semantic analysis of *shalom* in the Hebrew Bible, Shemaryahu Talmon understands *shalom* as not only connoting individual well-being, prosperity, and security, but also including inter-personal, intra-group, and inter-group peace. *Shalom* also included the eschatological dimension of a coming Messiah who would restore peace not only to Israel but to the cosmos as well. God’s covenant with Israel means that the people must walk and participate in God’s way of righteousness and justice, the source and norm for all of Israel’s relationships.

The New Testament use of *eirene* shares many of the characteristics of *shalom*, including rest, endless well-being, the elimination of enmity, and inter-personal harmony. Edward M. Keazirian analyzes Paul’s use of *eirene* in the context of Greco-Roman notions of peace, and finds the biggest difference in the Christian belief in peace not as anomalous interlude but as normative state of being. This shift comes through Jesus’s cosmic reconciliation achieved by his victory over the powers, overturning the dominance of the Greek warrior-hero as exemplar and the Roman peace as a carefully calibrated violence. The justification won through Christ’s victory on the cross must translate into peaceful relationships with others in the church as signs

---


88 Talmon, “The Signification of שָׁלוֹם,” 82-9
of God’s grace, in turn extending even towards the enemy. Keazirian thus summarizes Paul’s distinctive notion of peace from his contemporaries:

The serenity, the calm, quiet security that both Paul and the Greco-Roman world knew as peace provided a common point of reference for them. However, while the heroic ideal was to fight the war, destroy the enemy, and secure the peace, Paul’s ideal was to receive reconciliation, which destroyed the enmity with God, and thereby receive the gift of peace. While the heroic ideal was to seek glory and honor for oneself through courage and victory on the battlefield, Paul sought to know and glorify God, and to give honor to others. Therefore, in the call to reconciliation is also a call to sanctification, to live with a different set of values from the surrounding culture.  

Vanier’s own conception of peace agrees to a great extent with these biblical notions. Peace as a gift, as having its source in God and God’s righteousness, as including human flourishing and well-being, and as taking place within a community of justified persons all resonate in Vanier’s reflections. An aspect of peace Vanier emphasizes in distinction from much biblical work on shalom and eirene is the implicit link he makes between justice and friendship. Vanier would find much common ground with theologians seeking a “just peace,” summarized in the call to do “peace with justice.”  

Biblical views on peace contain inter-personal justice, but Vanier seeks to particularize that peace in relationships of friendship. Vanier understands the transformation of structures and inter-group reconciliation in situations of overt conflict as important. At the same time, he also believes that justice demands a mutual recognition of the other, modeled in Jesus’s calling of his disciples “friends” and the church’s mission of entering into relationships of friendship with marginalized and devalued persons.

Christian Personalism. A crucial source for this emphasis on inter-personal communion and friendship comes from his grounding in Christian personalism. As a Christian personalist philosopher, Vanier begins all his reflections on social issues not with institutions or political processes but with the human person. Therefore his discussion of peace assumes the importance of arriving first at a truthful anthropology.

---

93 Keazirian, Peace and Peacemaking in Paul and the Greco-Roman World, 186.
If our society has difficulty in functioning, if we are continually confronted by a world in crisis, full of violence, of fear, of abuse, I suggest it is because we are not clear about what it means to be human. We tend to reduce being human to acquiring knowledge, power, and social status. We have disregarded the heart, seeing it only as a symbol of weakness, the centre of sentimentality and emotion, instead of as a powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow.\(^9\)

According to Vanier, without a truthful understanding of the condition and telos of being human, attempts at forming the principles or building the structures of a peaceful society will fail. A clear anthropology provides the base from which to articulate the state and goal of human flourishing. Acknowledging persons as made for freedom within united communities of trust means that peace must include both a profound respect for each person as well as a network of relationships which bind persons to one another. Institutions may be necessary for maintaining the foundation for unity, but they must always serve the person and not vice versa. Likewise, individuals can never flourish within a communal narrative primarily based on autonomy and self-sufficiency for this erodes an awareness of the mutual dependence at the heart of being human. Vanier understands Jesus’s continual focus on the person rather than the law or the group as founding his personalist philosophy and ethic. Thus only through attempting to emulate Jesus’s life and vision can persons most authentically arrive at and journey towards the peace and unity God intends for the world.

**Conclusion**

In *Essential Writings: Jean Vanier*, editor Carolyn Whitney-Brown considers the founding of L’Arche in the context of its date: August 4-5, 1964.\(^9\) On August 4, Vanier moved into a humble house in Trosly-Breuil, France, in preparation for the call he received from God to welcome men considered disabled from a local institution. The next day, after a small ceremony and celebration with local dignitaries and friends, Vanier, Simi, and Seux (and Dany) began the adventure in peace that would become L’Arche. On the other side of the world a different

preparation was occurring. On August 4, a report was sent to the US government that the *USS Maddox*, then patrolling in Vietnam’s Gulf of Tonkin, was apparently attacked by the North Vietnamese navy. President Lyndon Johnson quickly decided on retaliatory strikes, with US aircraft bombing enemy targets on the morning of August 5. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed less than a week later, which gave Johnson authorization to use military force without declaring war and served as perhaps the primary event in the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The contrasts of events that occurred on August 4-5, 1964, serve as a useful metaphor for the witness of peace that L’Arche offers to the world. Based upon his experience of founding and living in L’Arche, what is philosophy and theology of peace Jean Vanier announces and advocates? Far from the dominant understanding as peace as the absence or cessation of hostilities, sometimes even by the use of force, Vanier conceives of peace as a holistic and dynamic communion of persons who welcome strangers and befriend enemies. While the reality of human brokenness often leads to the projection of evil onto others that paves the way for enmification and dehumanization, L’Arche provides a culture which assists persons in confronting and accepting their shadow selves. Vanier found core members particularly adept at leading persons to this kind of conversion, acting as masters in befriending others and making spaces of availability where peace can flourish. Persons in L’Arche undergo stages of transformation: from the original honeymoon period where persons recognize their ability to love others; to a subsequent recognition of their own woundedness, encountered in relationships with persons in anguish; to an acceptance of themselves and the other in the truth of the human condition. However, for Vanier this process does not end merely with the inner peace of the individual, but ecstatically moves outward in a call to work for a more liberated world. Vanier understands this desire to participate in God’s peace as at the heart of the gospel and the church, the community called to embody Jesus’s story through the power of the Holy Spirit. L’Arche stands a particularly apt icon of the gospel, especially when the church appears to be in moribund states of complacency. Vanier’s journey in and with L’Arche helped him see that “the renewal of the Church and the unity of the followers of Jesus will come as we serve and befriend those who appear to us as ‘strange’, ‘different’, the unwanted and the lonely of our societies and as we learn to befriend our own poverty, the ‘strange’ and the lonely within us.”

Many core

---

members’ gift of availability and receptivity shows a pathway to peace in cultures of cut-throat competition and divisive prejudice.

Vanier’s experience and vision of peace continually evolved due to his interpretation that the will and presence of God exists in the midst of life rather than merely in principles and concepts. By living in a spirit of inspired practicality with others with and without cognitive impairments in L’Arche, Vanier discovered the nature and form of peace. At the same time, he also uncovered the fundamental dispositions and practices that made reconciliation possible and alive among persons. The next chapter will consider what these virtues and habits consist of, and how they help in forming persons in the unity and friendship of God’s peace.
Chapter 4 Like Water Running Forever Over Rock: Becoming Friends of Time in L’Arche’s Peace Culture

To struggle for a cause it is best for people to be rooted in a community where they are learning reconciliation, acceptance of difference and of their own darkness, and how to celebrate.¹

L’Arche calls to the world. Its conviction is that, bit by bit, peace can come into the world. L’Arche wants to offer to others the desire to enter the logic of mutuality of gifts, greater than the logic of power or indifference....In living forgiveness and celebration in community life and in our mutual relationships, we learn together how to build peace, how to become men and women open to the world, ready to welcome all our brothers and sisters in humanity.²

Being with someone like Edith every day has the effect of the drop of water running forever over the rock.³

The vision of peace Jean Vanier presents cannot be lived without community. Peace never comes simply by the self-will of individuals because the creatureliness of human beings makes them dependent on God, others and creation for their very being. Thus peace must be worked out in a body of communion, a koinonia which calls its members to the transformative process of disarmament. L’Arche’s insight about core members often exemplifying the path toward transformation hinges on the need for the other. Social imaginaries which prize independence and self-determination as guiding norms often consider this persistent dependence as a failure or as a hindrance to human flourishing. However, persons in L’Arche discover that this “weakness” lies at the heart of being human, and accepting this vulnerability stands as an important task in living truthfully.

For those communities devoted to Vanier’s theological commitments and called to authentically witness to God’s peace in the world, they require a culture which attempts to embody the peace of Christ. As peace cultures, L’Arche communities are gifts arising from

God’s providence, bodies shaped by everyday habits and practices. The transformation from fear to peace Vanier advocates and sees in L’Arche does not just “happen,” but comes through the official and unofficial formation of daily life. Becoming peace cultures requires the cultivation and development of particular dispositions and performances which shape persons and communities into embodiments of disarmament.

My question for this chapter concerns how L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology understand the shape and content of their peaceable a way of life. What are the communal habits and practices that embody, illustrate and form persons in L’Arche’s peace culture? The method of this chapter will be twofold. The first consists in a description of how persons in L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theological vision acquire habits of peace through their experience of daily life in L’Arche. This chapter will focus in four habits in particular that assist persons and communities in becoming cultures of peace: mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness. These habits are formed through the key L’Arche practices of welcome, story-telling, prayer, deep listening, forgiveness, and celebration, which faithfully express the ethos of communities as well as form their members more fully in those dispositions of a peace culture. The second purpose of this chapter will be reflections on L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theological commitments as particular cultures of peace. As communities who place core members at the center of communal life, these L’Arche communities have refused to be fully “integrated” within dominant cultures but embody an authentic and holistic peace witness to often skeptical societies. An aspect of L’Arche’s alternative culture is its experience of time. In cultures and a world speeding up life and fragmenting persons, L’Arche’s conspicuously slow tempo confronts hurried newcomers with a truthful and gentle pace of life. This decelerated way of life is crucial in the development of peaceful habits and performances of the transformative practices L’Arche advocates. Time and again nondisabled assistants testify to their experience of core members as leading them to disarmament through the presence required in this slow tempo. Recognizing the truthful nature of the decelerated life stands as a gift Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities might offer to the church as it tries to faithfully follow Christ, and to a world weary and desiring community.

Methodological Considerations
On Sources

The twofold dimension of this chapter will make use of two different sets of sources on the way of peace and culture of Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities. For the discussion of the habits and practices of peace in L’Arche, I will rely primarily on the writings of persons in L’Arche as they describe and relate their experience of living community. This focus will rely on Vanier’s writings as well as articles from *The Letters of L’Arche*, an internal publication of the communities within the international movement. I also draw on additional internal documents of L’Arche International and L’Arche Canada for this analysis. Following this method provides vivid examples of the how L’Arche practices form persons in the habits the movement considers worthy of value. This focus aims to describe how people in L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theology experience the process of disarmament in the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of sharing life together, and how daily encounters and practices shape persons in particular habits and dispositions.

Limitations certainly come with this approach. The sources of this chapter do not meet the criteria of “objectivity” or “neutrality.” Taking sources at their word always has the downside of not being critical enough of underlying issues and contexts. Yet acknowledging the biases that exist by relying on first-person accounts, writings from L’Arche members still contains an exceptional self-awareness that can admit weaknesses and the times when it has failed to live up to its own sense of identity and mission.4 In addition, the focus here will be less on how persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights intellectually conceive L’Arche than on how they experience peaceable habits and practices in community life. Placing the emphasis on first person accounts will help identify which habits are relevant to L’Arche as a culture of peace, and which practices assist in forming members in the dispositions needed to sustain that culture.5

---

4 An example of this honesty is the three year, three phase Identity and Mission process that all the L’Arche communities globally were asked to participate in. The second phase was dedicated to discerning the obstacles to community life and how communities failed to live up to their call. See the report on the second phase, George Durner, “Naming and Growing,” *Letters of L’Arche* 114 (November 2004): 1–7.
5 For a similar consideration of the pros and cons of describing and analyzing L’Arche through texts, see Michael V. Angrosino, “L’Arche: The Phenomenology of Christian Counterculturalism,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 6 (December 2003): 935–6.
Other sources will be explored for the second part of this chapter, which attempts to reflect upon how habits and practices in L’Arche communities oriented around Vanier’s theology form communities into alternative peace cultures. These sources include ethnographic and phenomenological accounts of life in L’Arche, which have attempted to understand the way L’Arche’s way of life and value system impact assistants, and the potential the movement has for influencing the wider society on issues of disability and morality. Alongside these works, I draw on the work of theologians reflecting on L’Arche in regards to Christian discipleship and ecclesial practice. These sources will become increasingly important as an attempt to help “translate” L’Arche’s way and conception of peace to the ecumenical church.

**Culture as a Particular Way of Life**

This chapter will consider L’Arche communities oriented around Vanier’s theology as a (counter) culture nestled within the dominant culture of the societies communities inhabit. Yet culture is far from a clear and settled term. Raymond Williams has famously remarked that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” The fact that culture means many different things to many different people requires a further elucidation

---


8 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87.
of what exactly “culture” refers to in regards to the L’Arche communities referenced in this project.

In his look at the history of culture, sociologist Chris Jenks creates a fourfold typology of the concept of culture: culture as a cerebral category or state of mind of human progress; culture as a collective activity of development, often equivalent to the term “civilization”; culture as a descriptive category, including the collective body of artistic and intellectual work of a society; and culture as a social category which conceives of culture as a whole way of life of a people or group. This chapter will consider L’Arche as culture primarily in this last sense, namely as the commitment of a group to a particular way of life. In this definition, culture “refers to the way of life of a people and emphasizes the holistic, integrated totality of that way of life – including the people’s behavior, the things they make, and their ideas.” This assumes an acknowledgement of a more “pluralist” approach to culture, which can discern the traces of culture not only in grand systems but also in local moral worlds.

However, aspects of Jenks’s third conception of culture as symbolic production can also apply to L’Arche. L’Arche’s culture is concrete and embodied, and forms people not merely in ideas about being human but also creates new forms of value not noticed in a society geared toward productivity and instrumental rationality. This chapter uses a concept of culture which makes room both for the abstract/idealist and the concrete/realist. L’Arche involves the bodies of persons engaging in activities both socially routine and particular to L’Arche’s communal life. These actions then act as facilitators of the passing on of L’Arche’s more abstract norms and values. L’Arche thus represents culture in its holistic manifestation, as a way of life which involves and shapes both the behaviour and morality of its inhabitants.

**Becoming Oriented toward Communion: The Habits of Peace in L’Arche**

---


11 Jenks, *Culture,* 10.

L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments strive to live and witness to a faithful, Gospel culture of peace in the midst of late modern society. This does not necessarily come easy to persons formed in societies where speed, mobility, and rationality represent the essential building blocks of fulfillment. Persons in these L’Arche communities must be shaped in the proper qualities needed to become disarmed persons, receiving, revealing, and participating in God’s gift of peace. What are the habits, dispositions, and attitudes required of persons to live this peace witness? For which excellences must persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities strive to faithfully live their call and mission as cultures of peace?

This section will attempt to delineate some essential habits L’Arche members in communities following Vanier’s theological commitments seek to embody and develop in their journey to live God’s peace in their communities and in the world. Four particularly important habits will be discussed: mutuality, trust, patience, and tenderness. *Mutuality* provides persons with the lens necessary to see the other not as a category but as a friend, “another self.” Remembering God’s constant, providential care for L’Arche cultivates *trust* in L’Arche members, a crucial quality needed to live in peace with a community of radically different others. *Patience* teaches persons how not only to wait, but also how to bear life with others and not lose heart even during times of ineradicable suffering. Living a non-violence toward the body and all living things requires the development of *tenderness*, which understands every person as a gift created by a good God.

Certainly other habits and orientations could be discussed, such as humility, wisdom, and justice (among others). These four habits, however, are highlighted here because they connect in a particular way with Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities’ attempt to be and become a faithful culture of peace. A distinctive feature revealed in looking at habits of peace in L’Arche is the experience many nondisabled assistants have of those persons considered intellectually disabled as exemplars and teachers. The fact that even persons with profound cognitive impairments lead others in developing the qualities needed to live faithful community life points to L’Arche as an atypical community in late modernity. Instead of being guided by the apparently strongest and most “able,” L’Arche communities dedicated by Vanier’s theology strive to let the weakest set the tone for the community’s peace culture.
Mutuality – The Bond of the Community of Friends

Cultivating and proclaiming the mutuality of relationships between core members and assistants has grounded L’Arche since its beginnings. Whereas in institutional or mainstream residential care competent service to “clients” or “patients” suffices, L’Arche formed its members in seeing the other as a friend, as “another self.” Vanier continually emphasized over the years that the relationships between the rich and poor, the dominant and the marginalized, cannot stop at generosity but must move towards friendship and mutuality. Raphaël and Philippe sought most of all friendship from Vanier when they began living together. Assistants in L’Arche consistently experience core members teaching others the importance of mutuality in living relationships, and how this mutuality serves as the glue which binds individuals into a unified network of friends. In a world where difference can create enemies and enmity, the friendships created across vast unknowns and asymmetries make L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology a profound witness for God’s peace.

In a community which fosters and helps create relationships of mutuality and friendship, time spent with others becomes an opportunity to delight in the gift of the other’s presence. Whereas many might perceive the silent communion of friends gathered merely to be together as a “waste of time,” persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities understand friendship as taking time for the rich, mutual sharing of the other which brings unity and communion. As one assistant writes of his relationship with a core member, “Many times, Richard and I found ourselves alone, simply being together, enveloped in the silence of friendship, wasting time together – a time we valued immensely, knowing that in the wasting of time, we were really gaining time. Thus, Richard gave me the greatest gift of all: friendship. He asked me to journey with him, armed with only the fragile yet beautiful flower of friendship.”13 For persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology, simply sitting with another in the spirit of friendship represents not a loss but a mutual growth in value, which assists all its members in acquiring the habit of mutuality. This assistant experienced Richard offering the gift of himself to him in the midst of daily life, helping him to “waste” time together on the path to peace.

The friendships sought and sustained in L’Arche demand much of its members. The mutual openess and weakness of persons intimately living life together in community goes far

beyond the friendship of the like or the “friends” so easily won (and lost) in social media networks. Yet persons in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology understand how these kinds of relationships bind persons together in such a way as to keep them faithful to the witness of God’s strange peace in the world. Pamela Cushing sees the reciprocity at the heart of L’Arche as going beyond the model of friendship as a “tit-for-tat” equality. L’Arche goes further with friendship by seeing a “gift of self” as a contribution to relationships and society, where presence stands as a form of activity equally valued. In addition, L’Arche understands the reciprocity of gifts not in quantitative terms, whereby each side must contribute an “equal” amount to the relationship. Rather L’Arche sees each person as giving something of infinitely unique value to the other, not as expectation or demand but as awaited surprise.\(^\text{14}\) L’Arche’s experience of mutuality does not merely bring persons considered profoundly disabled within a moral paradigm, but transforms the paradigm by those very lives. Taking on the habit of mutuality transforms the vision of non-disabled assistants by helping them see persons like Richard not as “clients” but as friends.

Mutuality as experienced and articulated in L’Arche becomes therefore not a mere equality of the like or as coming from a generously endowed superior, but a gift given by even the most unusual and surprising persons. Friendship as a form of justice supplies the crucial mutual recognition of persons needed to grow and flourish. In L’Arche communities guided by Vanier’s theological commitments, non-disabled assistants often testify to how this recognition occurs through relationships with persons considered intellectually disabled. Vanier tells the poignant story of Peter and Françoise, a young Canadian assistant and an elderly woman with dementia respectively. In the midst of the dailiness of care, Françoise places her hand on Peter’s and turns her face toward him. In this simple moment, Peter understands Françoise as giving him a previously unexperienced gift of value and recognition. “Suddenly, something changed in me,” says Peter, and “I discovered that Mamie (and you could not imagine someone more disabled) was attracted to me, that she loved me. In her own way, she was saying ‘Thank you’. I had this experience of being no longer admired, but loved.”\(^\text{15}\) While most might easily discern Peter’s recognition of Françoise through his care, non-disabled persons in L’Arche experience


just as much recognition in the simple gestures of those considered intellectually disabled. Becoming formed in the habit of mutuality trains L’Arche members in seeing acts of peace through simple presence and touch. In Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities, being with one another can represent a participation in divine activity, a space where persons experience God as acting through the ordinary presence which says, “I am glad you exist.”

*Trust – Hope in God’s Providence*

Because Vanier founded L’Arche more on faith than rational planning and thus always insisted that structures be flexible enough to serve persons rather than the reverse, L’Arche has lived community life with at least a little insecurity. Thus from the very beginning, Vanier knew how important the cultivation of trust would be in keeping L’Arche faithful to its mission as witnesses to God’s peace, whether it be trust in God or in one another. Without trust, persons could not grow fully because they could only discern a hostile world demanding self-survival. Vanier found this readily enough in western culture – including the church – where an erosion of trust leads to the protection of security and certainties that come from a desperate need to cling to power. He saw with many people considered disabled however, the other side of distrust: persons deeply depressed and devalued, without hope. Vanier founded L’Arche with a desire to create a milieu of trust which gave persons hope in the power of transformation and a faith in God’s future.

While this milieu began as a space where core members could discover their gifts and grow in their humanity, Vanier perceived them as often teaching nondisabled assistants how to trust more fully. Persons in L’Arche communities oriented toward Vanier’s vision often experienced this radical trust in persons considered profoundly disabled. The radical dependence of Eric, for instance, forced him to literally place his life into the hands of nondisabled assistants for the most fundamental tasks like eating, basic personal care, and mobility. Vanier writes of how the daily activity of bathing Eric revealed to him Eric’s profound sense of trust, which awakened that same habit in him.

In hot water Eric relaxes; he likes it. Water refreshes and cleanses. He has a feeling of being enveloped in a gentle warmth. Through water and the touch of the body there was

---

a deep communion that was created between Eric and myself. It was good to be together. And because Eric was relaxed, it made me feel more relaxed. He has complete trust in the person who gives him a bath. He is completely abandoned. He no longer defends himself. He feels secure because he is respected and loved. The way he welcomed me, the way he trusted me, called forth trust in me.¹⁷

Eric’s trust in Vanier came through the communion they experienced in the daily routines of sharing life together. Through abandoning himself into the hands and lives of others, nondisabled assistants experienced Eric as trusting them with his life. This in turn helped assistants trust in themselves, even in the midst of brokenness and doubt. Without acquiring this habit of trust, persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology would not be able to fully enter into the process of disarmament, which forces people to see their shadow selves in truth yet still hope in the grace of transformation. A community of persons who trust has the ability to live adventurously and creatively in the world, and thus capable of living within an eschatological imagination.

Caring for persons like Eric every day reveals how the habit of trust in L’Arche comes not only through touch but also needs time. Over and over again, persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments stress that acquiring trust in one another does not happen quickly, but instead comes through sharing life together in all dailiness and ordinariness. Assistant Blandine Morgand illustrates this process by reflecting on her life at La Forestière, a house in Trosly consisting of nondisabled assistants and persons profoundly impaired. Morgand mentions the difficulty at first entering the house and having to live life with many silences. As a new assistant, Morgand “was tempted to fill the silences, which weighed on me sometimes, with endless banter, as I found it difficult to be left talking to myself….One hour in the bathroom, side by side, without the exchange of a single word, soon becomes unbearable.” Yet living day-by-day with Lucien, helping him with his personal care, slowed Morgand down enough to value the empty spaces, which trained her in the habit of trust and facilitated communion. “Today, we can spend a long time side by side without a word; the trust between us has been established. The passage of time has caused this.” Morgand writes similarly of sitting with Edith during Mass, experiencing her as “participating in it with her whole being. Her suffering body was completely open and giving. Without a word, I could sense the importance

of her presence.” Edith died a few days later, with Morgand helping to dress her body and remembering the way that Edith had trained her in trust. Edith “had never said a word, neither to me nor to anyone else, but who had opened up to me bit by bit, who allowed me to be close to her, both physically and to her most private self. The act of caring for her physically had brought us closer together than words could have done. Her trust and her submission showed me the presence of God.”18 Through sharing life together, nondisabled assistants perceived persons like Edith and Lucien revealing to them the importance of trust for walking on the path of disarmament. God becomes present through the communion facilitated by this habit, one which experiences time in God’s realm as slow, capacious, mysterious, and hopeful.

Patience – Bearing Life with the Other

A community attempting to witness to God’s peace understands patience as a fundamental and essential habit. Cultivating patience in its members provides a way towards transformation and growth, which enables persons to wait for God and one another even when all appears lost or static. One can wait impatiently, whether it be for someone to finish a meal or another country to bow to one’s wishes. Yet persons in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s insights readily testify to how waiting with patience requires a trust in God’s providence which only the Holy Spirit can provide. This is the way towards transformation and growth, which requires waiting even in the midst of suffering. The radical difference of persons in L’Arche creates the kind of inevitable conflict and interpersonal struggles which tempt its members to want to quickly change others into more loveable, i.e. less troublesome, people. However, striving to live God’s peace requires the habit of patience, which lets the other be rather than forcing them to become something else. In addition, living life at the speed of many core members, who move and think at a slower pace, slows down many persons who come to L’Arche trained in an increasingly fast society. Moving too quickly during a bath, meal, or meeting in L’Arche often leads not to “efficiency” but tension and hostility. The crucial habit of patience forms persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities to bear with the difference and pace of the other.

L’Arche’s acknowledgement of the importance of patience comes particularly through sharing life with core members. Yet the patience L’Arche members name must be distinguished from the oft cited “patience” used to exclusively describe assistants in communities. In this logic, assistants possess a kind of saintly forbearance for “those people,” i.e., no normal person could ever cope with people so bothersome as those considered intellectually disabled. However, the patience described and experienced by persons in L’Arche just as easily originates from core members as it does from assistants. In the world of L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theological commitments, core members often exemplify the patience of welcoming others and making space for them far more than nondisabled assistants. As a former director of a community in Haiti remarks of core member Yveline, “The way she welcomed me when I first visited left a lasting mark on me. She gave me such a warm hug that I felt she had been waiting for me for a long time. In fact, she herself had only recently been welcomed into the community.”\textsuperscript{19} Another assistant writes of the patience of Maurice with an assistant who impatiently wanted to do his duties in a more “efficient” manner. “But what I am here for then?” asks the assistant. Maurice replies, “It’s very nice that you’re here. We’re chatting.”\textsuperscript{20} Maurice understood how mutuality leaves a space to simply delight in the other, slowing down those trained in speed to trust and enjoy life. As oft exemplars of virtue in L’Arche, core members form others in the habits of patience and mutuality, ways of peace which help others in the process of transformation.

The waiting which patience brings not only trains persons in anticipating growth and fullness, but also gives them the persistence to wait even amidst trial and suffering. Patience forms L’Arche members in communities dedicated to Vanier’s vision in how to live with their own brokenness in a spirit of compassion rather than seeking to either deny or eliminate their imperfections. In so doing, persons learn how to wait for and trust in disarmament, both for themselves and for the other, even when transformation appears far from view. Former L’Arche assistant Chris Peloquin eloquently articulates this process in writing about life with Edith. Peloquin notes at how Edith taught her the disposition of patience, which learns to wait with the other both in moments of peace and darkness. “With Edith, one had to take time….We had to

take the time to allow her to do what she could do. She had a great time testing us: sometimes it took her a quarter of an hour to lift her arms and put it into the sleeve of her pull-over. At times it was just a question of being here, holding her hand, sometimes for hours on end….Edith could, and still does, reveal my patience, the capacity for listening and the tenderness that is in me and which I did not realise I possessed.”21 Yet at the same time, Edith also could bring out the darkness and violence in persons through her own anguish. Peloquin relates at being alone with her one evening after prayer. “There was nothing much that I could do except hold her hand and look at her, as I do so often. We stayed like that for a long time and I will never forget her expression. It was as if Edith was saying, ‘How far are you prepared to go?’ And in me there seemed to be the question: ‘Just where are you taking me?’ And I was frightened.”22 Edith’s way of being formed Peloquin in the habit of patiently waiting for and being with the other, opening her to see herself in a new way as well as reveal to herself her own brokenness and shadow. Acquiring and cultivating the habit of patience stands as crucial in moving on the path of disarmament, where persons learn how to love themselves and the other in their difference and fragility.

_Tenderness – Nonviolence and the Body_

An early lesson of Vanier upon beginning his peace journey with Raphaël and Philippe was his discovery of the importance of the body, and thus need to give it a profound respect. For persons like Edith and Lucien, the body represented not merely a possession of the will but their whole person. Thus Vanier understands the need for the habit of “tenderness” or “gentleness,” a disposition which encounters other bodies in mutuality and patience. The habit of tenderness does not mean simply “being nice” to others, but implies rather a constant desire to live in the truth, which includes a firm commitment not to harm or act in such a way as to depreciate the other.23 In this way, Vanier understands tenderness as but another name for nonviolence.24

---

22 Ibid., 12. The parallels between this assistant’s experience with Edith and the end of Mark’s Gospel are striking: “So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk 16:8).
23 Vanier, _Our Life Together_, 485. As Vanier repeatedly emphasizes, “the Kingdom is for the gentle and the non-violent, not the violent nor the timid, those who flee conflict.” _Jesus, the Gift of Love_ (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 87.
Daily life in L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theology presents many opportunities for formation in the habit of tenderness, particularly through prosaic yet essential personal care routines. Vanier notes an experience of a community having difficulty welcoming a disturbed person, and how a turn toward the body transformed this person and the community. “He couldn’t stay still. We were using a lot of words with him, but then we discovered that he had athlete’s foot and the doctor told us to wash his feet three times a day. There was a transformation. His language became more coherent when we were washing his feet. There is something about the touch of the body, holding the body, respecting the body. That is the initial communication. We forget that, and yet that is at the heart of everything.”

Experiencing this transformation through respectful care of the body trained Vanier in cultivating the tenderness which encounters other persons in a spirit of reverence and respect. Performing simple activities like washing feet or helping someone get out of bed develops the gentleness which perceives bodies not as objects but as living persons.

While persons in L’Arche could claim that tenderness originates in the commitment of a generous caregiver, assistants just as often point to core members, who they often experience as living non-violently with others. Former community director Claire Trahan writes about core member Alfie, who in the months leading up to his death showed a tenderness toward others as well as drawing out that same tenderness in others. “Through Alfie, I grew to be more gentle. I will always remember the tenderness with which he touched my face in quiet moments shared together.”

Another assistant notes on how he experienced a core member exemplifying the habit of gentleness during a community liturgy of washing feet. “My feet were washed gently and tenderly…by [a core member]. It is a strong memory like a blessing and marked something for me in my own faith….Time stood still…it is close to me.”

These stories reveal how the gentleness learned in community comes through the bodies of those trained in the habit of tenderness.

Thus far from being the domain of the able and strong, nondisabled assistants in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s insights repeatedly experience persons considered even

---

25 Quoted in Kathryn Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story: Jean Vanier and l’Arche (Toronto: Novalis, 2006), 144.
Former assistant Martine Haeck tells a story about Nicole, a core member who she lived with and accompanied in the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease. One Christmas Haeck attempted to talk with her family on the telephone, but no one spoke to her because they were watching television. “I told [assistant] Loretta about it, all in dressing Nicole, thinking that the latter was not following our conversation at all. She was seated and I was kneeling in order to put on her shoes. Suddenly Nicole put her arm around my neck and said ‘Come!’ She laid my head against her heart and kept me there for perhaps 10 minutes, her blue eyes big and full of peace. She said nothing, except an occasional ‘I’m happy.’” In the midst of pain and self-doubt, Haeck experienced Nicole as relating to her in a spirit of gentleness, which recognized her as precious and as a friend. Nicole’s act of tenderness challenged Haeck’s assumption about Nicole not paying attention because of her impairment. Instead of being merely a “vegetable,” Haeck experienced Nicole as exemplifying the gentleness and caring respect towards the other she was searching for.

The Practices of Peace in L’Arche

In order to witness to God’s peace, Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities call and encourages its members to acquire habits like patience, tenderness, mutuality and trust. Yet people in L’Arche do not develop these qualities mainly through books or seminars but through practices: communal activities performed over time which both express a community’s deepest convictions as well as form its members into the kinds of persons who can live well. Reason and reflection certainly play a role for some in L’Arche in acquiring habits of peace. Yet a far more common and lasting mode of training comes through participating in and performing communal practices. Persons in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology understand the prime formation as coming from a life shared with core members and other assistants, who through the quotidian rhythms of daily life shape bodies and moral imaginations into persons more human. The attention paid to practices in L’Arche coheres with its recognition of the corporeal dimension of human life, as well as the incarnational thrust of its spirituality. Peace must be experienced, sought after, and envisioned in human bodies, living and struggling together to live faithfully the mission to become cultures of peace and unity.

In addition to reinforcing the embodied nature of being human, practices also express how habits come through acting in harmony with others. Acquiring character in L’Arche comes not through self-will, but through a life shared with others, who shape individuals into becoming a unified body. The same importance placed on communal formation takes place in becoming persons and cultures of peace, which cannot be self-generated or willed but must come as a gift of the Trinity. L’Arche as a Vanier-inspired community of practice recognizes the dependence of persons on God and one another, and thus pays attention to communal practices which assist persons in becoming faith friends of time.

While many practices could be named, the following section will focus particularly on those practices in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology which most shape persons in L’Arche’s peace witness. The practice of welcome does not merely open a space for the stranger to occupy, but opens people’s hearts in the mutuality and trust which makes friends out of enemies. Story-telling slows down the frenzied heart and body long enough to remember the persons’ stories as providential, deepening a trust in a good world and a tenderness toward the other. Recognizing L’Arche as fundamentally “God’s project” means that prayer in Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities becomes a necessary practice in bringing persons into the slow silence of God, where the process of disarmament can take place. Unity in community without forgiveness is impossible, and living in God’s time makes possible the practice of forgiveness which turns enmity into mutuality and trust. L’Arche’s commitment to practicing celebration fosters the mutuality and trust in the other which builds unity, and acts as a sign of humanity’s fulfillment and end in the eschatological wedding banquet. These practices shape persons in those dispositions which form faithful friends of God, and offer a glimpse for the world of those practices which make for peace.

Vanier and others in L’Arche repeatedly emphasize that these practices distinguish L’Arche in a particular way from being merely a place of residential care for those considered intellectually disabled. L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments certainly strive to provide quality care for all persons, yet also desires to remain rooted in performing the practices emanating from the spiritual roots of its founding(s). Without these practices, these L’Arche communities could become competent institutions but would cease to live their mission: to witness to God’s peace through the mutually transformative relationships of a shared life in community.
Welcome – A Mutual Hosting of the Other in Truth

L’Arche is founded on the practice of welcome. Vanier began by welcoming oppressed persons extremely different than himself, who cried out for relationship and a home. Yet hospitality as practiced in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology should not be resigned to a mere inclusion of marginalized persons by generous benefactors. As became quickly apparent to Vanier and others, core members as much as the nondisabled assistants excelled in hosting others. An assistant tells the story of the welcome of Abdul, a homeless man with a profound cognitive impairment in India. She describes the first meeting between him and other core members as a “witness” and an “act of God.” “There were no questions of apprehensions, they welcomed him with handshakes, hugs and a flower – which Abdul promptly ate! Gopal’s first words to Abdul were ‘My friend’; Canna got up and gave Abdul a hug and then one by one everyone went to Abdul with a word or gesture of welcome. From that moment on there was not a doubt as to where Abdul belonged, he had a new home and a family who loved and very much wanted him, it was something I will never forget.”

The constant welcoming of persons in L’Arche homes and workshops, either of guests or new arrivals, continually orients L’Arche members to others as potential friends. Gopal’s calling of Abdul “friend” connects with how many nondisabled assistants experience core members as keenly possessing the habit of mutuality. The welcome afforded to Abdul illustrates how hospitality facilitates the peace which affirms the stranger as precious, and stands ready to accompany them on their journey.

Practicing hospitality trains L’Arche members in more than simply opening a door and letting people in. A radical aspect of welcome in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments lies in their desire to also welcome not just persons but whole persons in truth, which always includes weakness, limitations and pain. This welcome is crucial in the disarmament needed to become people and cultures of peace, and trains persons in the tenderness and patience required to become peaceful disciples. Far deeper than hospitality as “entertaining” guests, this practice is rooted in the dailiness of sharing life together. Living community life

founds a peace culture, and is the site where persons become shaped into friends of peace. “Even in the odd times when we’re not actually welcoming someone into our home we try to live in a spirit of openness and welcome to each other, to be as interested and caring for each other as we were when we first arrived, thus creating the ground to grow community.”$^{31}$ Welcoming one another truthfully in everyday activities like cleaning the bathrooms or eating a meal helps foster the kind of mutuality which makes friends. Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities understand friendship as needing the daily hospitality which trains persons in perceiving the other as fellow pilgrims on the path of transformation.

These L’Arche communities’ welcome transcends merely letting people in the door, and instead desires to encounter others as gifts and as potential friends. Through continually receiving and being received by others, persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities are trained to understand hospitality as a sign of God’s peace in the world. The co-founder of L’Arche in Mexico City witnesses to this belief, as she felt called to welcome in the midst of the first Gulf War newly separated conjoined twins labelled as intellectually disabled. “I hesitated a lot before saying ‘yes’ to this welcome: it frightened me. But today when the forces of death are so strong in the world, one must take the risk of doing something mad out of love. It’s our way of building peace.”$^{32}$ Through their radically daily practice of welcome, persons in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology develop the trust and mutuality to open their hearts to the stranger, and make a space to let the Holy Spirit dispel fear and transform it into tenderness. They show that welcome rather than force is a powerful answer to war and violence.

*Story-Telling – Remembering People Well*

The transmission and acquisition of the habits of peace in L’Arche lives and flows through telling stories. While persons in L’Arche do participate in official formation and reflection sessions, it is often more the telling of informal narratives of actual people that really shapes persons.$^{33}$ The priority L’Arche places upon “being with” rather than performing tasks

---


leaves an amicable space for sharing stories with one another. These stories can be as profound as the journey toward personal transformation in the midst of tremendous trial, or as prosaic as the joys or sufferings of daily interactions. The simple way of life prized in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments provide the time needed to slow down to listen to others’ stories, as well as training core members and assistants in the patience needed to witness to God’s peace.

Telling narratives about persons in these L’Arche communities intertwine with the conviction that L’Arche’s history has not originated from itself but comes out of God’s continuing story. Stories of persons and communities become thus signs that affirm God’s provision at the heart of life, which has drawn everyone together for a common goal and purpose. Vanier mentions a communal tradition of story-telling which attempts to place individual narratives within the realm of God’s salvation and mission.

In Trosly, after the community Eucharist on Holy Thursday, we all return to our homes where we wash one another’s feet as Jesus asked us. Then we share a meal, the paschal lamb, and we tell our stories. Each one remembers what he/she has lived: ‘Where were you ten years ago?’ ‘In a psychiatric hospital.’ ‘And you?’ ‘I was alone, and very anguished.’ ‘And now we have been called together by God.’ We give thanks that we are no longer alone, that we have been called together, as brothers and sisters, a beloved people of God, walking together with God.34

By reminding one another of the ways God has been with them and brought them together, persons in L’Arche grow in the trust needed to build community and hope in God’s future. Taking a long perspective on time helps persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities cultivate the patience required to welcome and wait for God’s peace.

As persons affirm others as gifts through telling stories, they also learn to develop the mutuality which sees persons not as objects but as (potential) friends. In this way story-telling acts as a practice of what John Swinton calls “remembering people well.”35 The story-telling performed in communities following Vanier’s theology shapes the memory in a truthful way about core members by prioritizing narratives of transformation and delight, rather than copying

the nightmarish imaginaries often projected upon persons considered disabled. An illustration of this remembering well comes through some communities’ practice of sharing stories of people who have recently died. Henri Nouwen relates the story-telling at core member Adam’s wake, and the space it made to for people to relate their full expression of experience. “Several times during visiting hours we stopped talking and formed a large circle around the casket to pray and to share. I read the twenty-seventh Psalm, feeling as though it was giving a voice to Adam. After the time of prayer we kept standing in the circle, and several people told stories about Adam, dreams or events that evoked a smile or a tear, or both. Sorrow and joy kept dancing together around Adam’s body. Grief and laughter, a sense of irretrievable loss and a sense of immense gain.”36 Story-telling provided the space for core members and assistants to remember Adam well, as well as truthfully share their own grief and sadness. In so doing, persons build the bonds needed to build up the body and witness to a communion across vast differences.

The mutuality built and fostered through story-telling forms Vanier-inspired L’Arche members and communities in the kind of friendship network which sees every person as precious. Looking at people through this lens quietly helps to transform judgment of the other into appreciation for the gift of the other. Robert Sackel articulates this hermeneutic when he describes the telling of a core member’s story as part of L’Arche International’s “Identity and Mission” process. In this process, L’Arche communities were encouraged to tell both personal and communal stories, in order to unearth L’Arche’s history and discern L’Arche’s future. Sackel relates how one community gathering was dedicated to telling Tim’s story. “If you could have seen Tim’s face when his sacred story was being shared, you would never again doubt if this process is a special one. One of the themes of Tim’s sacred story was the many smiles of Tim. The power point presentation revealed moments, smiles, and relationships of caring. On a Tuesday night of community prayer, gathered in Tim’s home, with his community, friends, and family, everyone rejoiced in and affirmed Tim.”37 Sackel notes how listening to others’ stories transforms his understanding of persons, making it more difficult to judge them. Placing these narratives in the context of God’s provision helps persons experience others’ stories as divinely gifted, giving them the opportunity to understand their own lives in the same light. Persons are

then able to trust in the process of disarmament, and witness to God’s peace through a body of persons united through the intersection of their personal and sacred stories. In this way, witness requires not articulate words but stories that speak of persons disarmed and silently participating in God’s repairing of creation.

Prayer – Bringing the Day to an End

As communities built upon God’s providential care, L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology have always understood prayer more as a necessary practice than an optional extra. Whether through simple times of silence and singing in L’Arche homes or larger gatherings of communities for more formal liturgies, persons in L’Arche repeatedly emphasize that without prayer these L’Arche communities could not remain faithful to their vocation. Prayer in L’Arche forms persons in the qualities of its peace witness by making them stop and place themselves in the Trinity’s presence, the source of L’Arche’s life. Without this practice, virtues like trust and tenderness would remain matters of the will. Life lived with core members, however, showed Vanier and others in L’Arche the importance of prayer as a way of recognizing the contingency of human life and God’s ultimate provision. The simple trust and mutuality with which many core members practice prayer has renewed faith for many assistants, as well as leading many persons with no faith tradition to recognize the importance of times of silence and reflection. Integrating the importance of prayer in daily life reminds persons in Vanier-grounded L’Arche communities that prayer fundamentally stands less as spoken words than as a way of life.

When nondisabled assistants let themselves be led by persons like Antonio or Loïc into the silent and non-productive activity of being, the radical disarmament inherent in the movement to real peace can occur. An assistant at La Forestière explains how common prayer can be an important aspect of this transformation. “Evening prayer is a powerful moment at la Forestière. It brings the day to an end. We are all together. After a hymn and a reading from the Gospel, there is a time of silence with individual intentions which move the heart, but also with the cries of Jojo, the laughter of Christophe or Laurence, and the tears of Loïc.”38 While the “end” here probably denotes the time when people go to sleep, it could also easily signify

another “end,” namely that of the community’s *telos* or final goal. In the common practice of prayer, persons and communities following Vanier’s theological insights develop and realize their end as witnesses to Christ’s peace.

Practicing prayer forms L’Arche members in the trust and patience needed to live with and bear the other, even in the midst of pain and sorrow. Kathryn Spink tells the story of being present in the home of core member Pascal when his father died, and how a community habituated to prayer as a way of life held him in his grief.

Over coffee in the living room Joseph announced on Pascal’s behalf that his father had ‘gone to be with Jesus’. Little was said in response. There were hugs for Pascal and tears and prayers that were touching in their lack of inhibition. There was no denying Pascal his grief. He would disappear at intervals and I would hear him sobbing in the night; but there was also no mistaking the way in which during the days that followed he was tacitly carried in his suffering by other members of the *foyer*. Small acts of special consideration, a touch, a look, expressed far better than any words the fact that those about him knew his anguish better than most others, and he was not alone.\(^{39}\)

Practicing prayer trains L’Arche members committed to Vanier’s vision in being able to silently and tenderly be with persons as they make their way toward disarmament and transformation. As persons are held by others in God’s grace through prayer, they in turn become more apt in participating in God’s communion which befriends the other and makes them witnesses of God’s peace. Adriana from L’Arche Bognor Regis in the U.K. tells the story of the end of a “honeymoon” experience in a community, where the temptation to flee back to the security of her previous home was assuaged by the prayers of her housemates. “When I came to L’Arche Bognor I was initially very happy, but then I crashed and found it hard to sleep….Then Kevin (a core member) prayed for me. It was the first time that someone outside my immediate family had prayed for me. I suddenly realized that I had a larger family in L’Arche. I then started to be happy again.”\(^{40}\) This assistant experienced Kevin’s prayer as an affirmation of her being, and an attempt to welcome her into a new body of belonging. Persons in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology understand that a community which takes the time to rest in God’s presence forms its members in the habits which bind very different

\(^{39}\) Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 75.

persons together. Communities that remain faithful to their mission of becoming peace witnesses understand how only with and through prayer can the ever present cycle of violence be broken, whether it be on an individual, communal or international basis.

_Forgiveness – Taking the Time to Reconcile with the Enemy_

The often wild diversity of persons at L’Arche made Vanier and others understand how crucial the practice of forgiveness is for communal unity and peace. Grudges and resentments build up quickly in the intensity of community life, and without pardon distrust and enmity can quickly reign supreme. Thus forgiveness stands as a key practice in acquiring the habits of peace. This practice is performed not just through formal liturgies, but must be worked out constantly in daily life. The quotidian misunderstandings, conflicts, and experiencing of one’s own and others’ imperfections make community an apt place to practice forgiveness.

Many assistants note how core members often exemplify persons who practice forgiveness regularly and habitually, as well as more readily admit their own need for reconciliation. Mani Karott, a Little Brother of Jesus who lives as a workshop assistant in the Bangalore community in India, tells a story about a core member named Kanna, and how his practice of forgiveness revealed him as a “teacher of Ahimsa.” One day Karott had to attend an assistants’ meeting, and left Kanna in charge of weeding a tomato patch. Upon returning, Karott found that not only had Kanna removed the weeds, but had pulled the tomatoes as well. Karott was furious, and the two spent the rest of the day not talking with one another. When the day was done, Karott was still angry and did not wish to say goodbye to Kanna. Karott then describes what Kanna did next: “He came to me, took me in a tight bear hug and looked into my eyes and grunted my name in his usual gruff voice. That was it! As he held me, my anger melted away and my chest contracted by anger relaxed and I smiled. Kanna roared his goodbye and left.”

Karott experienced Kanna’s spontaneous forgiveness as liberating, illustrating how persistently practicing forgiveness formed Kanna into an exemplar of the non-violent habits of mutuality and tenderness.

Many nondisabled assistants mention the importance of patience in faithfully and consistently practicing forgiveness. Living the daily conflicts in L’Arche trains persons in the

---

futility of trying to “speed up” reconciliation in order to quickly eliminate the pain that comes from discord and disunity. One L’Arche assistant from France writes about how a conflict with core member Marinette revealed to her how forgiveness requires and fosters the patience needed to wait in order for the other to reconcile at the appropriate time.

I remember our first big conflict. I don’t remember the incident, but I remember that it had been fairly violent; she even had hit me. She didn’t want to talk to me anymore and acted as if I didn’t exist. I didn’t know what to do, and everything I did to fix things only made her more angry. I had scratch marks on my hands, and her seeing them only made her feel more guilty. I had to wait, just being present with an apparently passive attitude (and without showing my hands too much!) I had to be attentive to the smallest sign of her desire to rebuild the relationship. Sure enough, several hours later she came to see me to ask me something utterly mundane. Marinette taught me something important. I—who so love to straighten things out quickly—understood that in a conflict you have to know how to wait.42

This assistant’s experience of conflict with Marinette showed her how one must leave space for the other in a spirit of openness and receptivity in order for forgiveness to truly occur. Practicing authentic reconciliation trains L’Arche members in Vanier-oriented communities in the patience that can wait for others, even in the midst of struggle and tension.

The time that forgiveness takes requires a kind of deceleration, which facilitates the cultivation of tenderness and mutuality which makes community life-giving and a witness to God’s peace. One assistant writes of how she saw Edith leading her towards forgiveness by slowing her down enough to become aware of the force she was applying to their relationship. After returning from some time away, this assistant writes that

I was supposed to be taking care of her, but all she did was resist and yell. She just wouldn’t help herself and I got really mad with her. Then suddenly I stopped, realising what I was doing, and started to speak to her properly. I took my time with her whereas before I had just been pulling her around. She became calm and she looked at me with a very deep serious look she has, and we started again. I found myself asking her

---
forgiveness and she made the effort to help herself, and I had this overwhelming feeling of love for her.\textsuperscript{43}

This assistant experienced a communion and reconciliation with Edith that came through stopping long enough to acknowledge that the “enemy” was not Edith but the assistant’s own impatience.

\textit{Celebration – Experiencing the Eschatological Banquet}

Perhaps no practice so distinguishes L’Arche’s community life as that of celebration. Vanier quickly realized the importance of celebrations in living L’Arche, particularly those which concerned the lives of core members. For most, the lives of people with cognitive impairments are anything but celebratory; their presence usually engenders more feelings of regret, pity, or revulsion than thanksgiving. The practice of celebrating people’s birthdays in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights represents another way not only of looking at people considered disabled, but all persons in community. Former director Sylvie Morin describes the importance of marking birthdays in her community, a tradition which exemplifies L’Arche’s attempt to recognize community members as all possessing unquantifiable value. “The celebration of a birthday is an inescapable ritual in my home. We begin with breakfast in bed….We prepare a meal that the person likes and we invite the significant people in his or her life. But the most important part of marking someone’s birthday is giving thanks for the gifts that this person brings to our lives. We light a candle and we share his or her gifts in a time of prayer. This time is unique and sacred, it is the heart of the celebration.”\textsuperscript{44} Celebrating birthdays and anniversaries forms L’Arche’s members in seeing others as persons with a gifted story, training them in the mutuality and tenderness which sees the other as (potential) friend rather than nameless object or enemy.

Yet celebration in L’Arche does not confine itself only to official events of special significance. The continual commemoration of birthdays and anniversaries trains Vanier-inspired L’Arche members in understanding all of life as celebratory, where gifts come in ordinary moments and joy emanates from simple tasks. Mealtimes represent particular

\textsuperscript{43} Quoted in Spink, \textit{The Miracle, the Message, the Story}, 197–8.

Vanier notes how the often playful and spontaneous spirit of many core members helps to imbue the ordinary with festivity, while also forming persons in the grace which trusts and receives peace from others. “When we’ve had oranges for dessert at l’Arche, we sometimes start chucking the peel about at the end of the meal. Everyone gets into it. An Englishman once asked me if this was a traditional French custom. I don’t know about that! But I do know that it is one way to bring people out of their isolation to express themselves joyfully – especially if they can’t communicate with words. People who cannot participate in interesting conversations can participate through play. When a piece of orange peel arrives on their nose, they are delighted – and they throw it back.”

The intentionality placed upon mealtimes in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology trains its members to understand eating not as mere consumption but as a practice building communion. Committing oneself to eat together simply for the joy of being together shapes persons in the patience which helps L’Arche members in these communities trust in the goodness of life and the other, even amidst trial and conflict.

That persons in L’Arche can celebrate even in the midst of suffering and death perhaps represents the most powerful realization of its peace witness. Grounded in a knowledge of L’Arche as “God’s project” rather than mere human institution, celebrating daily life helps persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities grow in the patience which trusts in God’s presence and salvation in the past, present and future. Vanier and others in L’Arche often point out how core members manifest this trust in a particular way, leading others in the hope of peace and unity. Assistant Jenny Kelly writes about Patty expressing the joy of receiving forgiveness and pardon. Usually very inhibited in public, Kelly perceives authentic joy in Patty’s dance after a reconciliation service at a Faith and Sharing retreat. As the guitars and laughter appeared after the completion of the service, Kelly saw Patty embody the overwhelming joy of the moment. “Standing in a beautiful rose garden, on a balmy evening in late June, I watched Patty dance…arms thrown out, head tossed back, delight in her eyes, and a wide smile on her face. As she danced, she appeared to be the freest, most joyful person alive. She was liberated. She was in ecstasy; and it was true celebration!”

The ability to celebrate being forgiven helps persons in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theological insights see life as not locked in a battle

45 Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 324.
for self-survival, but as representing more an opportunity to join with others on the path toward peace.

Practicing celebration after times of struggle and conflict prepares persons in L’Arche for the ultimate encounter with aging and death. Many persons formed in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology see aging and death as opportunities to celebrate the gift of persons’ histories and the hope of experiencing God’s joyful future. One assistant writes of a typical experience of a funeral for a core member, noting the profound sense of joy which comes from the daily practice of celebrating life. “We went to the crematorium singing: ‘Oh, when the saints came marching in…’ and after a short service were led to balcony which opened out on to the top of a high hill with a view of hills and valleys stretching away. Some people danced a little. High up there, in the sunlight, everyone singing or quietly smiling made me feel as if this was a little taste of the children of God gathered together in that joy of heaven which is the profound speechless joy on the other side of death.” 47 This assistant experienced this funeral as an eschatological sign of the heavenly wedding banquet, a harbinger of humanity’s ultimate fulfillment and happiness. Practicing celebration trains L’Arche members not to fear aging and death, which assists them in walking the path of disarmament. In L’Arche communities attempting to live out Vanier’s vision, few things so express a profound witness to peace than the final assurance of goodness in the midst of great vulnerability and powerlessness. Practicing celebration both expresses the gratitude for God’s grace-filled presence, and points persons toward that future peace where all will be liberated and war will be no more. 48

Schools of Peace: L’Arche Communities as Alternative Peace Cultures

A common theme of L’Arche’s theological narrative has been the tension experienced between maintaining competent care and a radical living of the Gospel. At the heart of this pull lies two different forms of reasoning: on the one hand, a logic of inclusion, which seeks to enable people to succeed and participate in “normal” society; on the other, a logic of communion, which seeks friendship and a welcoming of the being of another. The former logic can easily rest with

being a good institution or human service provider. However, a Gospel logic witnesses to peace not primarily through structures but by becoming a *culture*, with particular practices, beliefs, and ways of being. Becoming a peace culture faithful to the Gospel can mean sometimes living at odds with the mainstream societies that host particular L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theology. One aspect of this “oddness” comes through the way these L’Arche communities live and experience time, at times contrasting sharply with the pace of the late modern world.

*L’Arche as (a Peace) Culture*

L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments prioritize practices in its communities which work to help form its members in the habits of peace. Giving precedence to theological and spiritual practices means that these L’Arche communities exist as far more than merely an organization of residential homes for people considered intellectually disabled. Rather this vision and embodiment of L’Arche represents a *culture* which forms its members in a value system through the peaceful practices of daily life. Cultural anthropologists Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms define culture as “the learned, symbolic, at least partially adaptive, and ever-changing patterns of behavior and meaning shared by members of a group.”

The intensity of sharing daily life with others teaches L’Arche members a way of life, which includes both the concrete and the abstract. In her ethnological research on L’Arche in Canada, Pamela Cushing notes how L’Arche manifests culture not just at the level of rules of behavior, but reaches down to basic experiences of identity and story. “L’Arche is clearly a cultural system, in that it prescribes moral norms, but a cultural system’s effects go even further. It also provides the categories of thought that construct how we experience life, and how we make sense of it. This in turn influences what parts of the flow of our lives we consider narrative-worthy, meaningful experiences.”

While L’Arche encourages each person toward individual growth, it does this in the context of a shared life, punctuated with the shared activities which help to create, produce and transmit L’Arche’s particular culture.

---


As an organization which understands itself not only as providing care and employment but seeking to live a particular way of life, L’Arche lives its culture at the level of the concrete and the symbolic, the prosaic and the sublime. The intensity of sharing daily life together around a common goal creates particular social relationships which foster unity and the development of tangible structures. L’Arche communities train persons and bodies in a way of doing which includes culturally symbolic aspects like language (“core member,” “accompaniment,” “routines”), common customs (L’Arche Family Day, celebrating birthdays, Community Night), and cultural artifacts (the L’Arche logo, art designed and produced by its members). Just as these artifacts and traditions are produced and performed within the concreteness of daily life, they work to also help endow ordinary activities with meaning and significance.51 Although widely heterogeneous, the fact that so many communities around the world engaging in these practices gives L’Arche’s culture a transnational flavour. The commonality of practices, beliefs, and symbols of L’Arche communities in very different parts of the world supports a claim in L’Arche as having developed over time a unique cultural identity.

As a network of communities which emphasize a holistic way of life based on habits and practices of peace, L’Arche represents an example of what Elise Boulding calls a “peace culture.” According to Boulding, a peace culture “promotes peaceable diversity. Such a culture includes lifeways, patterns of belief, values, behavior, and accompanying institutional arrangements that promote mutual caring and well-being as well as an equality that includes appreciation of difference, stewardship, and equitable sharing of the earth’s resources among its members and with all living beings.”52 Peace cultures form their members in a “peaceableness” manifest not only in regards to issues of overt violence and war but including the fundamental interactions and relationships of daily life. Therefore this formation must come at all levels of a society or group, from actions of basic nurturance to relationships regarding authority and governance. Boulding sees as crucial for peace cultures the need to both form individual, nonviolent persons, as well as create the forms which transmit and cultivate a culture’s peaceableness.53

53 Ibid., 84.
L’Arche’s encouragement in the development of mutuality and tenderness exemplifies the kind of “peaceableness” Boulding advocates, leading its members to see the different through the lens of (potential) friend rather than enemy or opponent. Practicing peace on a daily and routine basis forms L’Arche members in Vanier-inspired communities in understanding peace not just as an inner state but as shared activity. Seeing peace as a communal action means that these L’Arche communities also try to bring a structure to their peaceableness. The qualities of listening, service, and discernment L’Arche advocates among its structures and leadership speak to L’Arche’s attempt to institute nonviolence at a community and federation level. At the same time, Vanier continually cautions that L’Arche must never subordinate persons to a group ideology. Rather communities exist to foster the growth and transformation of its members into persons of peace. In this regard, Vanier comes close to Boulding’s insight that peace cultures maintain a healthy balance between the bonding needed for unity and the call for individual persons to fully grow.54

L’Arche as “Alternative Space for Cultural Being”

The peaceable practices performed in Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities’ cultures nurtures its members in the habits which foster communion and unity across the divide of great difference. Yet in societies which do not share this same valuation of diversity – particularly of bodies and intellects – L’Arche’s culture can appear highly unusual if not outright strange. The entrance of persons into the culture of L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology confronts them with an alternative set of practices and beliefs, not just in regards to people labelled intellectually disabled but even on basic questions of being human. As Cushing notes, “Through ideology and practice, L’Arche introduces a new ideology and thereby unmoors and de-naturalizes these assistants’ typical habits of thought, giving them a chance to adopt, adapt or reject new possibilities.”55 This encounter with the strange helps facilitate the process of

54 Ibid., 2. The biggest difference between Vanier and Boulding in regards to maintaining a healthy tension between the individual and the community comes in how Vanier understands the human person. Boulding uses the framework of keeping individual “autonomy” in “balance” with the need for group bonding. In contrast, Vanier maintains that a community can never subordinate the person to the larger group, but that the person can never fully grow outside of a larger body of belonging. Thus for Vanier, community is essential to personal growth but only as servant and environment for relationships of love and recognition. Boulding appears to work out of a more liberal framework of the individual, even as she stresses the importance of community.

disarmament, where assistants undergo an experience of transformation through their relationships with core members and other assistants in community. Following the lead of many core members, assistants in L’Arche learn how to welcome themselves and others truthfully. Cushing discerns L’Arche as a “cultural system” that stimulates and expands the moral imagination of its members in an alternative approach to disability and difference. “L’Arche has created a local, moral world in its communities; a provocative cultural space for imagining and practicing an enriched way of living with the kind of personal group differences that are usually devalued in mainstream, Western society.”

While considering L’Arche communities following Vanier’s vision as alternative cultures may appear to found it upon a simple rejection of late modern society, a closer look reveals a more positive thread for its distinctive way of life. Certainly Vanier and others have noticed the destructive aspects of the contemporary world, and have attempted to make an alternate “workshop” of more Christian and humanist values. Yet an equally driving force behind Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities’ identification as an alternative peace culture is the presence of core members as being at the heart of communities. In many ways, Vanier and others originally sought to “integrate” themselves into their geographical contexts as much as possible rather than remain separate enclaves. By so doing, L’Arche attempted to be as “normal” as possible, yet the lives and presence of people with cognitive impairments kept them from fully “adapting” themselves to the dominant, Western value system. Through its commitment to keep core members at the center, L’Arche let those persons guide and influence its culture in a way other social service agencies could not. Acknowledging the gifts of people like Edith and Yveline in helping assistants on their journey to disarmament moved L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s insights from being mere sanctuaries for the dispossessed to schools of love in the ways of the Gospel. Without this crucial insight, these L’Arche communities may have been content with liberal forms of inclusion, which sought to normalize those considered intellectually disabled in the structures and social imaginaries prevalent in late modern societies. Core members helped lead Vanier and others to discern a way of life and moral imagination often considered out of step with the mainstream yet deeply in tune with the Gospel. At the same time, the abiding commitment of communities following Vanier’s theology to remain a part of local cultures affirms and assists its mission to witness to Christ’s peace in a violent and lonely world.

---

56 Ibid., 187.
These L’Arche communities’ commitment to being an alternative peace culture cannot be seen outside of the habit of mutuality it forms in its members through the practices of daily life. Time and again persons in L’Arche affirm how those labelled intellectually disabled can bind radically different persons together in a new culture which witnesses to God’s peace. L’Arche’s attempt to live community creates what former L’Arche International Board President Mireya de Corrales calls “an alternative space for cultural being,” where persons can review, critique and accept the tenets and practices of a particular culture. De Corrales relates an experience of L’Arche as an alternative culture at the funeral of core member Sulema in the L’Arche Choluteca community in Honduras. The community placed on Sulema’s coffin a cloth over the coffin emblazoned with the L’Arche logo: three persons drifting on the sea in a boat. De Corrales notes how this small act exemplifies the littleness and profundity of L’Arche’s attempt to be and become cultures of peace. “It just looked like a flag, although of course her burial was so unlike those of heroes or politicians that ‘deserve’ that honor in my country. It was a powerful sign nonetheless: a sign that L’Arche has already established a culture which transcends social classes, nations, languages, races and faiths. The power to create the spirit of an organization is inseparable from the power to create its culture. And it is in that culture that the spirit will become embodied.”57 In the contrast between Sulema’s funeral and those of the rich and powerful de Corrales discerns the gift of L’Arche in witnessing to another way of living. The simple flag adorning the coffin signifies the mutuality and trust at the heart of L’Arche communities attempting to live Vanier’s interpretation of the Gospel, habits considered crucial in helping persons walk the path of disarmament that leads to personal and community peace and unity. In L’Arche’s Vanier-inspired peace culture, witnessing to the peace of Christ requires not bombastic protest or political lobbying, but merely the simple symbols and lives that express a unity given and received.

L’Arche as a Culture with a Different Time

A particularly noticeable aspect of the alternative peace culture as seen in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology comes through its experience of, relation to, and conception of time. Cushing notes how an organization’s values are reflected in the temporal

structures it institutes and encourages. An institution’s temporal priorities help form and enculturate its members in a particular belief and behavioural system. Theologian David Ford consider this shaping of time as “one of the most important aspects of culture, community, and individual lives.” A L’Arche community’s temporality gets communicated through its practices of celebration, common worship, and daily “routines” of personal care. Participating in the cultural rhythms of community life expresses L’Arche’s fundamental convictions, as well as forming its members in the habits which faithfully live its peace witness.

In looking at L’Arche’s practices of peace as lived in communities oriented around Vanier’s theological vision, one can discern a temporality which makes a space for the habits of peace to be cultivated and developed. Many describe the experience of time in these L’Arche communities as slow and gentle, emphasising the “activities” of presence and being. Kevin Reimer illustrates how many persons in the L’Arche communities he researched in the U.S. experience an alternative temporality upon entering community life, aided by common practices and activities. The 24/7, endless connectivity of late modernity can shape persons in a kind of impatience which often further fragments and alienates persons, even as it also awakens the desire for friendship and community. Reimer contrasts this temporality as he sees assistant Sriram and core member Moses slowly making a meal, a practice which duly cultivates the habits needed to become people and cultures of peace.

For Westerners, time is a commodity. Time is money. Time must be carefully managed to maximize productivity. Our metaphors are replete with urgent efficiency in ‘redeeming the time’, ‘saving time’, or ‘making good time’. These familiar phrases are relatively meaningless in Sriram’s kitchen….The first priority is relationship. Time serves Sriram’s objective to be with Moses. Time is transformed from a commodity to an expression of love. Time becomes an opportunity to validate those quirks and preferences which make Moses uniquely human. Meal preparation celebrates Moses before palate.

59 Ibid., 193.
Committing themselves to keep core members at the heart of community life also means that communities attempt to live life at their tempo and pace. Originally this deceleration may have emanated from a sense of accommodation to the needs of people with lower mobility and living in radical states of dependence. Yet gradually persons discovered that developing the mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness needed to be and become a peace culture could only happen when persons and communities slowed down enough to encounter one another in truth. Vanier describes his years at La Forestière as a witness to the transformation experienced in the slower pace of life there. Assistants in this house enter a site with a new temporality, which must abide by the tempo of core members considered severely disabled.

Things have to go at a pace which can welcome their least expression; because they have no verbal skills, they have no way of enforcing their views by raising their voice. So the assistants have to be the more attentive to the many non-verbal communications, and this adds greatly to their ability to welcome the whole person. They become increasingly people of welcome and compassion. The slower rhythm and even the presence of the people with severe disabilities makes them slow down, switch off their efficiency motor, rest and recognise the presence of God. Entering the slow and gentle tempo in a L’Arche home striving to live according to Vanier’s vision helps persons to live life truthfully, revealing inner shadows as well as an awareness of themselves and the other as precious and loved by God.

Time in L’Arche’s peace culture makes space for presence, a way of being with others which tenderly waits for the other as friend rather than opponent. Manifested through the slow and patient relationships formed in community through practices like story-telling and prayer, the experience of time in Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities can reveal the sometimes fast and inhuman character of contemporary western societies. “The presence theme is a stark reminder that the world outside L’Arche is unfolding at breakneck speed, fueled by priorities of success and productivity. In L’Arche, time slows down and people shelve their ambitions, favoring the intimacy of a good joke or opportunity to hold another’s hand.”

In a peace culture as seen in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments, tenderness and mutuality rather than multi-tasking and mobility represent the habits which disarm hearts and make friends.

---

These L’Arche communities’ commitment to communal practices helps to form its members in the habits necessary for peace, showing them that peace comes slowly and prayerfully. In this social imaginary, peace looks and feels like a wedding banquet, prepared through a receptivity to the Holy Spirit and the welcoming of the stranger and enemy.

**Conclusion**

One day during break-time at the Oasis, a workshop run by L’Arche in the West Bank, its members decided to dance and listen to music. Out of nowhere came the sounds of helicopters overhead and three explosions nearby. Immediately the music stopped and fear seized everyone in the workshop. After someone tried to discern what happened, core member Intissar said simply, “they’re bombing again, aren’t they?” “Yup,” replies Kathy Baroody, one of the founders of the project in Palestine. In turn Intissar asks, “Will you dance with me anyway?” People then turned the music back on and returned to dancing together.

My question for the chapter asked about the communal habits and practices that embody, illustrate and form persons in L’Arche’s peace culture as discerned in communities dependent on Vanier’s theological insights. As places committed to hospitality, story-telling, prayer, forgiveness and celebration in the dailiness of shared life, these L’Arche communities perform the communal activities which cultivate the mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness needed to walk on the nonviolent path of disarmament. Each of these habits intertwines with the others to help produce persons persistent enough to live and act in God’s time for the repairing of the world. The non-disabled repeatedly experience core members like Intissar and other core members as masters in these peaceable habits. Intissar’s insistence on celebrating life with others, even in the midst of great conflict and tension, shapes others in the dispositions and qualities that train persons in befriending enemies and building community. The attempt to create an alternative culture primarily for the growth and development of devalued persons quickly turned into a milieu of transformation for everyone at L’Arche, giving communities a mission to live a more faithful story of disability and difference.

Thus rather than simply giving “access” to people considered intellectually disabled of the dominant narrative and politics of modern liberalism, L’Arche’s life “with” core members

---

forged a new story and a new culture. The centrality of persons like Intissar and Edith in communities means that L’Arche lives slowly and patiently enough to befriend the other in truth. L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology strive to go “beyond inclusion” to a much more capacious politics: where core members and nondisabled assistants encounter one another in friendship, and journey together toward that mutual transformation which turns them into participants of God’s renewing of all creation in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

L’Arche’s attempt to faithfully embody peace makes them a potential icon for how the church might understand itself as a community witnessing to the eschatological time of God. Through the trust and patience gained through practicing peace, people in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities experience time not as scarce resource but as capacious gift of God, which gives people the opportunity for growth and friendship with people radically different from themselves. Intissar’s insistence on dancing even amidst fear helps others understand the Holy Spirit as continually present in the world, slowing persons down enough to experience the eternal wedding banquet awaiting all. At the same time, the peaceable habits L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s insights rest upon is the belief that there is no hurry for transformation and peace; through Christ’s redemption of time life can be lived slowly enough to see and taste God’s providential care for the world.

As particular peace cultures located within wider cultural environments, L’Arche communities grounded in a theological story continually engage with a broader society with its own moral priorities and cultural practices. If L’Arche can inform a peace ecclesiology with its habits and practices, how might that form look and relate to and in different societies? Chapter five will take up this question, particularly through the way L’Arche’s practices accentuate a certain experience and conception of time.
Chapter 5 Befriending Time: Telling Time in the Odd Peace of L’Arche

We have to learn how to wait for God’s time, to live in God’s time. There is our time and there is God’s time. God is patient and knows how to wait for us. We have to learn to be patient and to wait for God….We need to become friends of time and to accept that growth takes time.¹

Time, slowness, gentleness, perseverance, and love: these are the qualities of people who have become friends of time. Time should not be our enemy; it should be our friend. The redemption of time has to do with turning time from an overbearing ruler into a gentle friend.²

Although firmly embedded within the dominant cultures that surround them, L’Arche communities strive to cultivate their own culture through particular habits and practices. For those communities committed to Vanier’s theological vision, this can mean prioritizing a way of life strange and/or intriguing for the wider society. The peace God calls these communities to embody can both resemble and contrast with the values of the broader cultures framing L’Arche. While communities generally do not seek to intentionally act counter-culturally, the shape, content and practice of L’Arche’s particular peace culture(s) can often embody a way of life distinct from the pace and values of contemporary western societies.

The question guiding this chapter concerns the form of L’Arche’s peace culture, and how that culture might inform the church as it relates to the dominant culture(s) of late modernity. How does the church shaped by a peace ecclesiology that is informed by the theology and practices of L’Arche compare with the cultural environment of modern society? In this chapter I will examine a prevailing experience and consequence of time in contemporary, western societies. This examination will reveal an experience of time as both fast and empty, leaving persons alienated, desperate, and left behind. Persons understand time in this view to represent the empty space given for the achievement of self-determined projects of the self. Following this discussion I will consider the living of time in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments, where persons understand time as a gift and opportunity for growth.

¹ Jean Vanier, Befriending the Stranger (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 114-5, 117.
² John Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016), 76.
and disarmament. Persons in these L’Arche communities boldly speak of the “wasting” of time needed to cultivate community and friendship. This “wasting” of time turns out to be what Vanier calls “befriending time,” understanding time as a gift given by God for relationship and for witnessing to peace in the world. As persons living in an eschatological mode of time, communities grounded in Vanier’s theological vision can appear highly “odd” in late modern society. The persons with impairments at the center of these communities accentuate the different temporality governing L’Arche’s way of life, and call the nondisabled to decelerate to the pace and rhythm of the slowest members, thereby making time for peace amidst high-speed society.

**Clock Time**

Like all human cultures, societies in the late modern west direct and encourage for its citizens a particular experience of time. The lived experience of time is increasingly being characterized by the leitmotifs of acceleration and emptiness. Across the generational spectrum, persons more and more live time as a clock “running out.” With a decreasing confidence in anything beyond physical death, life often becomes a race to acquire as many life experiences and finish as many individual life projects as possible. Fast and empty time results in a profound sense of alienation, desperation, and powerlessness. Persons feel increasingly lost and disconnected from their lives, susceptible to a desperation which seeks eternity through the domination of time.

*The Nature and Experience of Time: Fast and Empty*

One common theme arising to describing the temporal experience of ordinary life in late modernity is that of speed. Many areas of life appear to be accelerating to the point of leaving people breathless and “left behind.” The metaphor of being caught up in the “hamster wheel” of social acceleration, which binds persons in a race not to get left behind, more and more captures people’s feelings and intuitions about striving for the good life in minority world societies.³

---

Experiencing temporality as accelerating creates what Marianne Gronemeyer calls “homo accelerandus” and fosters the perception of time as a “race against the clock.”

Social theorist Hartmut Rosa describes social acceleration as having three primary characteristics. First, technological acceleration in dimensions such as transportation, production, and, in particular, computer and information technologies has significantly altered life experience in (late) modernity. People no longer travel by foot, or make things from scratch, or send messages by pigeon, but take planes and produce via assembly line and communicate by text messaging and email. Travelling faster, producing quicker, and communicating in “real time” serve the purpose of “saving time,” yet also carry persons along with the increased pace of technological development.

Rosa understands the second dimension of social acceleration concerning the pace of social change. Previous eras maintained a sense of both the past and future as having validity in the present, through tradition and a concern for future generations. Valid knowledge and experience had an inter-generational aspect: ancestors exercised an influence and wisdom on the present, and the future represented a similar and recognizable working-out of the present. Rosa sees the time window of legitimacy rapidly shrinking, where practical wisdom and a common life experience contract from multiple generations to intra-generational. This “contraction of the present” comes in the form of ever newer knowledge, continual changes in occupation, shorter (and more frequent) intimate relationships, and quicker changes in social norms.

The third area of social acceleration consists of a speeding up of the pace of life. Rosa understands this as arising from a general sense of “time famine,” which creates a desire to do

---


more things in a shorter period of time. So persons eat quicker (“fast food”), speed up relationships (“speed dating”), and plan more in order to squeeze more experiences into daily life (“quality time” with children). Multitasking represents the great virtue of contemporary life as it enables persons to “save time” by performing multiple activities at once. Rosa understands this sense of “time famine” as coming in part from the secularization of western societies. When the focus rests primarily on the earthly and immediate – as opposed to the transcendent and hereafter – the impetus of life becomes accentuating (and increasing) present experiences. Thus persons create “bucket lists” of activities they seek to experience between retirement and death, a time previously considered one for rest, relationship and reconciliation.7 The speeding up of the pace of life then resides not only with wage earning adults, but accelerates at all levels of the life cycle: from children’s education beginning sooner to the squeezing in of experiences before one dies.

Time at any age stands here as a (scarce) resource to be used, managed and manipulated for the furtherance of individual life projects. While previously religious institutions oriented persons towards time and its (eternal) other, in late modernity persons are increasing left on their own to set their own rhythm, albeit still influenced by the temporalities of dominant institutions. In this way, time in high-speed societies has an “empty” quality: time is merely a homogenous, disenchanted, and indifferent container in which humans fulfill self-made projects through their activity and experience.8 As an aspect of life disconnected from anything outside the self, time becomes something people “have” and “save” and use to maximize life experiences and quality.

The Ascendency of “Clock Time”

A crucial technology in the development of this kind of empty time was the mechanical clock. Few things have shaped western societies more than clocks for forming and conceiving of time. As John Swinton points out, clocks have power because they make time feel real and

---

tangible. This means that persons can begin to control time, as opposed to being merely passive receivers of seasonal and climactic rhythms. “The real power of clocks lies not so much in what they do – record the movement of temporal cycles lasting for twelve or twenty-four hours – but in what they represent: the impression that we can control time.”

The advent of the clock came with Benedictine monks who used bells tolled at regular intervals to connote the canonical hours. These first clocks had no hands or dials, so faithfulness to prayer with others rather than punctuality stood as the goal. While the typical peasant serf still relied upon the rise and falling of the sun to order her day, this regular scheduling by a machine was a highly unusual form of time-telling. Yet both the monk and peasant till lived primarily through “event” or “lived” time: the ordering of temporal life through highly significant events and practices. Thus Swinton understands the first mechanical clocks to have a specific purpose: “to enable people to structure their lives in ways that were faithful to their beliefs and their spiritual way of life.”

Yet as an emerging bourgeois class of merchants began to ascend in power, their appropriation of the clock for their own profit radically changed the way people told and conceived of time. The advent of hands on the clock enabled a more precise and quantifiable measure of time, which served the interests of merchants looking to differentiate their telling of time from monastery. Production increased exponentially through the “time saving” efficiencies of the assembly line, bolstered by the increased use of the clock in managing schedules and workers. Emptied of its lived and sacred meaning, time became a fit tool for commodification; “time is money” would have appeared nonsensical to a pre-modern observer,

---

who assumed time as related to a particular event. As Neil Postman mentions, “without the clock, capitalism would have been quite impossible.”

The clock’s increasingly pervasive usage in the scientific and economic revolutions of modernity led to the dominance of what Teresa Reed calls “clock time” and Benjamin Whorf names “Standard Average European Time (SAET).” This form of time is perceived as fragmented, instrumental and measurable, and contains key features like synchronicity, punctuality, paleontology along with behaviours and practices like “wasting time” and “saving time.” The political and cultural ascendency of science and capitalism translates into a cultivation of this temporality into the social imaginary as a whole, shaping ever greater aspects of life in clock time. The advent of neo-liberal globalization made this logic salient not just in the affluent west but attempted to reach the farthest ends of the earth. Robert Hassan recognizes this as producing a dominant, homogenous, global vision of clock time. “The régime of the clock reaches into every culture and influences, to a more or less degree, the actions of most people on the planet. Moreover, this abstract, technological form of time, like all other technologies, came to be a technology because of the deep need for temporal efficiency and control, for the speeding up of time. The consequence of this imperative has been the displacement and/or subsumption of other times in individuals, in society and in nature.”

Life in Clock Time: Wasted Lives, Alienation, and Desperation

What happens to persons in the speed and emptiness of secular time? Many laud the acceleration of production, distribution, and consumption brought about by globalization, which promises to bring the affluent lifestyle of the western economies to the rest of the world. Yet social theorist Zygmunt Bauman also sees globalization as spawning the proliferation of “wasted lives.” Bauman understands these “superfluous persons” as referring to the growing global social underclass. Yet persons considered intellectually disabled could also fit under this

---

15 Reed, “Time in Relation to Self, World, and God,” 167-9; Whorf quoted in Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 23.
16 Hassan, Empires of Speed, 50–51.
description. In a high-speed world of constant transiency and dematerialized virtuality, the embodied presence of people with significant limitations can appear strongly contradictory. Swinton notes how clock time contains not only a particular politics and economic, but also its own particular anthropology.

The desirable state for human beings living within SAET is to be able to handle the economics of time efficiently in a world that adores speed, loves intellectual prowess (quickness of mind), and worship comfortably at the altar of competitiveness, productivity, efficiency, and self-sufficiency (using your time well on your own behalf). The implication is that to live humanly is to learn to live one’s life effectively according to a series of culturally constructed time tracks that are laid out according to the fixed and relentless rhythm of the two-handed clock (or the four-figured digital clock). Not to be able to move one’s body or one’s mind to such a temporal rhythm is to live in a way that pushes the boundaries of acceptable humanness.19

The logic of speed inherent in the time of capitalism demands a faster, stronger body to win the competition for labour. In addition, Swinton mentions how a reductionist scientific worldview, particularly as seen in the realm of bioethics and evolutionary biology, contains a similar strand of competition not amenable to those considered intellectually disabled. When human progress supplanted providence as a guiding temporal doctrine, “time inevitably came to be perceived as morally neutral and instrumental, the uncaring arena for the working out of blind nature and the striving for human desire….Within such a worldview, any perceived difference in capacities inevitably came to be seen as a form of suffering insofar as it prevented people from fully engaging in the forward, progressive movement of time and history that is required for the betterment of the species.”20 In this sense, people with dementia or those labelled with conditions like Down Syndrome can easily be seen as burdens and impediments to the good. Swinton quotes a statement from British philosopher and ethicist Mary Warnock in regards to persons diagnosed with dementia. “If you’re demented, you’re wasting people’s lives – your family’s lives – and you’re wasting the resources of the National Health Service.”21 According to Swinton, Warnock’s comments encapsulate a clock time defined by speed, productivity and

---

20 Ibid., 42-3.
rational conceptions of happiness that easily turns persons with various impairments into burdens. “The suggestion that we are a burden on others because we cannot contribute is simply another way of saying that the way in which persons with profound disabilities use their time is incompatible with current temporal assumptions and expectations.”

While secular time makes the lives of persons with cognitive impairments increasingly incomprehensible, it also forms everyone else in a way of being which threatens all persons with alienation and estrangement. In an empty and high-speed world, time represents both something that the individual self possesses but also something which in turn possesses the self. Rosa points out how social acceleration and modernity’s goals of autonomy mutually support one another, yet speed actually winds up overwhelming person’s desires for expanded choice over their lives. Instead of people truly shaping their own lives through self-determination, more often than not they find themselves defined by the need to stay “competitive” in order not to get left behind. This dynamic leaves people in a profound state of alienation in every aspect of life: persons feel disconnected from space, where distance disappears in virtuality; in a culture of disposability, people no longer have the same connection with and attentiveness to things; when multitasking becomes the primary virtue, persons become alienated from their own actions, no longer having a lived sense of what they do; when the “tyranny of the moment” reigns and the present contracts, persons no longer connect with time; and the superficiality of relationships through the network wind up alienating persons from others.

More than ever, Richard Fenn states, western societies have left people “on their own” to deal with memory and time, producing a “lostness” that leaves persons anxious and without meaning.

When time is stripped of any meaning outside that of the projects of the modern self, the alienation it experiences produces what Jonathan Tran calls an acute form of “desperation.” Understanding time as a scarce resource which must be controlled results in a fear of time “running out” and “getting out of hand.” The ability to wait in situations of conflict and threat

---

22 Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 52.
23 Rosa, Alienation and Acceleration, 83–97. Rosa defines alienation as “a state in which subjects pursue ends or follow practices which, on the one hand, are not enforced upon them by external actors of factors – there are workable alternative options – but which, on the other hand, they do not ‘really’ want or support” (82).
depreciate to the point of taking “pre-emptive” actions in order to make history come out right.26 When time becomes an enemy the world begins to look very hostile and wars become apt instruments of maintaining individual/national/international security. Tran sees in the “domino theory” rationale for the Vietnam War an example of the kind of desperation which ensues from understanding time as empty. The removal of eternity from time means that time represents death and contingency, and must be fought and ultimately defeated as the universal enemy of humanity. In the name of progress and human security, time must be dominated because no other temporal horizon exists. Time for many in the late modern west becomes a brutal villain who must be swiftly dealt with in order to once again be brought under control. When time infinitely extends into an unknown future in an empty world, no hope for salvation other than human projects will save persons from the temporal enemy.

**Experiencing Time in L’Arche: Gift and Opportunity for Disarmament**

The previous chapter described L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theological vision as particular cultures providing a certain milieu for its members to experience time. While many in late modernity find themselves experiencing time as fast and empty, persons in L’Arche relate a temporal experience characterized by a full and gifted slowness. Guided by both its founding story as well as the task of being and becoming a community of peace, L’Arche communities oriented around Vanier’s theology understand the need to befriend time. The quotidian aspects of living life together shape persons into seeing time as God’s gift for growth and communion building. Persons previously formed in high-speed society learned how to “waste” time as a practice of peacefulness, becoming the “friends of time” who can welcome themselves and the other as precious gifts to encounter and receive. As the untypical teachers and masters of community life, those persons considered intellectually disabled lead the way for many in living time slowly and fully. Only through living at the pace of persons like Antoine or Edith did many nondisabled persons experience the transformation in self which lies at the heart of L’Arche’s understanding of peace.

---

26 While Tran contains his analysis of time and war to Vietnam, the more recent military interventions in the Middle East could parallel the same process. See Luc Reycherl, *Time for Peace: The Essential Role of Time in Conflict and Peace Processes* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2015), 107–11, on a similar dynamic which occurred in regards to the "regime change" in Libya in 2011.
Time as Gift Given for Peace

A consistent theme which arises from persons in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities when discussing temporality is an understanding of time as gift and opportunity for growth in self, relationships, and with God. Rather than perceive time merely as raw material to be exploited for personal projects, members in these communities speak of time as the mode for developing the virtues of peace which build communion. Persons in L’Arche use the language of “taking time,” but not in a dominating way. Instead, Claire de Miribel comments on the crucial role time plays in building relationships and community. When one comes to live in a L’Arche community dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments, one moves “from a world of efficiency and productivity into a world where the essential values are people’s relationships and personal presence to one another. From a world where everything is to be had here and now, you enter a world where the essential element is time: the time required to create personal ties, to win each other’s trust, to grow.”27 This kind of understanding implies a sense of time as gift, given by God for the works of transformation and growth.

The understanding of time as gift in communities attempting to live out Vanier’s theology means that one relates to time not as an enemy to conquer but an aspect of life to receive and welcome. In Vanier’s words, to become people and communities of peace its members must become “friends of time.” “Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community take time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time.”28 Through understanding time as the gift given for growth, L’Arche members in Vanier-grounded communities can grow in those habits which bring healing and communion. Cultivating and developing mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness demands a non-violent orientation to time, and understands growth as a lifelong journey rather than immediate

possession. Befriending time means opening oneself to the slow process of disarmament with self and other.

The particularly slow and deliberate temporality in L’Arche fosters and assists the revealing of one’s brokenness, something essential to the process of disarmament. Vanier discovered this first hand during his sabbatical. His encounters with the intense pain and rejection of someone like Eric showed him how a deceleration from high-speed society often brings up the shame and suffering of one’s own past. The transformation which occurs in community life cannot happen without this surfacing, which means that people must stop “running” and face their own shadow. “Let us simply stop and start listening to our own hearts. There we will touch a lot of pain. We will possibly touch a lot of anger. We will possible touch a lot of loneliness and anguish. Then we will hear something deeper. We will hear the voice of Jesus; we will hear the voice of God. We will discover that the heart of Christ, in some mysterious way, is hidden in my heart and there, we will hear, ‘I love you. You are precious to my eyes and I love you.’”

This experience of disarmament does not happen immediately but through being on a grace-filled journey together with others. Only by understanding time as a capacious gift can persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology take enough time and attention to walk the road of transformation. “Assistants as well as core members come to L’Arche wounded by circumstances, accidents, structures, rejection, abuse, weakness, stupidity, bad choices, and losses. It all takes so much time, and it is only now, after thirty years, that we [in L’Arche] reflect with wonder on the ways in which so many of us, members of our communities, are standing up, claiming our lives, integrating our losses, and assuming our true identity as men and women of peace.”

Time as Full and Contemplative

Understanding time as gift includes seeing time not as empty but as full. Lived time in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theological insights demands a kind of intensity of relationship and attentiveness that makes seemingly trivial aspects of life abound with significance. Whereas secular time imbues activities with a primarily functional meaning, the

---

slow and full time in these L’Arche communities brings out the fullness present in the everyday. Former assistant Christopher Bemrose describes living in a L’Arche home as teaching him the “importance of the inessential” in traditions often deemed unnecessary in late modernity. “The meals of over an hour, rather than the quick snack, giving a real sense of being with others. The celebrations – so numerous that I thought it was someone’s job to invent them – making the significant passing of time and of life. The rituals, such as holding hands for grace, create a sense of unity and belonging. They all make life fuller and richer, but are too readily dropped in our increasingly functional world.” The personal transformations that occur in L’Arche happen as a result of its particular way of living time. Experiencing time in L’Arche communities attempting to live out Vanier’s theology contrasts with a world concerned primarily with productivity and efficiency. Befriending time reorients one’s temporal perspective towards fullness rather than scarcity, seeing time as a capacious space to encounter God, one’s inner shadow, and the strangeness of the other.

The fullness and meaning of the experience of time in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities extends even to the journey of dementia and death. Nothing strikes fear in the heart of many in late modernity like a life ending in loss of memory and ability. In contrast, the way of living time in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights assists persons in finding meaning even in the midst of loss and fragility. Hazel Bradley describes the last days of core member Beryl, and how time became full as community members accompanied her on the way to death. “The more totally dependent she became the more she radiated a calm beauty that drew people to her side. She could no longer speak but would hold your hand tightly with a grip of iron that would not let go while she gazed deeply into your eyes. At the end people would sit for hours drinking in the beauty of her eyes that silently communicated so much of presence and communion.” Persons in L’Arche never seek to romanticize suffering and death; they know as much as anyone the struggles of persons with dementia and those who care for them. Yet L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theological vision speak to a fullness of time when it finds meaning amidst pain and loss. Thus Bradley notes how “Around the bed [at the hospital before death] there was great feeling of peace, prayer and presence.” As persons “sit for hours”

---

33 Ibid., 15.
next to their dying friends, they experience a fullness to time which expands the present to include the other and the transcendent.

For Vanier, this experience of a fullness of time points to how L’Arche is not merely the “active” community most believe it to be, but also a contemplative one as well. The emphasis Vanier places on relationship and unity in L’Arche slows persons down enough to make room for the inbreaking of God. Pursuing mutuality above instrumentality results in living time as ready to be filled with meaning, and which creates a moment of healing and peace. “It is a moment of eternity in a world where people are usually caught up in action, noise, aggression, a quest for efficiency, and the need to prove themselves….Moments of peace, contemplation and communion deepen and widen the human heart; they show that it is possible to be more, to live more, to search more, to love more and to give of oneself more. They are moments of fulfillment, but also new beginnings.” These moments exemplify an experience of God’s time, which demands the patience that comes from befriending time. Friends of time know how to wait and slow down enough to recognize time as a medium where God reveals himself and guides persons on the journey of disarmament.

_Befriending Time: Learning How to “Waste” Time with “Wasted” Lives_

Persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology begin to experience this kind of fullness of time through participation in the daily life and practices of community life. These activities range from the more formal practices mentioned in chapter 4 – welcome, storytelling, prayer, celebration, and forgiveness – to the more prosaic aspects of living together. Nondisabled assistants will often speak of these activities as being deliberate attempts to “waste time,” in contrast to a secular view of time which understands this “waste” as deeply regrettable. For persons in Vanier-grounded L’Arche communities, “wasting” time means an intentional act of relationship building over functionality and efficiency. This “wasting” of time translates into the need to befriend time as the opportunity for growth and friendship. This attitude often does not come easy to many persons new to community. Vanier himself describes how he needed to learn how to waste time during his sabbatical with persons like Eric and Lucien; without doing

---

so he would potentially have avoided the process of disarmament he experienced, as well as miss
the gift of friendships offered to him.35 Even for those committed to Vanier’s theological vision
of L’Arche, the need to intentionally “waste” time remains a crucial practice. Former director
Baska Pestka notes how the speed of the world invades her L’Arche community, which creates
an even greater need to spend non-functional time with others.

The extreme busyness of community life sometimes is especially frustrating because,
above all, for a relationship of true tenderness to develop, it takes time. It may be only
when starting the second or third cup of tea that someone will ask: ‘How are you really?
How are you Baska?’ And you know from the tone of voice and the depth of that
question going through your spine that you are being really seen and really cared for. So
‘wasting’ time together, enjoying each other’s company is what constantly draws me and
nourishes me. It is resting in friendship, without trying to perform and be busy all the
time. It takes time to let myself trust enough to be vulnerable; to be cared for.36

L’Arche communities trying to live Vanier’s theological insights discovered the gift of
time and the crucial practice of its “waste” not through rational design but through committing
itself to relationships with those called intellectually disabled. Vanier and others did not
welcome person labelled disabled in order to slow down and experience eternity in time. In
contrast, it was persons like Eric and Edith who transformed the temporality of others, away
from a fast and empty time and towards a fuller and slower time of grace. While the clock still
makes its presence felt in every L’Arche community, nondisabled members continually
emphasize how many core members drew them into another, more capacious temporality.
Assistant Philip Ney relates how living with persons considered intellectually disabled has been
crucial in his own transformation. “I am grateful to Rachel, Cory, Gary and Lisa for calling me
to stop multi-tasking in order to be fully present with them. L’Arche teaches us the value of
slowing down, in speech, in action and way of life: to treasure the simple moments of life when
we share a gentle smile, search for silent moments side by side, in drinking tea, sharing a prayer,
and when our hearts cry to connect, to be known.”37 Ney’s gratitude represents something that
goes beyond a mere liberal inclusion of the outlier within normative bounds. Instead persons in

L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology understand many core members as exercising a transformative role as teachers and guides on living time as fullness rather than scarcity. The friendships of people with cognitive impairments revealed to many nondisabled assistants the need to become friends with time, and how this befriending is an essential part of the disarming process.

_L’Arche as a Community Living and Telling Time Eschatologically_

As a sign of the Gospel with so called “wasted lives” at its center, L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology represent a particularly “odd” sign of peace and unity in a high-speed world. Yet if habits like patience and trust, as well as the characteristics of slowness and dependency, lie at the center of a Christian temporality of peace, then perhaps these L’Arche communities may not be as “odd” as they appear. The living and experiencing of time in Vanier-inspired communities appears far more amenable to the process of disarmament than does an empty and accelerated time. In these communities, persons are formed in an understanding of the gift of time on a daily basis through life together in community, which makes them into the “friends of time” who practice peace as a habitual art.

If slowness and dependency represent essential aspects of a Christian anthropology and temporality, then it comes as little surprise how L’Arche communities attempting to live out Vanier’s theological insights continually announce persons labelled intellectually disabled as masters in peace. Vanier and others see the place and centrality of core members in communities as merely attempts to approximate Paul’s description of the Body of Christ: “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect” (1 Cor 12:22-23). Learning how to live at the pace of people like Edith and Lucien opened the way for many nondisabled assistants to experiencing them as friends who accompanied them on the path of disarmament.

Thus Vanier understands welcoming people with cognitive impairments in L’Arche not as “social inclusion” but as simply being and becoming God’s embodied peace in the world. As persons perceived as being equally capable of living in God’s time as anyone else, core members need not “get up to speed” with secular time. In contrast, those labelled as intellectually disabled
revealed to many nondisabled members how a temporality based in slowness and patience might more aptly assists human flourishing, mutual relationships, and the building of community. Vanier and the other founders of L’Arche did not first philosophically discern slowness as a fundamental principle of communal life, and then welcome people accordingly. Rather the presence core members like Eric and Antoine challenged persons to understand time contemplatively because only by so doing could community happen, friendship grow and people experience disarmament. Telling time in this way means that core members do not so much depend on others “including” them because L’Arche communities create an environment in which they more fittingly belong. L’Arche’s story shows how one’s temporal imaginary is determined in large part by the company one keeps, as well as who and what a community values.

Yet the cadence of this strange peace appropriately approximates the eschatological tenor of the kingdom of God. The nondisabled and cognitively impaired alike understand themselves as a people on a journey, travelling toward the mystery of God’s future already glimpsed in experienced moments of eternity in the present. When time is perceived as gift rather than curse, hope rather than desperation can represent one’s vision of the “end times.” The eschatological nature of God’s time means that clocks become subordinate to relationships, and that human flourishing includes a surprising range of difference and embodiment. Living from God’s future re-imagines time in the present and befriends limitations previously considered obstacles to “progress.”

The eschatological hope formed through the performance of communal practices and the cultivation of timeful habits offers an authentic freedom to face the truth and rest assured in the liberation of time by Jesus. L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theology train persons in the patience and tenderness not tempted by the world’s “peace-through-violence” strategy, an approach that demands an autonomy and power Christians reserve for God alone. Instead persons like Antoine and Yveline show others how peace and unity come through an acknowledgement of their true place in God’s story. “We live in God’s time and within God’s history. The salvation of the world is God’s task, not ours. Our task is to be faithful, peaceful people wherever we are. And the shape of that peace is determined not by the violence of the

---

world, but by the recognition that Jesus who is gentle has redeemed time and that the key to faithful living is living trustfully, patiently and gently until the Lord returns (James 5:7).”

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter I oriented my question around how an ecclesiology informed by the peace culture represented in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology compares with the cultural environment of contemporary western societies. A fundamental aspect of this peace culture centers around its perception and experience of time, a view which can contrast greatly with late modern cultures governed by temporalities of speed, efficiency and emptiness. When communities grounded in Vanier’s theology lets this kind of time inform its way of life, they call their members to live and experience time as a gift and opportunity for disarmament. Fullness rather than emptiness characterizes God’s time, along with a hope in a future given through the Holy Spirit rather than autonomously secured by human effort. L’Arche communities living out of Vanier’s theology stand as signs of a lived Christian temporality, one bold enough to live the slow, eschatological pilgrimage of trust amidst high-speed society.

The peace at the heart of living time eschatologically contrasts with secular time’s speed and emptiness. What looks like a “waste of time” to some appears to those in Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities as the befriending of time required to grow into those habits needed to witness to God’s peace. For persons who journey in trust towards their end in eternity, peace lies all along the way; in God’s temporality, all time has been filled with God’s future. An empty time in an empty world fears death as the clock “running out,” and thus perceive any obstacles to their own choice as enemies. Those obstacles include those persons unable to be incorporated in the anthropology of liberal citizenship guiding the concept and experience of time in liberal societies. However, persons living eschatologically can take the time to slow down and truly encounter persons unable to “get up to speed” with secular time. Thus the “oddness” of an eschatological peace lies not only in the people it understands as gifted but also in habits and goods it deems as the true human end. Even amidst those communities less overtly acting out of

a theological story or a sense of having a counter-cultural identity, merely the presence of those considered disabled sets them at odds with cultures whose anthropologies promulgate multi-tasking and quick-thinking as model humans. Calling people like Edith or Antoine “teachers” or prioritizing the “wasting of time” as a practice of peace can rest uncomfortably beside societies who time frames emphasize efficiency and control.

How might the church live out and practice this way of life as a witness to peace and as gift for the world? In the following two chapters I will examine the church as an eschatological community of God, called to act as a sign of peace in a world of sin and violence. That sign is expressed not as an ideology or theological conception but as lived argument. Thus part of the church’s theological imagination consists in articulating the ecclesial habits and practices which shape persons in the time of Jesus Christ, and make themselves ready to receive and respond to the eschatological peace of the Holy Spirit. Before going into those habits and practices in detail, I will look at the ground of what a peace ecclesiology looks like which takes its cue from Vanier’s theology and the practice of it in communities following his theological vision.
Chapter 6 Living on the Frontier: The Foundation of an Eschatological Peace Ecclesiology

*God has time for himself and for us; we never have enough time for anything; and that is the great difference between us.*

*To forget God, to lose time, to produce division among human beings – these are three movements of one and the same attitude.*

For those L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights, their attempt to live out Vanier’s vision of peace roots itself in being a body of persons drawn together in communion. In their attempt to live the Gospel, these communities’ fidelity to their way of life can accentuate their “oddness,” sometimes giving them a counter-cultural character in spite of themselves. The peace that calls communities grounded in Vanier’s vision to witness to God’s reconciliation requires a sense of communion which journeys slowly enough to live in God’s learn from lives often considered “wasted.”

But what might this say to the church? How could Vanier’s theology and the practice of it in communities dedicated to his theological commitments be “translated” into a peace ecclesiology? When these communities live their vocation faithfully, what do they reveal to the church about being God’s community of the “new creation”? How might the church glean these insights regarding its own call to live into and embody for the world Christ’s peace? As another community of the *eschaton,* what does L’Arche have to teach the church about living in God’s temporality?

Keeping the shape of L’Arche’s peace culture in mind, this chapter will concern itself with beginning to discern the shape of a peace ecclesiology drawn from Vanier’s theology and those L’Arche communities’ attempt to live it out as a way of life. My question here asks: How might the insights from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities committed to Jean Vanier’s theological vision be developed as the ground of a peace ecclesiology? Answering this question will entail making two moves. First, I will summarize my findings to this point in my

---

attempt to answer the overall research question, namely what might be learned from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities as implied in the work Jean Vanier for the project of developing a peace ecclesiology. This first move will entail describing Vanier’s theology of peace, and articulating the habits and practices that accompany it in L’Arche communities grounded in his theological vision. After this I will begin to develop these ideas into new dimensions that move beyond Vanier’s theology and the practice of them in L’Arche communities. This second move entails a shift in perspective from understanding peace in regards to Vanier’s theology and L’Arche’s practice, to how the church might bring these insights into its own theology and practice of peace. As L’Arche is clearly not a church in the ecclesial or denominational sense, Vanier’s theology and its praxis in communities exist not as “blueprints” for ecclesial bodies and congregations to merely copy. By contrast, the theological vision expressed by Vanier and in communities grounded in his insights offer seeds for a peace ecclesiology, helping to see new aspects of the church and its witness for peace. In this light I look at the church’s incorporation into the story of the Trinity, and how God’s economy stamps the church with its own peaceful character. The body formed and called by God becomes the “timeful” church, one given the time to grow into its mission to anticipate the eschatological kingdom and embody the friendships faithful to Jesus’s life and work. A community living in God’s time lives “on the frontier” between the old and new aeon, making the time to receive the gift of friendship from those often left behind by a temporality beholden to the clock and the claims of the autonomous self.

Methodological Considerations

L’Arche as “Embodied Parable” for the Church

This dissertation has noted several times how Vanier and others in L’Arche go to great pains to not call themselves a “church” in the denominational sense. L’Arche has always strived to draw its life from the tradition of the church rather than seek its own ecclesiastical structures and identity. At the same time, Vanier never shies away from articulating a vision of the church inspired by his experience of life in Christian community with people considered intellectually disabled. The attempt of L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theological vision to provide
not simply clinical care but also build community through living the Gospel means that its way of life includes many of the activities common to local faith communities: worship, liturgical rites, reflection on the scriptures, the sharing of gifts and financial resources, and common prayer to name a few. It is the experience of these practices in the intensity of community life that leads Vanier to see in L’Arche the “body” Paul articulates in his first Corinthian letter. Vanier never intends to present communities as “models” for churches and congregations to imitate. Instead, Vanier sees in L’Arche many instantiations of the charisms and gifts at the heart of an *ekklesia*, a people called out by God for worship and witness. In Scott MacDougall’s words, L’Arche exists as a kind of “embodied parable” that contains both the content of faith as well as a visceral, affective, and relational experience of God and the Gospel.³ L’Arche acts as a “sign” for the church rather than its prototype, and offers its embodied Christian experience of transformation and peace to the catholic body of Christ.

Along these lines, the ecclesiology developed in this chapter will understand Vanier-grounded L’Arche communities as a “parable” or “sign” for the church’s way of life and mission as witnesses to God’s peace. I will discern in the church the same habits and practices of peace experienced in these L’Arche communities as noted in chapter 4. These Christian dispositions and activities happen within the slow and capacious time mentioned in previous chapter, a temporality gleaned from the experience of time in L’Arche. In this way, I will interpret L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments as a Spirit-led inspiration for the church’s peace witness without limiting the particular instantiation of faith communities to a mere mimicking of L’Arche’s communal life.

*A Broadly Hauerwasian Approach*

Theologians have used various ways of thinking about the church. In his influential book *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles used six images for ecclesiological reflection: the church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples.⁴

---

Nicholas Healy considers the three ecclesial positions of pluralist, exclusivist, and inclusivist. A more recent approach to the church that has become widely used is communion ecclesiology. This model has become particularly popular in ecumenical discussions and remains the dominant approach used by the World Council of Churches. Various other approaches exist, ranging from feminist to eucharistic to missionary forms of ecclesiology. Healy sees an inadequacy in many of these models, particularly when they act as “blueprint ecclesiologies” which try to encapsulate or summarize the church in one all-encompassing “supermodel.”

This chapter’s discussion of the “timeful church” will rely substantially on Stanley Hauerwas’s ecclesiological approach. Hauerwas has intentionally refused to advocate any

8 See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
9 Healy, Church, World, and the Christian Life, chap. 2.
“model” of the church or even develop one of his own, and so has never written a systematic ecclesiology per se. Yet a key aspect of his general theological method is understanding the church as central to any endeavor at theological reflection. Hauerwas claims that “all theology must begin and end with ecclesiology” because Christians discern the nature and economy of God less through intellectual concepts than through sharing life together in communities of faith. Discipleship entails an attention and commitment to living the story of Jesus in “communities of character” which shape persons in the habits and virtues required to live Christian life faithfully. The church as a “school” of moral formation helps train Christians in these faithful dispositions through the performances of ecclesial practices and sacramental activities, which in turn assist believers in faithfully embodying the Gospel. At the same time, Hauerwas is aware of how faith communities can fall short of their calling to follow Christ.

Hauerwas has written on L’Arche, and his appreciation of and admiration for Vanier and L’Arche communities is clear and unequivocal. At one point, in response to a question about

---

11 Hauerwas, In Good Company, 38. This is one of the areas where the influence of John Howard Yoder on Hauerwas becomes clear. Yoder’s work that stand out in this regards include Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2001) and The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
what L’Arche might have to say to the church, Hauerwas remarks that L’Arche “is the church….L’Arche helps us get a glimpse of what the future of Christianity might look like.”

Yet Hauerwas also senses the temptation for L’Arche to become its own church, and recognizes L’Arche’s need to remain connected to and dependent upon the wider ecclesial community. Not only does the intense communal life in L’Arche potentially create tribal allegiances that erode a wider and catholic belonging in the church, but L’Arche needs the church because it is a central source of the movement’s own charism and mission. “L’Arche must remain connected with other modes of Christian life that make L’Arche possible. The body of L’Arche must always be integrated into the larger body of Christ through interconnectedness with other communities around the world.”

In addition to drawing on many of Hauerwas’s ecclesiological insights, this chapter also includes aspects of theologian Steven Summers’s “friendship ecclesiology.” Utilizing the church’s rich theological reflection around friendship, Summers sees the potential for the church in late modernity to become “a community that primarily identifies itself relationally, in terms of a ‘network of friendships’ that are by nature open-ended and facing a future open to possibility.” Understanding the church as a hospitable “network of friendships” coheres with the way God befriends time in Jesus and invites others into friendship through the Holy Spirit. Summers’s approach also focuses on the particular relationships of a local community as a locus for the church’s mission of witnessing to God’s peace in the world.

*Making Normative Statements about Christian Life and the Church*

Chapters 6 and 7 concern an attempt to take L’Arche communities’ theology and practice as implied in Vanier’s theological vision and “translate” it into Christian theology and the moral life of the church. While at times acknowledging how the church fails to authentically live out its vocation as friends of time, I will still use normative statements to articulate the character and
calling of Christian life and the church. In the introduction, I recognized the church as being an *in via* community, called to journey to and with God but susceptible to sin and infidelity due to human creatureliness. Keeping that in mind, I will still present a vision of belief that the church is called to embody and witness. Thus the general tone of the following chapters will generally be more prescriptive than descriptive in nature. However, the injunctions and directions given in regards to telling time and practicing peace do not come completely out of the blue. Aspects of the Christian peace theology presented here, as well as the habits and practices mentioned, cohere with the Christian tradition. That this theology and practice happens in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology shows them as more than abstract conceptions, and demonstrates how they can take root and be actualized in faith communities. Chapter 7 will also reveal examples of how faith communities might take the practices of a peace ecclesiology, and both express them in communal life and ecstatically in the cultures they inhabit.

**Answering the Research Question**

Up until this point, my project has concerned teasing out and illuminating what a peace culture contains and looks like in L’Arche communities devoted to Jean Vanier’s theological commitments. I took this direction due to the inadequacy of ecclesial attempts to orient their understanding of the place of those labelled as intellectually disabled through the model of “social inclusion.” While dominant models of social inclusion succeed at letting those with cognitive impairments into church buildings and worship services, they cannot accomplish the kind of robust hospitality that makes for communion and friendship. L’Arche exists as a living embodiments of the attempt to go “beyond inclusion” and make those called intellectually disabled true members of the body.

The overall research question for this project concerns what might be learned from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities as implied in the work of Jean Vanier for the project of developing a peace ecclesiology. Before proceeding to tease out the ecclesial implications of this theology and practice, I will summarize my argument up until now, pointing out what the church might realize from Vanier’s work and the attempt to live it out in communities dedicated to his theological vision. The answer to my research question focuses on the content of Vanier’s theology and the communal living out of that theology through being a
peace culture with particular habits and practices. Vanier understands peace as not only a state of non-conflict but, more importantly, as a dynamic process of disarming the self and befriending the enemy. Community is the locus for this work of transformation and reconciliation, where persons become formed in the graced dispositions which make for peace. Members discover and realize these habits through communal practices, which act as responses to the Trinity’s friendship and which form persons in their vocation to become “friends of time.” The church can learn from communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological vision to witness the “oddness” of God’s peace through living with the (supposed) weakest and slowest members.

**Becoming God’s Disarmed People: Vanier’s Peace Theology**

Because communion lies at the core of Vanier’s discussions of peace, he assumes a concept of peace that goes much further than the mere cessation of overt hostilities or violence. Vanier’s holistic notion of peace as state, *telos* or end, and activity orients him towards understanding peace and nonviolence more as ways of life than static conditions or strategic goals. In this way, Vanier envisions peace as communion from beginning, middle and end. Peace is achieved everyday through acts of encounter and community building, from the prosaic to the grand. A certain amount of stability and harmony requires this activity, so Vanier does not deny the need for peace as a state of affairs. Yet Vanier never holds a present, stable peace as an absolute. He knows that earthly peace will always be *in via*, stubbornly contingent and imperfect. Yet due to this Vanier also upholds a vision of peace as eschatological goal, rooted in the biblical image of the eternal wedding banquet. Vanier reminds the church that while the ultimate state of peace as eternal communion will only arrive at the *eschaton*, the transformation he has experienced in L’Arche communities gives him and all people hope in the possibility of reconciliation and redemption in the everyday.

Yet this peace worked at daily only occurs because it is ultimately a gift received from God. Vanier’s commitment to L’Arche as fundamentally a theological project – communities providentially brought about and sustained through the economy of the Trinity – means that in order for peace to permeate personal and communal life, recognition must be given to God’s primacy as giver of peace. Jesus Christ as redeemer of creation and reconciler of humanity stands at the forefront of Vanier’s theological vision of peace, with the Holy Spirit as animator
and realizer of Christ’s work in the world today. As people won by Christ’s peace, Vanier
certainly has a place for followers of Christ to participate in the missio Dei. Yet Vanier’s
appropriation of the reconciliation of humanity with God, each other, and creation as envisioned
in the New Testament witness means that human work and thought alone can never accord with
humanity’s true end. Dialogue, encounter and even a degree of common ground can be sought
with those outside this biblical vision of peace. However, Vanier emphasizes the need to
recognize peace as firstly a gift given out of the love of the Trinity to redeem and restore us to
our end as friendship with God. The church cannot rest on peace as merely a strategy to
accomplish, but firstly a way of life to be received as a gift and shared with the world.

At the core of Vanier’s theological vision of peace lies the need for personal
transformation within the context of deep friendships. Vanier’s personalist orientation means
that he understands no fundamental sense of peace to be possible without in the disarmament of
human persons. In this way, the church is reminded that merely structural or policy focused
efforts at peacemaking can never on their own transform the wounds and fear which create
enemies and a hostile world. The profound insecurity and anguish that come from early
imperfect caregiver relationships come to be reconciled through new mutual relationships of
friendship, often with people very different from oneself. For Vanier, encountering persons who
even awaken one’s own fear and inner violence are crucial to the disarmament process because
these situations reveal the truth of the human condition. Vanier’s own experience of awakening
to his own anguish through being with Eric illustrates how peace comes not through a flight from
painful reality but through its very fragility and vulnerability. Once persons realize their shadow
side they can begin to accept and own this aspect of the human condition, rather than merely
project it onto external enemies. When reality can be welcomed this way in truth, Vanier notes
from his own experience as well as others in L’Arche how persons grow in openness,
compassion and peace.

This peace occurs through relationships which have seen the worst of persons but
friendship also have called persons to their true selves. In this way, Vanier continually remarks
on how the stereotypical “generous benefactor” and “poor recipient” dynamic believed to exist
between nondisabled assistants and those with cognitive impairments often breaks down in real
relationships. While Eric certainly awakened his anguish, other core members also called forth
giftedness in him and others through their own gift of friendship. As “prophets of peace,” Vanier
understands people like Intissar and Yveline to have the vocation of living out and calling others
to grow in peace not in spite of but in the very midst of their vulnerability. Decelerating to the
pace of the slowest members of communities acts not only as an element of care, but just as
importantly assists persons in the process of disarmament. Transformation cannot be hurried and
usually does not occur through running. For Vanier, an element of peace means becoming
“friends of time” who enter into God’s full, slow and contemplative temporality. Vanier shows
the church how people like Edith and Antoine live this prophetic gift of living in God’s time, and
has seen how their way of being has transformed the lives of those trapped in the frantic and
desperate time of contemporary affluent societies.

According to Vanier, the place where these transformative friendships occur is in
communities of faith and life sharing. Communal unity as much as interpersonal harmony stands
as fundamental to the communion Vanier describes as being at the heart of peace. As a
personalist, Vanier understands personhood as inherently social in character, and communities of
belonging as the milieu where persons grow and flourish. According to Vanier, an
“anthropology of liberal citizenship” that takes persons to be autonomous individuals entering
into a social contract with one cannot adequately facilitate flourishing because of its
impoverished view of being human. Part of this arises through his experience of living with
persons considered intellectually disabled, who revealed to him both the inadequacy of liberal
individualism as well as opening him to an anthropology more hospitable to vulnerability and
dependence. Yet living in community also showed Vanier how impoverishing a liberal
anthropology is for all persons, even those who consider themselves the strongest and most
“able.” Thus community and networks of belonging exist not only for the “weak” and “poor” to
flourish and facilitate “equality of opportunity.” More significantly, being befriended by people
like Raphaël and Lucien shows the church the importance of community for everyone as a
fundamental aspect of being human. Certainly someone like Eric has a particular “need” for the
supports community provides more than Vanier or other nondisabled assistants. Yet Vanier
shows how that “need” is not different in kind from those without visible impairments but only
in degree. Everyone must undergo the process of disarmament that can only happen within
communities of friendship and belonging.

Yet for Vanier community is not merely a place of need but also locations from which to
witness to and participate in God’s peace and reconciliation in the world. Vanier never tires of
emphasizing peace as a practical activity, where enemies becomes friends in the most daily of ways. L’Arche plays host to the encounter with wide spectrums of difference of seen as threatening in the wider cultures of which communities are a part. As fellow signs rather than solutions, the church learns from communities committed to Vanier’s theology the need not to feel “responsible” for shaping the world but can commit themselves to being faithful stewards of the peace given to them by simply being themselves; namely, communities which facilitate the Holy Spirit’s disarmament of persons and the communion characteristic of the communal body. Vanier and others in L’Arche know that this task of merely being a unified community can be difficult enough. When faithfully understood, the failings and conflicts inherent in communal life can provide an openness and humility to recognize God as the true bringer and sustainer of peace. Therefore Vanier can counsel communities on the priority of receiving and facilitating the transformative friendships which witness to the world a way beyond alienation and enmity. For Vanier, this embodiment of God’s kingdom and wedding banquet is the vocation to peace which, while appearing highly “odd” to many late modern societies, has the potential to show persons and cultures Jesus’s vision of the good life for all creation.

Habits and Practices: The Shape of L’Arche’s Peace Culture

Consistent with Vanier’s emphasis on peace as action, those communities which take their cue from Vanier’s theological vision understand their task of peace as primarily a practical activity. At the heart of this vocation is an understanding of L’Arche as peace culture, a way of life which forms its members in a perspective faithful to Vanier’s theological and philosophical insights. Vanier and others in L’Arche often take pains to distinguish themselves from an institutional model of “human service provision” prevalent in western, late modern societies. Communities’ engagement with government bureaucracies can seek to define L’Arche in this direction, imposing their own practices and logic onto the daily life of community homes and programs dedicated to Vanier’s theology. While Vanier has never advocated foregoing all financial support from the state, he and others have warned about the “subtle threat” this bureaucratic formation might potentially have on the identity of L’Arche communities. At the risk of being understood as “counter-cultural” or “odd,” the peace culture of Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities places the emphasis not on care “for” the weak but on transformation
“with” those considered intellectually disabled. Grounded in the Gospel, persons in these communities offer the church an attempt to witness to Jesus’s peace not “as the world gives” (John 14:27), showing the reconciliation at the heart of Christ’s way of peace.

The way that this peace culture is taught, cultivated and sustained in communities is through habits and practices of peace. Although official teaching sessions occur in L’Arche communities following Vanier’s theological insights, most formation happens through the customs repeated through the dailiness that comes from life sharing. As a place where the whole body (rather than just the mind) takes priority, the values of a L’Arche peace culture are communicated through habits learned via communal practices and traditions. In this way, Vanier-grounded L’Arche communities primarily practice theology, which acts to both express the contours of that theology and form persons in its logic. These communities reveal to the church how the vocation of witnessing to God’s peace requires a commitment to weave the kerygma of Christ’s peace into the bodily rhythms and actions of a people.

The specific habits of mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness express and orient persons in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theology towards that koinonia where Christ’s peace reigns. At the heart of living relationships mutually is the goal of seeing the other not as “resident” or some other category, but as friend, “another self.” The communion at the heart of this relational orientation goes beyond the “equality” of sameness regnant in a liberal anthropology, and orients persons towards bonds of belonging rather than a contract between autonomous “equals.” This mutuality happens within a milieu of trust, which can hope in the inbreaking of eschatological peace even to all signs of the contrary. Vanier and others in L’Arche communities dedicated to his insights often speak of trust as exemplified in people like Eric and Edith, persons who have lived their whole lives dependent on others for all daily activities. Many L’Arche assistants testify to how living through the quotidian conflicts of community life, never mind witnessing to God’s peace, without the habit of trust is essentially impossible. Along with the importance of trust comes the disposition of patience, the grace to continue to bear with the other even when all looks hopeless. Tempering the incessant need for the nondisabled trained in high-speed society to solve problems immediately, patience forms persons in the ability to wait peace to be given rather than always seize it. L’Arche’s peace culture as seen in communities oriented around Vanier’s theology runs on the kind of patience which can take the time to receive the other as gift and befriend or be befriended by them. The
formation in the habit of tenderness trains L’Arche members dedicated to Vanier’s theology in a nonviolent orientation not just to the body but to all of material reality. A training in tenderness in these communities orients persons in a way that can be peaceful stewards of the gifts God gives. “Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). What all these habits reveal to the church is the need for peace to be incorporated and embodied in the daily lives of those called to this vocation.

The place where these habits are cultivated is in the practices performed in communal life. These practices hold the intention of peace implied in the habits and reveal the training in these dispositions as a social activity as much as a personal one. As crucial aspects of L’Arche’s culture, these practices show the church how a corporeal incorporation of peaceable habits needs communal activities that contain and transmit a community’s notion of peace. L’Arche communities oriented around Vanier’s theology practice hospitality, a welcoming of the other in the truth of their being. In a world where the other can be either vilified or ignored, these communities’ practice of hospitality forms persons in the mutuality and patience which can turn enemies into friends. Vanier-inspired communities practice story-telling as a way of remembering people and communities truthfully. By continually re-telling stories, these communities foster the hope and trust which reminds them of God’s providential care for them.

The practice of prayer orients persons and communities toward their true end, the eschatological wedding banquet. Prayer forms members in communities in the patience and gentleness which understands peace as a gift. Vanier-directed communities also practice forgiveness, the grace which makes a way for reconciliation not just with the enemy but with time itself. Forgiveness forms persons in the trust and mutuality of a peace beyond violence and enmity. Finally, L’Arche communities reliant on Vanier’s theological insights celebrate as an expression of gratitude for the gift of peace continually given by God in daily life. Practicing celebration orients persons in these communities in the tenderness and trust of the wedding banquet already present and still to come.

Located within these practices is a particular temporality potentially more apt for holding the holistic peace of Christ than the “clock time” of many contemporary western societies. Particularly facilitated by the pace and rhythm of persons with cognitive impairments, who Vanier notes have an ability to decelerate those trained in high-speed societies, this slow and full time provides a space to receive the habits needed to become “friends of time.” In cultures
where “time is money,” practicing prayer or spending hours telling stories can appear “wasteful.” Yet the commitment of L’Arche communities dependent on Vanier’s theology to these practices comes from a belief that becoming witnesses of peace only comes through a befriending of time. The church might learn from the theology and practice of these communities that peace has a time and pace that require practices which slow persons down enough to recognize time as a gift given by God for reconciliation.

Because this sort of temporality can look highly odd to cultures with a fast pace of life, the church might also glean from Vanier-grounded L’Arche communities a readiness to likewise appear rather odd in the culture of which they are a part. Choosing to slow down and live by the pace of the slowest among them, persons in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights immediately sets these communities apart not only in their rhythm of life but in their conception of time itself. Vanier-inspired communities show the church what a community of “marginals” might look like, and how they witness to a form of peace which can celebrate while patiently bearing the suffering of another or working through interpersonal and communal conflicts. This oddness and marginality resonates with a Christian eschatological understanding of time, and reveals what living on the “frontiers” and “edges” of the new age might look like.

**Shifting the Perspective: The Ground of a Peace Ecclesiology Informed by Jean Vanier and L’Arche**

As L’Arche represents what Vanier calls a “gospel-based community” rather than a church or denomination, the theology and practice of communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights cannot simply be transposed onto ecclesial structures and life. Therefore the perspective of this project will now shift from how Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities envision and live out their participation in the *missio Dei* to how this theology can be developed into a peace theology for the whole church. The task now becomes in exploring how Vanier’s theology can move beyond the embodiment of that theology in L’Arche communities and into the thought and practice of ecclesial life.

---

The life and foundation of the church rests on the redemptive economy of the Trinity. God’s work as seen in creation, the covenant with Israel, the Word made flesh in the incarnation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost orient the church’s time not to the fragmented duration of the clock but to the saving events of history. As the community living in the new time of Jesus Christ, the church sees with eschatological eyes and thus discerns a peace the world cannot give (John 14:27). The mission of the church in God’s temporality rests in being the community called to embody God’s peace in a world of desperation and often resigned to the necessity of violence.

**Founded on the Trinitarian Economy**

The foundation of the church rests on nothing less than God’s call of friendship to a people to participate in God’s story of creation, redemption and fulfillment. The church affirms its genealogical roots in the people of Israel and the Hebrew scriptures, called out of slavery into a covenantal relationship with Yahweh to worship him and be the witness to God’s peace for all creation. Israel understands itself as the people born of and dependent on God, literally given time as a gift to grow into the Lord of Time’s faithful witnesses on earth. Through the written and oral Torah and the commitment to praise through worship, God formed Israel into the eschatological community called to participate in God’s *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the rendered fabric of creation. God gave Israel the gift of the Sabbath, to remind them time belongs to God and that God’s story has a beginning, middle and end.²⁰

It was to this people that God came in Jesus, and to whom the first followers of Jesus belonged. The first Christians subsequently ordered time and their way of life by the events of Jesus’s life. The incarnation announced God’s penetration into earthly time, an ecstatic act of befriending time. Jesus continued this mission of friendship by eating with sinners, reconciling the rejected, and announcing the immanence of God’s reign as he journeyed together with the disciples.

---

Jesus’s befriending of time extended even to the ultimate sign of love: the cross. By the cross Jesus saved creation from the hands of the powers, who claim violence and domination as a means to true peace. Through eschewing the need for violent control over evil, Jesus breaks the bond of violent competition within earthly time through the forgiving patience of God. Christ’s work of reconciliation in the crucifixion thus represents for the church the true center and beginning of time.21 The cross liberates creation for a love of the other guided more by friendship than domination, a befriending which includes time itself.

The resurrection confirms Jesus’s victory over the powers, and stands as the first fruits of God’s eschatological kingdom.22 God’s resurrection of Jesus opened the way between heaven and earth, bringing the ends of God into all creation. This naturally included the transformation of time, which stood now not as an encroaching enemy to life but as the space to experience creation’s true end. In this way the resurrection acts as the “grammar” of the Christian imagination, providing the syntactical structure for Christian reasoning and action, along with placing an eschatological seed within the material world that points to Jesus’s resurrected body as the future of creation.23

The event usually attributed as the church’s birth is the event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In this event, Jesus’s promise of continual presence with his friends is fulfilled through the Holy Spirit’s descent on the gathered group in Jerusalem. By uniting a diverse and scattered group into the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit works God’s end of befriending the world and makes the new community of followers of Jesus the witness to God’s peace. Grounded in the Trinitarian economy, the Holy Spirit directs and guides believers in the way of Christ and the missio Dei. As the continual presence of Jesus with the church, the Spirit animates and reconciles the Body into the koinonia which lives in and for God’s time. A peace ecclesiology cannot exist without the Holy Spirit as the love which binds not only the Trinitarian persons into unity in diversity but also the Body of believers. The Spirit enables Christians to

23 On the resurrection as the “grammar” of Christian thinking, see Brian DuWayne Robinette, Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence (New York: Crossroad, 2009), as well as MacDougall’s discussion in More than Communion, 46–9.
understand difference – whether language or body or way of being – not as barrier to communion but as the very way to reconciliation and friendship.

As the community born and incubated in God’s story, the church grounds its being on God’s work of peace: creation, election, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost. Thus Christian time flows less from the measured durations of the clock than from saving events which extend backwards and forwards in time. The church lives upon the breath of the eschatological Spirit, who transforms time from being a scarce commodity into the means for friendship and reconciliation. In God’s time, “all time is the time of something, or time for something. Time is, of course, not thing, but affordance. It is an opportunity for a happening, which involves more than the individual.”

The Vision of God’s New Community

As the community transformed into the Body of Christ, the church stands as the community consciously living in the new eschatological age while maintaining one foot in the old world. In John Howard Yoder’s terms, the church is the community living between the new and old aeon. The church has one foot in the world of the unredeemed powers, yet also anticipates the inaugurated kingdom as a sign through baptism and its witness to the “new creation” in Christ. Jesus’s redemption of time into the means of friendship with God births not just new individuals but also a new community living in the time of the eschatological kingdom. According to Philip Kenneson, a crucial aspect of that redemption is the creation of a new, “timeful” community who can live time eschatologically as gift.

Being in this timeful community requires a radical change in the way one is and acts in the world. “In this new time the priorities of existence are transformed: activities are significant

---

24 Ibid., 53.
to the extent that they proclaim and accord with the new time.”28 Wells notes how thinking and living eschatologically expands the moral imagination beyond the immediate and closed secular world. A temptation for the church is to accede to secular time’s logic of empty immanence, where “progress” replaces eternity and self-realization supplants conversion. Yet according to Wells, a timeful community “has a longer view of time, and commends action in accordance with the End of the story. The centre of that story is not the acting subject but the sovereign God. God has and is the last word.”29 Eschatological reasoning occurs by being a part of a community animated by the Holy Spirit, who forms persons in a particular way of seeing the world as a drama with an end: namely Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church participates in God’s peace by conforming its life to Jesus Christ. According to Fernando Enns, the image the church attempts to embody is not that of Christ as Pantocrator but as “the koinonia of God with humanity, the participatio of the church as a community constituted by the Holy Spirit and qualified by the Spirit as ethical community.”30 The church gazes at the icon of the nonviolent fellowship of the trinitarian persons, perichoretically abiding in each other as love, at the same time as their economy overflows outward to creation in philia love.31 In this way, the church is called to extend Jesus’s friendship mission of peace on earth by becoming his Body, which relates to fellow members in friendship love and invites the other (even the enemy) into the journey of becoming God’s friends.

The call to conversion and transformed priorities in the church equally applies to the encounter with other persons. Eastern theologian John Panteleimon Manoussakis explains how Christians see others with an eschatological vision which frees persons from a fixed and determined past. Instead of understanding the other through a protological gaze, with its

---

28 Wells, “From Space to Time,” 147.
29 Wells, “Stanley Hauerwas’ Theological Ethics in Eschatological Perspective,” 432.
30 Fernando Enns, The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence, trans. Helmut Harder (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2007), 244.
31 Other words could be used here to describe the love of the Trinity for creation, agape in particular. I will use philia regularly to stress the desire of God for a mutual relationship of intimacy with humanity, rather than a mere master/servant relationship, as exemplified in Jesus’s calling of the disciples friends (John 15:15). For a helpful explanation of philia (as distinguished from agape and eros) as being characterized by a love for the mutual relationship shared with another, see Edward Collins Vacek, Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 322. One could also use the Thomist language of caritas to denote the friendship of God, yet I will rely on philia as used and envisioned by the New Testament writers.
obsession with origins, the church sees the other in relation to their true end: namely communion with God, others, and all creation. Thus the church defines people not by past labels or current social norms. Rather the Holy Spirit directs Christians to see the other in relation to what they will become at the eschaton. Philip Thomas understands what kind of a difference this way of seeing can be for those considered disabled. “The new creation of God’s future, in which his image is perfected in all believers, will replace this world’s assumptions and conventions of social labeling with new values in which physical difference will not be viewed negatively.” Too often believers live out of the human image of the old aeon, and thus maintain the anthropology which denigrates rather than valuates physical difference. However, when the church lives eschatologically, it can more readily anticipate and act out of its end as receiving and being God’s friends. The community of the new aeon can thus relate to the other with the philia love which understands difference as gift and the other as the imago Dei.

With the Trinity as source for its communal life, the church has the time to befriend the other, particularly those often understood as lying far outside the possibility for mutual relations. Living God’s time means the church has the patience to wait for the calling of the Holy Spirit, and see everyone as bearing a vocation in the body of Christ. Summers sees the church as “demonstrating a way of being that embraces Jesus’s hospitable friendship. The call to be friends of Christ indicates that this community will contain those whom one would not, in other circumstances, consider friends. Those whom one sits next to at the table, or kneels beside at the altar-rail in the Eucharist, are not friends in a notional sense but in a real sense – they are fellow instantiators of koinonia, sharing in the gift of God’s Spirit.” Thus a timeful church goes beyond inclusion by not just letting the other in the building, but, more importantly, recognizing them as friends in Christ with a vocation to share. Outliers need not “get up to speed” in order to participate. In fact, those persons thought profoundly intellectually disabled might live slowly and gently enough to demonstrate to others in the body what it means to live peaceably in the world.

34 Summers, Friendship, 194.
Mission – Sent to Anticipate the Fullness and Reconciliation of the Kingdom

As the community not only called by God but also sent to participate in the missio Dei, the church fundamentally lives by mission. The mission given to the church lies in anticipating the fourfold reconciliation and communion inaugurated by Christ: between humanity and God, between persons, within persons, and between humanity and the rest of creation. Yet as a fundamentally eschatological reality, the kingdom always remains beyond the reach of the church even as it appears within it. Thus the church never is or replaces the kingdom, but merely anticipates it.

The first and primary way the church exercises and demonstrates its mission is simply through being the community called to praise God and be the community animated by the Holy Spirit to witness to the kingdom’s fullness. As Fernando Enns explains, the church’s main task rests in being the community of the new aeon. “In her very being she is the messenger of the kingdom of God; she is the shalom of the righteousness of God and of peace for humanity and the entire creation. As part of the world in which she lives, the church is always the precursor to a new, different world.” Thus when the church lives time as the opportunity for worship of the one God in a relationality of friendship and mutuality, it witnesses in a bold (if still contingent) way to the eschatological communion of God’s ultimate reign.

Committing itself to being first and foremost Jesus’s faithful and timeful body does not necessarily entail the kind of “sectarianism” claimed by some. The timeful church exists for God but still very much in the world, doing so in a spirit of pilgrimage that still commits itself to the “good of the city.” Hauerwas sees the church as having a crucial mission in showing the world that it is not condemned to constant enmity and violence. An aspect of this mission means

---

35 MacDougall, More than Communion, 10, 177.
36 Enns, The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community, 4.
38 Yoder termed this a “Jeremianic” model of church-world relations. Based on Jeremiah 29, Yoder wanted to give the church enough distance from the world to maintain its identity, yet also keep a relationship with the wider society that recognizes that all creation belongs to God. See his “See How They Go with Their Face to the Son,” in For the Nations : Essays Evangelical and Public (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 51–78.
helping “the world find the habits of peace whose absence so often makes violence seem like the only alternative.” 39 These habits come primarily through being part of local bodies of believers, whose life together shapes persons into the timeful friends who witness to the dawning of the eschatological kingdom. In this way, peace (making) is primarily not what the church does, claims Nindyo Sasongko, but what the church is, an attribute of the church akin to its traditional four marks of being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. 40

As the Body aware that the Creator God has made time as a gift for friendship and peace, the timeful church recognizes that fidelity rather than responsibility defines its relationship to the world. Rather than understand itself as the “chaplain to society,” whose duty lies in trying to make the world as just as possible, the church knows its first call as the praise of God and the embodied witness to the risen Christ. 41 Essential to this vision is the eschatological orientation of the church, which understands the Holy Spirit as the director guiding the community towards its true end: friendship and communion with the Trinity. Being animated by the Holy Spirit “releases the church from that Constantinian temptation to employ coercive and expediential power to achieve its missionary and apologetic ends. Instead the power of the imagination, resourced by the habits, tradition and practices of the peaceable community, offers other creative ways of respectfully exercising power.” 42 Living in God’s time means entering into the nonviolent relationality that understands violence not as inevitable but as the result of late modernity’s desperation and alienation. Recognizing that the true beginning and end of time has already come in Christ, the church opens itself to the eschatological horizon which draws all things towards the beatific telos of the Creator God.

The church can trust in its vocation as eschatological witness of the kingdom of peace because it understands that peace not as self-made work but first and foremost as the gift of God. “A church listening to the gospel of peace lives what she is: a community constituted by the proclamation of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, a community of reconciliation between God and humans, a community of solidarity between human beings, a sign of peace in the midst of

39 Hauerwas, “Peacemaking,” 325.
40 Nindyo Sasongko, “Toward a Nonviolent Koinonia: An Ecumenical Enquiry into Being the Church from a Historic Peace Church Perspective,” Ecclesiology 11, no. 3 (2015): 328. For an attempt to understand the church’s peace witness through the lens of the four marks of the church, see Craig L. Nessan, Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
42 Thomson, The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas, 192.
ongoing enmities. Peace is primarily not an ethical obligation of the church, but God’s gift – a reality given by Christ that constitutes the church as such.”43 A community open to the Holy Spirit well knows how it so often “misses the mark” and fails as a body to lead lives “worthy of the calling to which [it has] been called” (Eph 4:1). Yet despite this infidelity God continually holds out the invitation to the church to participate in her story, and take its part in the missio Dei. The church’s mission thus remains God’s mission, despite the church’s failures. When the church acknowledges its sinfulness and infidelity, it can even witness to God’s mission of reconciliation by truthfully revealing its creatureliness and reliance on God’s forgiveness. The church can then trust and hope in the future of God’s peace, even amidst all signs to the contrary. Maintaining its eschatological dimension means understanding its task as embodying God’s peace for the world as a response to the grace of Holy Spirit and the redemption of time Jesus enacted in his life, death and resurrection.

**Temporality and the Odd Eschatological Peace of the Kingdom of God**

Participating in God’s time means living in and into the “odd” peace of God’s eschatological kingdom. As the eschatological guide for God’s time, the Holy Spirit breaks God’s future into the present, and redeems the past through Christ’s forgiveness. Those inspired by the Spirit’s temporality to receive rather than produce peace on earth. Accompanying eschatological time is an openness to difference which takes the time to welcome those lives considered “wasted” in late modernity. The pace required for peace demand a slowness contrasting with secular time’s accelerating pace. God beckons the church to stand as an embodied sign of a lived out Christian temporality, which represent an attempt to faithfully witness to God’s peace amidst an accelerating world. As an eschatological community, the church is called to instantiate the surprising newness of the Holy Spirit, turning the “wasted” lives of late modernity into masters of living in God’s time.

*The Holy Spirit as Eschatological Guide*

---

Christians speak of the Holy Spirit as an animating guide in communal life, which includes the way they live and experience time. This temporality coheres with a pneumatology which understands the Spirit as bringing the gift of God’s eschatological newness into the world. As the “power of the future,” the Holy Spirit comes to break the present open to herself, as well as carrying history into the promise of creation’s ultimate redemption. “The Spirit is God as his and our future rushing upon us, he is the eschatological reality of God, the Power as which God is the active Goal of all things, as which God is for himself and for us those ‘things hoped for’, those ‘things not seen’, which call for faith and not mere religious assurance.”

44 While secular time lives in a closed and desperate world, the power of the Spirit brings otherness, novelty and surprise to creation.

The Holy Spirit’s eschatological orientation means that it reveals in a particular way God’s eschaton or “last things.” Eschatology’s focus lies in those matters of ultimate validity and importance in God’s plan of redemption for creation. As Karl Rahner elegantly claims,

... Christianity is a religion with an eschatology; it looks into the future; it makes binding pronouncements about what is to come both by explaining what will come and by looking on these future events as the decisive guiding principle of action in the present. Indeed, Christianity declares that with the Incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ, the last age has already begun… and that we live, therefore, in the last ages, in the fullness of time.

45 The guide for this “last age” already begun but yet to be consummated is the Holy Spirit, continually coming from the future as the power of God. The Holy Spirit comes as God’s friendship, revealing to persons their true end and leading them into their eschatological fulfillment as God’s friends. Augustine understood the Holy Spirit as the friendship or caritas of the Father and Son, and as the one who sets the heart aflame to re-direct its desires to its true object.

46 The Holy Spirit as God’s friendship communicates God’s eschaton as the open future redeemed by God through Jesus. This philia love of the Spirit transforms persons into

---

46 “So the love which is from God and is God is distinctively the Holy Spirit; through him the charity of God is poured out in our hearts and through it the whole triad dwells in us.” De Trinitatae V, 32; VI, v, 7.
understanding time as a gift of God given to journey towards eternity, the true eschaton of human persons.

Surprise and novelty characterize the Holy Spirit’s future time, one fundamentally open to alterity and difference. “[O]ne is not dealing with the construction of a time arrow that emanates from a center of time, but rather, above all, with the question of the presence of the end of time in the midst of time. It is the attempt to speak of time as relationship creating, relational, and dynamic.”

Maintaining the tension between future coming and present reality protects time from sliding into an over-realized eschatology, where notions of immanence collude too easily with utopian ambitions. Secular time’s presentism can quickly associate the kingdom of God merely with autonomous human projects. Telling time eschatologically means hoping in a future centered in God’s loving mystery yet communicated through the present gift of the Holy Spirit.

Living in an eschatological mode of time means recognizing that the reconciliation of past, present, and future lies first and foremost in the hands of God. People cannot autonomously manufacture the “new” of God’s future, but must learn to receive it as a gift. Rahner speaks of the anti-Promethean character of Christian life by noting that Christians must “surrender themselves to the future.” As primarily a pilgrim people, Christians are called to live with a trust in the future that frees them from the imperative to make the future turn out right.

Christianity has no predictions to make, no programme and no clear-cut prescriptions for the future of man in this world; it knows from the very start that man does not have them either and that he (and hence also Christianity itself) must therefore go unprotected into the dark venture of his intramundane future. The eschatology of Christianity is no intramundane utopia, it sets no intramundane tasks and goals. As a consequence, the Christian is not given any concrete directions for his life in this world as such, which could relieve him of the anguish of planning the future and of the burden of his passage into the dark unknown.

---

47 Jackelén, *Time & Eternity*, 185–86.
48 Rahner, “Christianity and the ‘New Man,’” 151.
49 Ibid., 138
This does not mean that Christians refuse to work with others for goals of liberation in the here and now. Creation’s participation in Jesus’s redemption means that it cannot be left behind for a disembodied future; God works in the world for the flourishing of human persons as they journey toward beatitude. Yet no human project or plan can be seen as absolute in the light of the coming eschaton of the Spirit. As the power of the future, the Holy Spirit holds what Johan Baptist Metz calls an “eschatological proviso,” which subjects any ideology or utopia to the criteria of God’s eschatological kingdom.\footnote{Johann Baptist Metz, \textit{Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz}, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 31-4.}

As a people living on the “frontier of time and eternity,” Christians’ experience of the Holy Spirit comes not primarily through extraordinary mystical visions but in the ordinary existence of the human condition. The befriending power of the Spirit provides a grace and presence which infuses life with God’s eschatological purpose. Living time eschatologically ushers persons into the “experience of eternity, the experience that the Spirit is more than a part of this temporal world, the experience that the meaning of man is not absorbed in the meaning and happiness of this world, the experience of risk and of overwhelming trust which really has no demonstrable justification based on success in this world.”\footnote{Karl Rahner, “Experience of the Holy Spirit,” in \textit{Theological Investigations}, vol. 18, \textit{God and Revelation}, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 203.} The Holy Spirit’s friendship gifts time for relationship and reconciliation, in turn helping cultivate those habits and practices which build peace and communion.

A true experience of the Spirit in time infuses life with a passion and grace which can make Christians look disconcertingly “out of time.” Rahner understands Christians who live on the frontier between time and eternity as those saints – canonized or not – who manifest the “odd life” inspired by the Spirit.\footnote{Ibid, 204.} The eschatological freedom which comes from the Spirit’s friendship means that Christians can truly befriend time, and thus begin to participate in God’s eternity. The fullness of time brought about by Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection orients Christians in a temporality with different ends and different exemplars than the ones lived in a secular social imaginary.
The “Timeful” Nature of God’s Peace

Living eschatologically on the frontier of time and eternity trains persons to perceive slowness rather than acceleration as adequately representing the temporality of human flourishing. As Jürgen Moltmann mentions, “Whoever is certain of the presence of eternity has a lot of time. We must not live in a bigger rush in order to have more of life; on the contrary, we should live more slowly in order to experience life more deeply. Only the one who eats and drinks slowly eats and drinks with satisfaction. In God’s presence we too become wholly present and experience the moment with undreamt-of intensity.”53 Trusting in Jesus’s redemption of time means understanding life as a gift granted by God to receive the Holy Spirit’s invitation to friendship, which draws persons forward toward the human telos of communion with the Trinity. As a pilgrim people, Christians have no imperative to make history come out right for they know God rules. In this way, Christians should live with a freedom from results and success that makes them open to see the world as God sees and work for the world with God’s hands.

This certainly includes being persons of peace in a world of conflict and violence. Living God’s temporality does not relieve Christians of participating in God’s tikkun olam, or repairing the damaged fabric of creation. Yet Christians understand themselves as not having to carry the “political responsibility” needed to autonomously guarantee peace in the world. Only God, in Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit has done, can do, and will achieve such salvation. Communion for Christians has a particularly eschatological flavour: peace comes not merely as efficient cause of human planning but as God’s newness and surprise breaking in from the future. That eschaton is grounded in God’s promise of friendship and communion, the ultimate end of human life. Such friendship consists of Jesus’s befriending of time through the incarnation, making a way for all persons to find peace not outside of time but also within it. In the friendship with God offered by the Holy Spirit, Christians begin to experience peace as a present state that accompanies them on their journey as a sign and anticipation of their beatific destiny. Transformation into Christ’s peace requires a face-to-face meeting in all truth with persons’

---

wounded pasts, which becomes redeemed through the love of Christ and finds a transformed future in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Such working for peace looks odd not just in the slow pace it requires, but in the eschatological freedom it maintains in regards to the results of its activity. In God’s temporality, working for peace entails not only (and maybe not even primarily) official peacekeeping missions, but the ordinary activities included as followers of Jesus. Hauerwas describes these activities as “timeful” in the sense that they form a people “capable of rest, of worship, in a world bent on its own destruction.” According to Hauerwas, this living peace gives time its meaning by placing all activity within the realm of Trinitarian grace. “Peace takes time. Put even more strongly, peace creates time by its steadfast refusal to force the other to submit in the name of order. Peace is not a static state, but an activity that requires constant attention and care.” The Trinity calls Christians toward a freedom from necessity for success because they know that God’s peace as coming; all they need to do is learn to receive the Holy Spirit’s offer of friendship and trust in Christ’s redemption of time.

This eschatological freedom contrasts sharply with the instrumental and consequentialist approach dominating peace and conflict prevention work. Reflections on time rarely make it into theorizing and practice of peace work other than on matters of “timing.” In this regard, temporality only becomes relevant as matter of the order of particular processes or actions. For the most part this view presupposes a strictly linear model of time as efficient causation, one under that control of mediators and persons involved in the conflict. Long-time Christian conflict mediator John Paul Lederach saw himself approaching peace work in the same way. This empty and linear view of time only occurred to him after he began working in majority world cultures with different temporalities. An aboriginal Nicaraguan colleague of Lederach mentioned to him the difference between “the guys up north and us guys down south” as a matter of “You have the watches, but we have the time.” Lederach then recognized how his vision of peace work assumed the frantic control over time dominant in a secular temporality. “It was not

56 Luc Reychlor’s Time for Peace: The Essential Role of Time in Conflict and Peace Processes (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2015) exemplifies this view. The main role of discussions of time in conflict situations ultimately concerns merely the right “timing” for events and interventions. With no explicit temporal norms to follow, Reychlor’s “use of time” follows an instrumentalist view of empty, secular time.
just that I saw time as a commodity. I saw the flow of time as moving forward, toward a future goal that I could somehow control if enough skill and planning could be brought to bear. The present was an urgent fleeting moment that somehow must be taken advantage of and shaped.”

Lederach captures well the belief and experiences of empty and accelerated time within a secular understanding of the world, where time represents an enemy to conquer in the name of the elimination of non-being and death.

*Living Time at a Human Pace*

Behind the contrasting logics of clock time and God’s time lie equally divergent anthropologies, with different understandings of the “inclusion” concomitant with a broader vision of “just peace.” Clock time rests comfortably within the “anthropology of liberal citizenship” looked at in chapter 1. Modern liberalism advocates the importance of rationality, autonomy, and agency as capacities which enable persons to achieve their projects of self-determination. Time has relevance as the (empty) duration in which those projects develop and come to fruition. Social inclusion of others becomes a matter of bringing previously excluded persons “up to speed” with the pace of society, thereby empowering those persons with the skills needed to “compete” with other citizens for individual goods. The skills of multi-tasking, speed, flexibility, and mobility represent crucial qualities required to become participatory members of society. Rationality and agency demand the acquisition and development of these abilities; without them persons run the risk of being “left behind” in a high-speed world.

At the same moment as time stands as a resource for the completion of self-determined projects, time as duration also represents a limit for the self to overcome through technologies which accelerate and enhance human experience. Part of the urgency of liberal anthropology comes through its sense of death as the final and ultimate “enemy,” otherwise known as “time running out.” The solution to death lies (at least for some) in a “post-human” future, where immortality finally becomes destiny rather than dream. In the meantime, persons can postpone death by cramming as much life experiences and projects into their lifetime as possible.

---


A more eschatological temporality potentially makes space for a more capacious anthropology. Slowness and dependency distinguish an eschatological vision of the human person living faithfully in God’s temporality. Christians understand themselves as creatures made as gifts of a good God, rather than masters in control of their destinies. God created time as a gift for Christians to reach their true end as friends of God. Thus Christians only live fully and humanly in time by receiving the Holy Spirit’s friendship, leading persons towards communion with the Trinity by way of the eternity placed in time accomplished through the incarnation. Participating in this friendship demands living at a pace slow enough to receive the fullness of the other, and an acknowledgement that being and becoming human is a pilgrimage.

Inclusion of those “wasted lives” created by high-speed society thus represents a spacious hospitality, which takes time for the other to be and to grow. The Holy Spirit gifts persons with the habits capable of faithfully responding to God’s offer of friendship, in turn shaping them into persons who can welcome the other in peace. Experiencing time as filled with God’s eternity means that Christians must not understand death as the ticking clock constantly threatening the end of the (individual and universal) human project. Seeing time as a gift calls believers to the confidence and hope to live life as if they have all the time in the world for practicing peace through their witness to God’s time. Just as Jesus made time for community with the “wasted lives” of his day, so his followers can make friends today with contemporary outcasts and sinners, many living in the alienation and desperation of secular time’s speed and emptiness.

**Conclusion**

The question grounding this chapter concerned itself with exploring how the insights from the practice and theology of L’Arche communities as discerned in Vanier’s theology could be developed as the ground of a peace ecclesiology. I began by summarizing the project so far, understanding Vanier’s theology and the habits and practices of it in communities dedicated to his vision as the core of what L’Arche has to teach the church in regards to a peace theology for the church. Vanier roots his theology of peace in the call for personal disarmament, an awakening to and acceptance of the self’s shadow side for the purpose of stopping the projection

---

of enmity onto external enemies. This disarmament process happens in community through friendships across great difference, which helps persons welcome their vulnerability and become “friends of time” and thus friends of peace. Persons undergo (trans)formation in community through communal practices, which train them in the timeful and peaceable habits of mutuality, trust, patience and gentleness.

After this synopsis of what Vanier and those communities dedicated to his theology vision have to teach the church concerning a peace ecclesiology, I then shifted the perspective to how these insights might ground a peace ecclesiology. I began by grounding the church in God’s story, thereby calling the church to participate in and anticipate the fullness of trinitarian time. The ekklesia grounds itself on the economy and event of God, orienting all its activity towards God’s peace as the true end of creation. Even as the church maintains a foot in the old aeon and thus requires God’s redemption, life on the frontier of the new aeon draws it into a new temporality, that gentle, slow, and relational time of the Trinity. When the church stays faithful to God’s understanding of time as gift and celebration, the Holy Spirit as eschatological guide transforms its vision into eyes which see friends rather than enemies, and discerns in the other sacramental bodies rather than autonomous competitors for a scarce and time-shrunken world. Living from God’s temporal imagination means understanding time as a gift and an opportunity to journey on pilgrimage to beatitude, the peaceful telos of all creation. As a community called and sent by God to be the community witnessing to God’s peace in the world, the church and its members live on the “frontier” of time. The eschatological freedom which this location brings means Christians can live life at a truthful pace, and has an anthropology that opens up friendship beyond mere “equality” to embrace those unable to “get up to speed” with clock time.
Chapter 7 Witnessing the Peace of God: Practical Elaborations of a Peace Ecclesiology

Taking its Cue from L’Arche

Committed to the new way of life envisioned in Jesus’s proclamation of the reign of God, Christians constitute a community where people take care of one another, are patient with one another, and seek the wellbeing of one another. In their pledge to live according to the disciplines and practices of the reign of God, they show the joy and freedom that come from renouncing retribution and embracing reconciliation and peace instead. It is this commitment to follow the new way of life begun by Christ that makes the Church a true instrument of salvation for the world.¹

The Church is the improvising community, living out of the expanding and limitless movement of gracious exchange which God has set in motion.²

The Christian community dedicated to a Spirit-led following Christ in the world and witnessing to his peace understands itself as God’s people not only in word but also in practice. L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments remind the church that the Body of Christ consists of whole bodies practicing faith rather than disembodied minds. These practices form Christians in the culture and time of the Gospel, inculcating the peaceable habits that dispose members of the church to become the disarmed “friends of time” living “on the frontier.”

Drawing upon the exposition of the church in chapter 6 as the eschatological community of God called to live and witness to God’s peace, this chapter will concern itself with articulating in more detail the shape of the church called to live God’s reconciliation as a way of life. My question here asks: What are the ecclesial habits and practices that announce and exemplify a peace ecclesiology that takes its cue from L’Arche? I begin by looking at the peaceable habits as seen in L’Arche from the perspective of the body of Christ. Mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness act as gifts which orient persons towards God’s peace, and make the church open to

the grace needed to faithfully live its vocation in the world. Following this I look at five communal practices, also practiced in L’Arche, which the church performs as a response to God’s gift of *philia*, which assists in the formation of the habits required to live peace. These practices have a particular home in the *ekklesia*’s worship, and extend themselves in the world in bold performances and activities which participate in the *missio Dei*.

**Becoming a School of Peace: The Habits of the Timeful Church**

Contrary to a vision of the church as responsible for the world and for history turning out right, the vision of the church presented here rests in the knowledge of Jesus’s victory over the “powers and principalities” which claim violence as their prerogative for peace. The church thus does not need to save the world but first be the community of the new aeon, and learn how to receive God’s friendship and be friends with one another across great differences. As Philip Turner writes, this means that the church’s primary work rests not in transforming culture but in forming one.³

In order to act as faithful witnesses of God’s peace, members of that body require a shaping into persons who conform more and more into faithful friends of time. My account of the timeful church will now review how those informed habits described in chapter 4 relate to the Body of Christ. In order to remain faithful to its call to participate in the *missio Dei*, members of the church require the reception and cultivation of these peaceable habits and dispositions. As a pilgrim people *in via*, Christians know that they never possess these virtues perfectly. Yet through a commitment to sharing life as a Body, members of the church make themselves available to the transformation that occurs through the Holy Spirit’s presence.

*Mutuality – Befriending the Other without Fear*

A core habit timeful disciples receive and cultivate is mutuality, the disposition which sees the other with the eyes of friendship love. As a *koinonia*, the church exists as a community

---

of mutual sharing dependent on the Trinitarian communion. In this way, the church is called to the same relationality with its members and the world as the divine persons share with one another and ecstatically impart to creation. Living in God’s time forms persons in discerning the other not as a competitor for scarce resources, but as a fellow creature of a Creator God called to communion as a participant in the *missio Dei*. In this way, friends of time participate in the non-competitive economy of God, which welcomes other persons as gifts of God’s goodness made for communities of mutual fulfillment.

Another name for the timeful habit of mutuality is *solidarity*. Developed particularly in the context of Roman Catholic social teaching, solidarity connotes active and engaged relationships with particular others grounded in a larger sense of social interdependence. As John Paul II writes, “[Solidarity] then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” Being in solidarity with others means seeing them not as instruments or independent competitors, but “as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper’ (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.” Solidarity looks for connections with the other beyond mere common self-interest, instead seeing her as “another self.” In this way, Godswill Uchenna Abgagwa notes the similarities between this sense of solidarity and the theological tradition of friendship, and places solidarity within the Thomist virtue tradition.

Like the Trinity’s own invitation of persons to friendship, the habit of mutuality formed in the timeful church means that Christians extend their gaze of mutual delight not merely to the “like” or the “same.” Just as Jesus was called a friend of “sinners and tax collectors” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34), so timeful disciples can enter into mutual relationships with those

---


5 On the ethical implications of the noncompetitive relations of the Trinity, see the work of Kathryn Tanner, particularly *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), chap. 3, and Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.).


7 Ibid., par. 39.

8 Godswill Uchenna Abgagwa, “Towards Situating Solidarity in a Thomistic Understanding of Virtue” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 2016), 76-7. John Paul II makes the same suggestion when he notes in *Centesimus Annus* how Leo XIII use of the term friendship coheres with the principle solidarity (par. 34).
dangerously different from them. In this way, Christians are shaped in a mutuality that expresses itself not only in *phila* but even in *philoxenia*, the friendship love of the stranger. Hauerwas suggests that this kind of stance toward the stranger embodies the holiness of the eschatological kingdom. “The kind of holiness that marks the church…is not that of moral perfection, but the holiness of a people who have learned to live in the presence of others without fear and envy.” That extension of *philoxenia* goes even to the enemy, those persons considered the extreme threat to one’s self and community. As John Thomson writes, the peaceableness of the eschatological kingdom “enables us to befriend our enemy without abusing that act of friendship through violence. It also enables us to discover the stranger speaking to us as a friend.”

Paul Wadell understands the friendship Christians receive from God completing itself in the church’s mission. The friendship that begins in worship forms the church into a community that “exists not for its own sake. It exists to share in and further the mission and ministry of Jesus. The friends of God are entrusted with the daunting mission of witnessing to the reign of God by striving to live according to it now.” As a community befriended by God, the church is called to move beyond “safe neighbor love,” and instead become the “creatively strange” Body that lives the Spirit’s eschatological imagination. When the church fails to extend its friendship into mission, it risks becoming self-absorbed, elitist, and institutionally sterile. Yet a community formed in the *philia* love of God lives out of its own reception into trinitarian communion by seeing the stranger as potential friend. As the community sharing in God’s mission, the church strives to live its relationships in the same spirit of *philoxenia* and encounter as its saviour.

*Patience – The Grace to Endure Life with the Other*

A timeful church knows itself as living in God’s world where God rules and calls people to friendship. Living peaceably in God’s world means acquiring and cultivating the patience
needed to be the eschatological people who can live “out of control” and need not make the world come out right. “What the people called ‘catholic’ have to offer is the patience and humility learned through the story called ‘Gospel,’ which teaches us how to live at peace when we are not able to write the history of humankind.”

Being formed into a patient people means that Christians can live time truthfully, acknowledging tragedy without falling into despair, and bearing with suffering rather than eliminate the sufferer. This kind of patience emanates from the Holy Spirit’s transformative friendship, which encounters the other not in competition but in mutuality. Hauerwas and Pinches understand this kind of caritas to be at the heart of the timeful habit of patience. “To learn to live with the unavoidability of the other is to learn to be patient. Such patience comes not just from our inability to have the other do our will; more profoundly, it arises with the love that the presence of the other can and does create in us….Moreover, patience sustains and strengthens love, for it opens to us the time we need to tell our own story with another’s story intertwined and to tell it together with that other. So told, the story in fact constitutes our love.”

The church has the patience to endure and bear the other because it is founded on the patience of God’s friendship, which bears with humanity even to the end of crucifixion. In the impatience of high-speed society, some forms of “compassion” can be highly precarious for those outliers who do not possess the capacities needed to keep up. The love of the timeful church, however is founded on the patience of God’s friendship, which bears with humanity even to the end of crucifixion. Yet that same love also contains the patience which reveals the eschatological promise of resurrection and communion with God. Thus truthful philia comes

---

14 Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom, 105–6.
16 This ability to bear with suffering is something Hauerwas understands as one of L’Arche’s most profound witnesses today. Stanley Hauerwas, “Seeing Peace: L’Arche as a Peace Movement,” in The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L’Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 118. On the liberal impulse to eliminate suffering by eliminating the sufferer, see Stanley Hauerwas, Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 167; Stanley Hauerwas, Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 64.
from being shaped in the patience of a timeful people, given the time to perform the ordinary and “trivial” activities which make for peace.\(^\text{18}\)

The patience friends of time receive and attempt to embody prepares them for a peace witness that can lead to the ultimate self-gift of martyrdom. When the church tells time eschatologically, it hopes in God’s ultimate promise of redemption and therefore more readily bears life with the enemy rather than needing to pre-emptively eliminate them. Rob Arner notes how this kind of *patientia* undergirded the ethic of the early church, seeing in Jesus the model for a patient endurance which culminates in the cross and the resurrection.\(^\text{19}\) Tertullian’s *De Patientia* represents a prime example of this kind of ethic. As the source of all good, the patience demonstrated by God and embodied in Christ stands as a crucial aspect of that good, which Christians are called to obediently emulate and make part of their character (par. 2-4). On the contrary, impatience emanates from the devil and is the root of all sin (5). According to Tertullian, “evil is impatience of the good” (5), whose fruit is adultery, anger, murder, and revenge (5, 10). Receiving God’s gift of patience not only conforms Christians more to their Lord. At the same time, patience witnesses to others of Jesus's peace and also shows the futility of impatiently employing violent forms of force (8). Tertullian shows how the belief in the church as an eschatological community can form persons in a patience that trusts in Jesus’s redemption of time, even to the point of witness through the giving up of their lives.

Yet a people formed in patience do not undergo martyrdom simply through overt acts of killing by impatient persecutors. Patience also trains Christians in learning how to live with “enemies” and sin within its own internal life. Drawing on Augustine’s exegesis of Scripture through his performance of preaching, Michael C. McCarthy refers to this patient endurance of the messiness of ecclesial life as an “ecclesiology of groaning.”\(^\text{20}\) Augustine uses the image of the dove to express how believers are called not to run away from the “groans” of inconvenient others but remain with them as an act of Christian charity. “For the dove appears as a sign of love, and in it groans are loved. There is nothing so familiar with groans as a dove; day and

\(^{18}\text{Stanley Hauerwas, “Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 87-100.}\)


night it groans, as if it is placed here where it must groan.” In an *in via* church, rife with scandal and infidelity, the habit of patience stands as crucial in being a Body that can truthfully acknowledge its creatureliness and still commit itself to its prime vocation of witness of God’s peace. “Augustine’s frequent reminder that we groan in the present condition suggests a form of resistance to premature solutions of the multiple problems that he faced as a fifth-century bishop. The eschatological sense, both of Scripture and the Church, did not deliver him from real tensions or provide a way for him to escape into an overly spiritualized exegesis or ecclesiology. Rather, it urged patience with pains of disagreement, the effects of scandal, the bonds with those who cause us grief and embarrassment.”

*Trust – Having Faith in God’s Providence and Promise*

A central ground for the church’s patience resides in its fundamental trust in God and in his eschatological promise of reconciliation and peace. The timeful church has the grace to trust in God because it has been incorporated into God’s story. Thus time and history become not deterministic but are seen in the light of God’s providential ordering of creation. “The ways we experience, name, and interpret time contribute to the kinds of communities we imagine and inhabit. Traditionally, Christians have used the language of providence to speak of God’s time as determinative of our own. Here ‘God’s time’ does not mean a time above or alongside human time, but a quality of time that is the internal basis of human time.” As the community determined by and grafted into God’s story, the church tells time understanding God’s promise of resurrection and consummation. This trust lets timeful disciples relinquish control of their lives enough to place themselves within God’s story.

The church can trust in God and God’s peace with their lives because they undergo and have undergone the disarmament process in all truthfulness. Disciples trust in the Lord because the brokenness and blessedness of their lives has been revealed in the body of Christ. By letting the sinfulness of their history be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians can trust that the truth really does set people free (John 8:32). Hauerwas mentions how the trust

cultivated and nurtured in the Body assists its members in witnessing truthfully in a world living in empty time. According to Hauerwas, there is “an inherent relation between truthfulness and peacefulness because peace comes only as we are transformed by a truth that gives us the confidence to rely on nothing else than its witness. A ‘truth’ that must use violence to secure its existence cannot be truth. Rather the truth that moves the sun and the stars is that which is so sure in its power that it refuses to compel compliance or agreement by force. Rather it relies on the slow, hard, and seemingly unrewarding work of witness, a witness which it trusts to prevail even in a fragmented and violent world.”

Having experienced the future of God already inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Christians can even understand certain types of “patient inactivity” as expressing their confidence and hope in Christ’s victory over the powers.25

At the same time as the timeful church can confidently rest in its task of being God’s people, this trust also enables a bold and risky discipleship let loose in the world. Because the church does not need to “effective” or “responsible” for society its witness can embody practices of generosity, peacefulness and hospitality that can encompass the strange and manifest the impossible.26

Telling time eschatologically originates in the victory of Christ witnessed in the resurrection, which “gives the church the confidence to risk this way of being in a world as yet uncommitted to peaceful living. This is what living the Kingdom means for it reflects what Jesus showed, namely that this sort of peaceable life is possible now if there is belief that God is sovereign. Friendship of the outcast, peaceful resistance to the evil one, forgiveness, all illustrate Kingdom living informed by this eschatology.”

_Tenderness – Gentle Encounters with Other Bodies_

The nonviolent orientation that characterizes mutual relationships in the _koinonia_ inherently includes encounters with the _bodies_ of others, which demands the acquisition and cultivation of the habit of tenderness. Christians can too readily copy high-speed society’s

---

24 Hauerwas, _The Peaceable Kingdom_, 15.
26 Ibid., 99.
tendency towards a virtuality and instantaneity that can ignore or override the body. However, the timeful church’s call to live in God’s time demands more patient friendships which are slowed down enough to face persons not as abstract “selves” but embodied creatures. The friendship love the Holy Spirit calls timeful disciples to extend to others emanates from Jesus’s own invitation to friendship with God, begun in becoming flesh at the incarnation. Thus participating in the missio Dei entails the same welcoming of the body as gift of God’s creation. In this way Hauerwas notes how the peacemaking which is the church “has a peculiar stake in the temporal. Peace, as well as forgiveness, must take place in time. Disembodied beings cannot know peace; only beings who know themselves as timeful are capable of being at peace.”

In the reality of God’s time, bodies witness the peace of Christ as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19), sacramental manifestations of the living God who participate in the reality to which they point. The habit of tenderness learned in God’s temporality disposes Christians towards the truthful core of being human not as rational mind but as fragile and dependent heart.

Thus Christians relate to other bodies with the tenderness which recognizes them as gifts of the Creator and transmitters of God’s friendship love to one another. A love graced by tenderness understand bodies as inherently communicative and charged with the grace of the Holy Spirit. The encounter with other bodies then demands a reverence which respects their sacramental character. Just as an in via church prioritizes time over space in its emphasis on witness, so members of the body can patiently meet others in a tenderness which encounters bodies with nonviolent care and the delight of philia love.

Recognizing the sacramentality of other bodies means that Christians have no impulse to improve bodies or judge them in terms of “quality of life.” Instead tenderness forms persons in perceiving the other in the spirit of friendship, which cares for the other as “another self.” Bernard Wall understands friendship to be at the root of care in L’Arche, a care “best characterized as being present-for the other, which involves being and belonging with the

---

other.”\textsuperscript{31} Cultivating the habit of tenderness forms persons to understand caring for bodies less as contractual or medical task than as a way of life “rooted in love oriented toward helping persons discover and welcome their true self.”\textsuperscript{32} With this kind of patience and mutuality Christians can non-violently encounter even the most dissonant bodies with the \textit{philia} of the Holy Spirit.

**Performing in God’s Time: Practicing Peace in the Timeful Church**

The following section will look at how the five practices of peace as found within L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological insights also exist in the timeful church. Like in these L’Arche communities, hospitality, story-telling, prayer, forgiveness and celebration all exist as traditional practices the church perform to build and sustain its moral life. Responding to God’s friendship through these practices forms Christians in the habits and temporality of the timeful church. This section will also emphasize the liturgical context in which these practices are performed. I will point out how particular sacramental practices exemplify the eschatological and peaceable nature of the church’s mission. Along with common worship practices, other para-liturgical extensions of these practices will be considered. Mentioning these ecclesial activities shows how the moral life of the church might move beyond the walls of church buildings and overflow out into the world as acts of the church’s peace witness.

*Hospitality – Baptism and Welcome at Life’s Edges*

As the community called out of the world to become God’s people, the church’s practice of hospitality arises as a response to the gift of being invited into God’s friendship. The members of the Body participate in the \textit{missio Dei} through both their habit of mutuality with others in the \textit{ekklesia}, and through their invitation of friendship to others to share in the Trinity’s story. “The kingdom of peace initiated by Jesus is also the kingdom of love which is most


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 93.
clearly embodied in the Christian obligation to be hospitable. We are community on principle standing ready to share our meal with the stranger. Moreover we must be a people who have hospitable selves – we must be ready to be stretched by what we know not. Friendship becomes our way of life as we learn to rejoice in the presence of others. Thus Jesus’ kingdom is one that requires commitment to friends, for without them the journey that is the kingdom is impossible. We can only know where we walk as we walk with others.”  

In this way hospitality is an essentially timeful and embodied practice, which lives the slow and patient time where bodies can be welcomed as sacraments and hosted accordingly.

The church attempts to emulate Jesus as the journeying guest/host, understanding his call to holiness to become those who can encounter the other without fear. Luke Bretherton understands this kind of welcome as the church’s attempt to participate in the recapitulation of the Pentecost event and a witness to an eschatological imagination. “[T]he church is to invite the world to participate in generative patterns of thought and action, and bear witness in its life together to the possibility of such patterns. Thus the church, through the social practice of hospitality, is to host the world even as it journeys as a stranger through the midst of the world, thereby bearing witness to the world’s own eschatological possibilities.”

“As an eschatological social practice, Christian hospitality is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the church to host the life of its neighbours without the church being assimilated to, colonized by, or having to withdraw from its neighbours.”

The practice of baptism profoundly symbolizes God’s welcome of the other through their participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism ushers persons into faith as both a personal and communal transformative moral journey. Swinton understands this timeful aspect of baptism as a liberation out of clock time and into the redemptive time of Jesus Christ. “Baptism is a break with the past that occurs in the present and points toward a new future.”

A community which faithfully remembers its baptismal vows comes then to a vision of discipleship.

---

36 Ibid., 143.
that manifests the habits of the heart which represent God’s time. “When people are baptized, welcomed, and enabled to come to know and experience Jesus, so the body of Christ comes to recognize and understand the meaning of slow, gentle, and sometimes wordless discipleship.”

Two practices of hospitality which exemplify how the timeful church expresses its mission consist in the adoption of children and palliative care for the dying. Baptism reminds Christians of being disciples not through merit but by God’s free choosing of them. Thus timeful disciples understand themselves as “adopted children” of God (Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5). As persons not left alone in their alienated state but welcomed into God’s people, Christians might then consider God calling them into a similar vocation to host those children left homeless and without a people. As a particular timeful practice, the commitment to child rearing – particularly those marginalized and considered especially regrettable – acts as a Christian activity and profound witness to a trust in God’s future. Hospice care represents a similar trust in God’s time by understanding death not as the ultimately tragic annihilation of one’s life project but as another timeful stage on the way to humanity’s true telos. Christian care for the dying forms persons in the tenderness which understands the limitation of the body but still bear patiently the suffering without a hasty elimination of the sufferer. In this way, Bretherton points to the eschatological nature of hospice as Christian practice.

[I]n hospice care wherein the eschatological hope for the future of the body is borne witness to in the proper cherishing of the body, but it is recognized that the eschaton sets a limit to this life, and so life is not to be prolonged at all costs. Likewise, that the eschaton is not yet fully established is borne witness to by the fact that hospice care is precisely a response to the recognition of the suffering-dying, and the need to establish ways of faithfully bearing with and caring for the dying in their suffering, and neither attempting to deny the suffering of this age nor masking the continued power of death by excluding death from the midst of human community.

In a commitment to hospitality at the “edges of life” through adoption and hospice care, the believers can enact the baptismal hospitality they have received from the church through the

---

38 Ibid.
40 Bretherton, Hospitality as Holiness, 188.
Holy Spirit, and offer it as a witness to a temporality which has the time to peacefully welcome the other and befriend the enemy.

*Story-telling – Hearing, Preaching, and Performing God’s Narrative*

The church responds to its incorporation into the *missio Dei* by re-telling and proclaiming the transformative story of which it is now a part. Thus members of the body consider the Bible as their truthful story, not one relegated to a dead past but instead living and calling Christians to a journey as God’s friends. Telling and hearing God’s story shapes a people in the politics of the new aeon, making them witnesses to a narrative of the world which ends in reconciliation rather than violence. This kind of attention to the narrative of God reveals the performative and timeful character of the biblical revelation. As John David Dawson claims, the church looks “to the text of the Bible for clues and models useful for unraveling as much as they can of what they think they discern as the mysterious working of God in the lives of people over time. What is always ultimately at stake is the reality and the proper characterization of a divine performance in the material world of space and time, a performance that defines the personal, social, ethical, and political obligations of Christians.”

For the church, continually re-telling God’s story draws them into God’s eschatological way of telling time and making peace.

For the church, the central aspect of God’s story is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As the true center and end of time, Christ brings the world to birth through the Word, comes to the world as human flesh, and sends the Holy Spirit to continually call believers to their true end in God. Thus the story of God in Jesus brings God’s redemptive and saving time into the world. “The *theological* content of the *christological* story is the key to its *eschatological* significance. Because it is God who is disclosed in Jesus in such a way that Jesus must be understood as the disclosure of the reality of God, therefore the story of Jesus bears ultimate significance for the whole of humanity, indeed for the whole of creation.”

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church tells the timeful story of Jesus’s reconciliation and

---


promise of fulfillment, and reminds the church of its call to the transformation which can witness that story through lives of faithful trust and tenderness.

Fundamental to the church’s liturgy is the proclaiming of God’s story in the reading of scripture and announcing it through preaching. The reading of scripture among the people trains the church in the imagination of the Bible, a living font of discerning God’s time. “[I]t is from the hearing of God’s Word repeatedly read in public worship that a life of faith takes on something of its measured rhythms and cadences, its distinctive orchestration, but also its peculiar vision.” Reading and hearing the Word in liturgy helps to bring the church back to its Jewish roots, where scripture represented God’s story told to a people over time. The public proclamation of scripture also emphasizes reading as an embodied practice, which resonates and reverberates around and among other persons. Regularly hearing God’s story told in the body forms persons in the trust and patience which allows the Holy Spirit to engrave God’s time in the heart (Ez 36:25, Jer 31:3, Heb 8:8-12, 2 Cor 3:3).

The people extend the telling of God’s story through its practice of preaching. Proclaiming the Word takes the reading and hearing of scripture and turns it into witness. “[T]here is no story without witness, and it is through the preaching of God’s good news and our willingness to hear it that we become a people of witness.” William Willimon understands an aspect of that witness to come in revealing to the world the truer, “stranger” time of the Bible. As opposed to merely helping Christians cope with the sterility and purposelessness of clock time, proclaiming the good news means creating a space for the inbreaking of the eschatological Spirit into the high-speed and desperate temporality of the world. “The sermon becomes a signal, instrument, foretaste, promise, seed of hope, sign of God’s momentous turn toward us in Christ, of God’s refusal to be God without an audience, a congregation, witnesses to time made strange by Jesus.”

The performative aspect of the Word draws persons into God’s peace, and calls them to witness to that story in the world. An aspect of that witness by a timeful church could come through its reading and proclamation of the Word into the streets by way of live, embodied

---

44 Stanley Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom, 108.
performances. For example, volunteers from several Episcopal churches in San Francisco come together every year to offer the imposition of ashes to people on the street.\footnote{Claire Maria Chambers, “Street Church and Service as Salutation: The Public Ecclesiology of the South of Market Episcopal Churches,” \textit{Performance Research} 16, no. 2 (2011): 65–73.} This “Ash Wednesday on the Street” exemplifies an ecclesiology where the church displays its oddness – through the intentional wearing of religious clothing and exposition of liturgical instruments – yet does so in a manner of tenderness and mutuality, gently touching people’s foreheads and encountering the other as potential friend. Bringing the liturgy into the streets also brings God’s eschatological temporality into an empty world, offering a gift in the midst of conspicuous consumption.\footnote{In response to the question about whether the ashes were free, a minister responds with “Freer than free, the freest thing ever.” Ibid., 68.} Taking the Gospel (literally) into the streets recalls ecclesial public performances from earlier eras.\footnote{For a sample of works on pre-modern ecclesial performances in public, see Susan Signe Morrison, \textit{Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety and Public Performance} (London: Routledge, 2000); Claire M. Waters, \textit{Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Jessica Brantley, \textit{Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Robert E. Stillman, ed., \textit{Spectacle and Public Performance in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance} (Leiden: Brill, 2006).} Yet the difference now is that the church no longer acts from a position of dominance and power but (at least in the West) from a place of marginality. Another way of demonstrating this peaceful theo-drama might come through the use of the “flash mob.” Generally considered either frivolous or inherently violent, inspired by the Holy Spirit a flash mob could express the strangeness of Jesus let loose in the world. Thus L’Arche in France can transform the Lyon train station into a place of dancing and celebration of people across wide spectrums of difference, or the “Pirates of Justice” flash mob can turn a Vancouver square into a playful yet prophetic witness to the exploitation of cruise ship workers.\footnote{L’Arche France, “You Can Be Yourself - Flashmob de L’Arche,” June 30, 2014, accessed February 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZbHkJN8QB8; Pirates of Justice, “The Pirates of Justice Flash Mob in Vancouver,” February 27, 2010, accessed February 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSJMZ9ejlFo. The Pirates of Justice flash mobs are organized by Christian activist Craig Greenfield. See his \textit{Subversive Jesus: An Adventure in Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness in a Broken World} (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016).} Both of these performances offer examples of ways of proclaiming the peace of God’s time and story into a high-speed and desperate world.

\textit{Prayer – Remembering God and Keeping the Sabbath}
A practice the church has performed since its very beginnings which forms its members in the habits of peace is its commitment to prayer. Prayer as the desire for relationship with God both cultivates and demands the dispositions of mutuality, trust, patience, and tenderness at the heart of living a life in God’s time. While Christian prayer has taken many forms in the church’s history, theologian Lawrence Cunningham boils prayer down to one of its simplest forms as “remembering God.” This form of remembering does not require the cognitive recall of past events normally considered as memory. In contrast, remembering God draws upon a pre-cognitive faith drawn more from the heart than the mind, and emanates more from a prior call and friendship than a subjective choice.

Taking the time to remember God reminds persons that time (and thus the world) belongs to God, and that life is not a self-determined project but a gift to be received in gratitude and delight. In this way, prayer acts as a reminder that the Sabbath represents not a separated day of the week but instead the end of all creation. As that day which exemplifies the eschatological entry of eternity into time, the Sabbath shows the world its telos as rest and celebration. Living life in a contemplative, Sabbath orientation shapes Christians into the timeful friends who can become ambassadors of reconciliation rather than succumb to the “unquiet desperation” which polarizes persons and creates enemies. Thus Christians can hear the Word command to “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex 20:8) as that attention to God which opens the heart to the friendship of Jesus and welcomes the other without fear.

While the whole of worship at its core acts as an extended prayer, the practices of intercession, following the liturgical year, and singing stand as particular performances which exemplify the church’s commitment to become the communion which witnesses to God’s peace. Kelly Johnson writes of the church’s intercessory prayer as a kind of encore, calling for more of the Trinity’s timeful economy and work in the world. Prayer responds to the gift of God’s

---


salvation, while at the same time relying on that redemption for its own desire for relationship. “Being able to pray is itself a gift, the first gift that brings Christians into the continuing friendship and outpouring of gifts that is God’s life.” Prayer both manifests the patience of seeing God’s economy in the world, and forms them in the patience needed to stay in relation even in the midst of tragedy and suffering. The communal prayer of the people as the communion of saints also binds the church with the past and the future through the presence of the Holy Spirit. As the maker of communion the Holy Spirit helps the church celebrate its past fidelity and confess its sinful history, as well as give it the trust in God’s eschatological promise of fulfillment. “Intercessory prayer, therefore, is the manner in which God binds the living and the dead, the past, present, and future, into one Body and into a common social space sustained by God’s own self-giving. Past, present, and future intersect in the presence of this Body.”

Setting its prayer within the liturgical seasons of the year both offers a communion across time and space, and places the church within a different time than that of modernity. Scott Bader-Saye argues that calendars act as political instruments that bind persons around a common notion of time and thus can create “imagined” communities across wide differences. Christian prayer and the use of the liturgical calendars play this role for the church. “The reading of Scripture, the celebration of the Eucharist, and the marking of saints’ days serve to create an imagined contemporaneity among God’s people stretching from the biblical world to the present, from the living to the dead. Isaiah, Mary, Jesus, and St. Augustine are as much a part of one’s community as are one’s chronological contemporaries (perhaps more so). The ‘communion of saints’ constitutes one’s true community.”

Along with intercessory prayer, the church also prays in its songs of praise and petition. As the true temporal art, “music entails sharing in and shaping the temporality of the world,” a practice that involves all of one’s embodied being. Praying and praising in song forms the imaginations of Christians in God’s temporality, one where persons are trained in the transformation of time and space which sees an end in beauty and grace. “To worship in spirit

and in truth is to witness to the evangelical and eschatological nature of reality, giving holy substance to what would otherwise be hollow shades. As living hymns, Christians create forms of life that participate in the drama of redemption.”

Ben Quash writes of the singing of the Sanctus and the Trisagion as examples of how the church’s fidelity to God’s time shapes persons into witnesses of Jesus’s strange kingdom. Both hymns show “that there is a horizon we cannot eliminate – the most real and important of any horizon; the earth’s realest end-point: the point where divine and human encounter one another. The Christian conviction that life not oriented to this end is life not oriented at all.”

Proclaiming the holiness of God reminds Christians how the “seed” of God’s time has been sowed in earthly time. The church’s prayer with music represents in a particularly profound way how the redemption of earthly time into the gift of communion and witness.

The church could extend its practice of prayer into the world by a deeper commitment to Sabbath keeping. Living the Sabbath as a way of life means integrating the remembering of God into all facets of being, which includes the social dimension. Thus keeping the Sabbath can include acts of service and community building rather than just mere individual “recharging.” John Swinton understands offering respite care as a timeful Sabbath practice that offers rest not for oneself but for the other. Uwe Becker sees a re-commitment to the Sabbath as a way of fostering dialogue and community with others, making Sunday a day where persons gather and find ways of making neighborhoods more human and lively place of hospitality. Churches could also take their practice of prayer and song into public spaces, transforming commodified spaces into locations of praise and peace.

This commitment to prayer could also include prayers for peace, even to the point of being a costly witness. An example comes from the Mexican nonviolent Civil Society of the Bees (Las Abejas), a group of Indigenous Christians

---

60 Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time, 210.
62 One only needs to search for “Handel’s Messiah flash mobs” on YouTube to see this kind of prayer and singing in public.
calling for justice and peace in Chiapas. On December 22, 1997, while praying for peace in a local Roman Catholic church, 45 men, women, and children died after being attacked by paramilitaries.63

Forgiveness – The Restoration of Friendship and the Washing of Feet

Because Christians truthfully acknowledge their brokenness, members of the Body understand the practice of forgiveness as crucial in forming them into the patient and tender disciples who can faithfully inhabit God’s time. In his theological analysis of forgiveness as a practice, L. Gregory Jones emphasizes how forgiveness represents less the absolution of guilt and more as the restoration of community. Thus the activity of forgiveness represents not so much words or moments, but a way of life that seeks to break the habits of sin which destroy lives and relationships. Living this reconciliation requires a community committed to the mutuality of the friends of God. “If such commitments are to be sustained, they require supportive friendships, practices, and institutions that enable the unlearning of destructive habits and the cultivation of holy ones….It takes only a moment to destroy lives through violence, but it takes lifetimes to cultivate alternative patterns and practices of forgiveness, of trust, of love.”64 Forgiveness here represents a craft learned from mentors who have lived the journey of disarmament, accomplished above all through participating in communal life.

At the heart of forgiveness lies the eschatological presence of the Holy Spirit, inviting persons to the friendship of the Trinity and reconciliation with other members of the body. A community practicing forgiveness anticipates as a sign “the peace of God’s original Creation as well as the promised eschatological consummation of that Creation in the Kingdom.”65 Because forgiveness represents more than the absolution of guilt, it does not simply point backwards to cancellation but also forwards to the liberation from the cycle of inevitable violence.66 Abiding in God’s gentle temporality means that persons have the time to undergo the timeful journey of

---

64 L. Gregory Jones, Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 76.
65 Ibid., 5.
66 Ibid., 88.
unlearning the habits of sin and learning the habits of peace. According to Jones, this adventure cannot be undertaken without the Holy Spirit, the truthful friendship love of God that can reconcile all things.\(^{67}\)

While the practice of confession appears to most as the logical ecclesial expression of forgiveness, the rite of footwashing also stands as another sacramental practice available to the church to respond to Christ’s gift of reconciliation and form persons in the habits of God’s peace.\(^{68}\) Footwashing demonstrate the kind of peace which can wait in patience for the body of the other, and encounter them in the spirit of tenderness and friendship. Footwashing cultivates the kind of peaceableness Hauerwas recognizes as possible only if Christians are a forgiven people who entrust their lives in the hands of others.\(^{69}\) Jesus’s action in the upper room manifests a *philia* towards his friends meant to transform not just their relationships to Jesus but also with other followers of Jesus.\(^{70}\) While the theme of service tends to dominate interpretations of footwashing, traditions have also accented the sacramental act of cleansing of sin (and its relation to baptism) of the rite.\(^{71}\) In James Brenneman’s words, footwashing offers a setting for “embodied forgiveness” where Christians can learn to “forgive with their hands while on their knees.”\(^{72}\) Footwashing thus represents a practice of reconciliation which both unites a community and offers a witness of a world beyond violence and revenge. As an eschatological

---

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 131.


\(^{69}\) Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 89.


rite of hospitality and friendship, footwashing acts as a sign of the kingdom of peace Jesus inaugurates and promises.\textsuperscript{73}

A way that the church might extend its practice of forgiveness in the world would be to participate in various forms of debt forgiveness. When Christians understand forgiveness as a way of life of a people rather than the absolution of individual guilt, pardon encompasses all one’s social and economic relationships. Christians might not only work at the cancellations of oppressive debts of persons and nations, but might also reconsider the ecclesial ban on usury formerly an integral part of the Christian moral tradition.\textsuperscript{74} Luke Bretherton notes how the rise of financialization relies on the buying and selling of time inherent in the charging of interest, and the need for “the reclamation of time as a commonwealth free for all and open to eternity through the Christ-event.”\textsuperscript{75} A commitment to alternative economic practices which foster trust and mutuality between persons rather than competition and subservience would cohere with the radical performance of a community that forgives by washing each other’s feet.

\textit{Celebration – Eating Together in God’s Inoperative Time}

Perhaps no practice exemplifies a people living in God’s time like that of celebration. Practicing celebration and the feasts of the church break persons out of the monotony and emptiness of clock time, and into the hope and anticipation of God’s time. Celebration also expresses what Ghislain Lafont calls the “superimposition of times,” the expansiveness and fullness of God’s temporality which remembers birth as creation and anticipates the glorified end of human being. According to Lafont, celebration “is symbolic behavior or action capable of saying that the time of this individual, of his body, of his heart, is not exhausted in the pure


present; he is also the time of his origin and of his destiny, that of his parents and of his posterity, and also...that of God with him....It resumes and prolongs the grace of the beginning and, quite literally, re-news life.”

Gratuity and joy characterizes the space-time of celebration, contrasting sharply with the highly functional and instrumental nature of secular clock time. In this way, Joseph Ballan considers celebration as having the temporal logic of “inoperativity.” For Ballan “inoperative time” names the use of time for purposes that cannot be reduced to utility and thus appears highly discontinuous with dominant forms of time in modernity. Celebration represents a transformation of *chronos* into *kairos*, and a persistent refusal to submit to a logic of production. “Against the backdrop of this system, worship is a gratuitous expenditure of time, a loss of a precious resource. The gratuitousness with which human worshipers give their time can be understood as a response to the time they have been graciously given by God.” The celebration of feasts with meals demonstrates this inoperative time, a theme pervasive within God’s story. Abundant within both Testaments is the future feast where people will come from the four corners of the earth to be filled with blessing and reconciliation. As Hauerwas mentions, “The principal eschatological image of the Gospels is the banquet. The image of the great feast declares that God longs for his people to worship him in a friendship that is embodied in eating together.” For Christians the end of time lies not in a utopic material paradise or a violent conflagration and annihilation, but in the meal where disarmed persons gather and enemies become friends.

The prime ecclesial practice of celebration which expresses the inoperativity of God’s time is the eucharist. As Hauerwas and Wells note, “The regular practice of a shared meal on the day of the Lord’s resurrection is the principal way in which Christians bind time.” Orienting itself not to empty clock time but the gratuitous temporality of the eucharist creates for the church a “rhythm of celebration” which “comes to order the shapelessness of time.” Practicing eucharist reminds Christians of their status as creatures of God invited into a relationship of

---

78 Ibid., 227.
79 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 16.
friendship which transforms and redeems persons into friends of time and reconciled ambassadors for God. “[E]very eucharistic celebration can be seen as a repeated opportunity for time-laden creatures to be incorporated into a temporal environment, established in Christ, in which past, present and future co-inhere, in such a way that our identities can be healed, recast and reformed.”

Experiencing this incorporation into God’s redemptive story ushers the body into an imagination graced by the peaceful habits of the Holy Spirit, where the church enacts and celebrates its identity as the eschatological community anticipating the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Through their commitment to celebrate the uncommodified gift of bread and time of the eucharist, members of the Body experience the trust which comes from God’s provision, and learn the patience needed to sit “idle” with the outlier in the Holy Spirit’s grace of friendship.

The church continues its celebration of grace by boldly and copiously desiring to eat with the stranger. Craig Nessan notes how Christian social eating practices orient themselves around the transforming way Jesus shared meals with the outlier. “The eating of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners provides the framework for all eating at the Lord’s Table: an invitation to all, beginning with the outcast and sinners, the least. All are welcome at the table of Jesus. And at this meal there is enough for all.”

The bread Jesus broke with others acted as signs of the just eating practices of the inbreaking kingdom of God. Yet Jesus’s meal practice did not involve merely income redistribution or even a generous sharing of one’s goods. The intentionality of himself sitting down to eat with those marginalized persons signals the telos of friendship and mutuality characteristic of the kingdom. In a world increasingly polarized and afraid of the difference of the foreigner, the church can demonstrate Jesus’s boundary trespassing friendship through sharing meals with those left behind in secular time. Rebecca Spurrier writes about how sharing community with many marginalized persons at Holy Family Episcopal Church includes eating together. As many members of the congregation are unemployed, interns are encouraged to “loiter with intent,” learning the kind of inoperative time which can wait and encounter the other without agendas. Spurrier understands this as exemplifying a kind of

---

81 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 166.
eschatological time which offers a place for dialogue and mutuality.84 This same kind of eating practice could be extended to refugees and other persons migrating across borders. In the midst of a rhetoric of fear and distrust toward the foreigner, the church’s extending of its table to the other in the spirit of friendship would witness to the reconciliation given through the eucharist.

Conclusion

My research question for this chapter asked what the ecclesial habits and practices would be that announce and exemplify a peace ecclesiology that takes its cue from L’Arche. Through its advocacy and encouragement of particular habits and dispositions, the church commits itself to become a school of peace in the mutuality which befriends the stranger in a spirit of solidarity; in the patience which can bear life with the other and not give in to the despair which prematurely tries to eliminate or run away from inconvenient others; in the trust which has faith in God’s providence and redemption, and thus can live radically because it knows it does not have to be “responsible” for the world; and in the tenderness which encounters all bodies non-violently and witnesses to a kind of care that can lead to friendship. These habits come through the ecclesial practices of hospitality, story-telling, prayer, forgiveness and celebration. The church performs these activities in its communal worship, a training ground in learning how to receive God’s gift of peace and share it with others. However, the church is called to bring its practices of peace into the world outside of the church building as a sign of its mission to participate in the *missio Dei*. As a community incorporated into God’s story, the church follows Jesus not only through worship but also by bringing its gift of peace to abandoned and forsaken places.

Because the church is a community *in via* rather than one not yet arrived, it frequently fails to fully announce and embody these ecclesial habits and practices of peace. Too often the church capitulates to and unthinkingly emulates the clock time of high-speed societies, and removes itself from or passes by those “strange/ers” left behind. Yet when the church faithfully practices its beliefs and receives peaceable habits, it receives the graces of trust and patience needed to slow down and receive the gift of God’s friendship and grace. Performing the faith

---

and embodying the habits in the gentle time of Jesus Christ means that those often considered as outliers may soon become masters, and those most regrettable can manifest the vocations given by the Holy Spirit for the uplift of the Body. In this way the tenderness and mutuality shown by Jesus and fostered in the church can come from those considered the weakest and most vulnerable. The task in the timeful church becomes then less a matter of social inclusion, and more a matter of recognizing friendships and teachers already in the Body. With a vision transformed the church can discern how persons like Edith, Eric, and Yvette embody the timeful peace of the kingdom, and orient the Body’s imagination towards the “impossible,” eschatological time of the Holy Spirit.
Summing Up: Towards a L’Arche Inspired Peace Ecclesiology

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ....[T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect....God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another (1 Cor 12: 12, 22-25).

There are many places in the world today that represent the human struggle with enmity, conflict, and violence. Northern Ireland is one of those locations. Despite the peace treaties and reconciliation work, years of conflict formed persons in a fear of the other and the projection of evil onto an external enemy. Not even the church has been immune to the allure and effects of enmity. While many physical walls have come down, a suspicion and distrust of the other remains. Thus for many the war continues, a peace based on more than the absence of overt hostilities than deep unity. Many programs of “inclusion” may be proposed and put in place, but friendship and communion remain elusive.

Into this tempest of enmity comes Maria Garvey and other persons labelled as intellectually disabled. As one of the co-founders of L’Arche Belfast, Garvey understands L’Arche as a community commissioned by God to live and bring peace to the world. The members of L’Arche Belfast exercise this mission not through speeches to Parliament or community organizing. The heart of their peace witness lies in becoming and being a community of friends.

While this mission may appear parochial and self-centered, Garvey has seen first-hand how the friendships across difference forged in L’Arche disarm strangers and witness to a world without violence. Garvey tells a story about going with core member Lisa to a local café. Lisa and Garvey drank their hot chocolate and cappuccino and then left to go home. Garvey had visited the café many times in the previous six weeks, but no one ever spoke with her. As a resident of the Republic of Ireland, Garvey’s accent in certain quarters of the city gave her the “voice of an enemy.” Yet the next day when Garvey entered the café alone the owner
approached her. “[S]orry if we’ve seemed unfriendly until now,” the owner said with a smile. “I presume that you’re new here and you might not realize that this is a side of the city where your accent might put you at risk. But...when I saw you with [Lisa] yesterday I knew that you couldn’t be an enemy and I knew that we could talk.”

As an individual, Garvey’s presence evoked suspicion, erecting walls of estrangement and fear. Yet the ordinary sharing of coffee and hot chocolate with Lisa had a disarming effect on others, making a space for encounter and dialogue previously considered unthinkable. The peace mission Lisa and Garvey exercised in the café came about less through an attempt at “inclusion” than a commitment to their friendship. Certainly Garvey gave Lisa an opportunity to go to a café and thus participate in a common social activity. Yet it was the friendship the owner saw and which ignited the disarmament that subsequently followed. Garvey gives no indication that she and Lisa entered the café to intentionally perform peace and reconciliation work; the two did not display a friendship simply for the sake of reconciling others. Instead Lisa and Garvey drank together as a practice which helped foster and express their friendship, in turn forming them in the habits which make peace and communion possible. Publicly witnessing to a friendship across a range of difference considered irreconcilable resulted in transformation of the moral imagination of others. In a local café in Belfast, peace and reconciliation was won through the witness of a communion forged in the crucible of community life, where persons practice the timeful activities that make friends of time. Lisa and Garvey brought the fullness of God’s time into a space of alienation and desperation not through speeches or programs but by their gentle, mutual, and slow sharing with one another.

This dissertation has been an attempt to investigate how Lisa, Garvey, and others in L’Arche offer their peace witness to the world, and how their insight and practice might aid the church in its own peace witness. The overall research question for this project asked what might be learned from the theology and practice of L’Arche communities as exemplified in the work of Jean Vanier for the project of developing a peace ecclesiology. One immediate discovery these L’Arche communities reveal is that persons considered intellectually disabled are central to the church’s peace witness, exercising their particular vocations in the founding narrative of the Body. At the same time, the presence of these members challenges and expands the contours of

---

the body’s story, especially through the deceleration they often demand. Slowing down helps others in L’Arche remember their first task of relationship and reconciliation, where friendships won across great divides of difference represents true success.

Following this fundamental insight of Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities, the church might understand the place of persons labelled intellectually disabled in the Body under a different category than one of simple “inclusion.” The church certainly has a role in finding persons excluded from faith communities and making space for them in the Body. Yet L’Arche communities committed to practicing Vanier’s theology call the church to go further, by living the kind of communion which recognizes in the other a (potential) friend, “another self.” By orienting relationships towards mutuality, persons with cognitive impairments can not only attend religious services but more authentically exercise their Spirit-given vocations to build up the Body. Inside of a temporality like that of L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theological insights, nondisabled Christians might learn to perceive in persons like Lucien and Eric – people often labelled as profoundly intellectually disabled – charisms of gentle discipleship offered to others in the communal journey towards peace and unity. In this milieu, the gifts of these persons enable the possibility for mutual transformation and a renewed understanding of the Gospel. As friends rather than targets for special programs or accommodation, people considered intellectually disabled have the potential to change the church by helping bring other persons into God’s time, redeemed by Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The vocation of L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological commitments to embody and witness God’s reconciliation should reaffirm for the church how peace(making) consists of much more than nonviolent activism or overt conflict mediation (two very important peace activities nonetheless). In this way, the church might learn from these L’Arche communities’ theology and practice a concrete (albeit often flawed) attempt to live peace as a way of life rather than intentional strategy. This adventure in being and becoming peace offers the church and world a demonstration of the very font of what Christian mediators such as John Paul Lederach base their work on. L’Arche has no playbook or blueprint for bringing peace to the world; in fact, L’Arche harbours no such delusions of grandeur in regards to its vocation. Instead, L’Arche communities grounded in Vanier’s theology are content to remain a “parable”
or “sign” of God’s peace, and reminds the church that its call lies in being thankful for Christ’s redemption of time, and to faithfully perform and witness to that time in its communal life.

As a sign rather than saviour, the church might learn from theologically-grounded L’Arche communities how peace is a profoundly relational activity. Living peace includes the daily interactions of mutuality with persons in the church that characterize it as a koinonia. Being attentive to those relationships means thick encounters with the other, which brings joy as well as potential conflict. The process of disarmament Vanier sees as crucial for authentic reconciliation begins with meeting those who are different, not as projects to save but as strangers to befriend. Although these encounters may appear small and irrelevant amidst the enmity evident across the globe, Vanier shows how meeting the other without fear might exist as a crucial aspect of the church’s peace witness. Learning how to live relationships with others in the body with mutuality and tenderness might even represent something of a test for the timeful church. Faith communities cannot claim to live Christ’s peace when their relationships do not exhibit the patience and truthfulness of that same peace. The church can learn from L’Arche how a commitment to this peace calls the Body to “go further” with the estranged and marginalized of the world, engaging with them not as generous benefactors but as potential friends. When the church makes friendship rather than access the primary goal for its encounters with those considered intellectually disabled, it might actually come closer to achieving full participation and inclusion. However, the true goal or end of Christian life is less inclusion than communion, being the koinonia that recognizes the other as “another self” and fellow imago Dei. When the church can receive the grace of the Holy Spirit’s friendship and live this relationality, befriending and being befriended by people like Lisa could move the church towards a fuller and renewed understanding of the Gospel and Christian faith.

The church might also learn from L’Arche’s theology and practice as articulated by Vanier how peace is an eschatological activity. Being witnesses to peace not only takes time, but demands living a certain kind of time. Living amidst high-speed society continually tempts faith communities in the minority world to accede to its pace and priorities. Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities remind the church how being called to embody the Gospel implies following God’s time, and telling time from an eschatological horizon that understands eternity and communion as humanity’s true end. As the sent promise of God’s future, the Holy Spirit acts as the harbinger of this communion which has all the time in the world to make friends and
reconcile with the enemy. The presence of persons labelled intellectually disabled in congregations might show others this telos as something worth waiting for; slowing down to the pace of people like Lisa could assist members of the body in resting long enough to recognize the kingdom of God as “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). The friendship Lisa and Garvey exhibited in the café recalls for the church peace as a gift of God which the church first receives, and then demonstrates to the world through its Spirit-imbued life. As disciples living on the frontier of time, persons in L’Arche help the church remember its life as a slow journey in and to peace, even in the middle of an alienated and desperate world.

The peace L’Arche communities practicing Vanier’s theology try to live daily might also teach the church how peace is a profoundly practical activity. This practical aspect does not merely entail living with the inspired pragmatism of Vanier in the first years of L’Arche. In addition, peace as practical recognizes peace as coming via communal activities, which form its members in the peaceable habits needed to become friends of time. By understanding formation as occurring through embodied practices, the church certainly “includes” persons like Lisa and others who may experience God through non-cognitive means. Yet understanding sacramental practices as like forgiveness and hospitality as formative in the peaceable virtues also reminds everyone else of the body’s indispensability in Christian discipleship. Paying attention to practices might help Christians stay away from the temptation to make faith an individualistic, subjectivist enterprise of rational assent. Vanier-oriented L’Arche communities show the church how peace begins with communal activities of response to God’s gift, which can form whole persons in the logic of the Gospel. While these practices begin in the community through the liturgy, their witness can extend far beyond it. As the story from L’Arche Belfast shows, the simple practice of sharing drinks – performed many times before in community life – overflowed into the larger community and spoke volumes to people trained in suspicion of the other. Lisa and Maria Garvey required no speeches or placards to witness to God’s transformative reconciliation. They only needed to extend their practice into a neighbourhood café, and hope the Holy Spirit does the rest. Through a commitment to live eschatologically in God’s time, the church’s sacramental practices might have the same effect in both forming disciples and witnessing the peace of God.

L’Arche’s commitment to the person first and foremost could certainly lead to the accusation that it pays insufficient attention to structural injustice, whether it be neo-liberal
economics or paternalistic social service bureaucracies. Vanier and others in L’Arche readily recognize the essential value in seeking justice in these areas, but understand their vocation to peace in a different way. The personalist thrust at the heart of Vanier’s thought and the practice of peace in L’Arche communities convict embolden them to seek justice primarily through the particular relationships between persons that culminate in friendship. This emphasis does not have to translate into a myopic and sectarian community of the same, although that temptation can always arise. Rather Vanier understands a confrontation with structural injustice as requiring an encounter between persons, eschewing ideological battles for meeting the enemy “face-to-face.” This personalistic orientation might turn out to be “unproductive” and “inefficient.” Yet for a community telling time eschatologically, inefficiency is not necessarily equated with a lack of success. Recognizing Jesus as the Lord of time means giving up the need for a political responsibility which demands making the world come out right. Those L’Arche communities inspired by Vanier’s theology might remind the church in this regard that, while it does not have to abandon its struggle against larger forms of structural injustice, God gives it the time to meet the other in peace, thereby opening up the potential for the Holy Spirit to transform sin into grace.

As an in via rather than fully arrived people, the church often fails to tell time rightly and fully embody God’s peace in the world. Too often faith communities unconsciously comply with various forms of structural injustice, which includes the exclusion of persons labelled as intellectually disabled. When the church succumbs to the empty and accelerated time of high-speed societies it rarely has the imagination to persons like Lisa as masters and teachers. While Vanier discerns the two pillars of L’Arche – encounters with the poor and a firm reliance on God’s providence – from Paul’s reflections on the body of Christ, it can be argued that many faith communities do not live this same vision in their concrete life. In this way, L’Arche could prove to be a source of renewal for the church, and not just in regards to “inclusion” of marginalized persons. If Vanier’s sense of L’Arche as being given a vocation to “rebuild the church” is true, then people like Lisa and Edith might also help transform communities into more authentic witnesses to God’s peace.
Bibliography


Glass, Eileen. "The Particular Needs of Older People with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Carers: A Perspective from the Experience of L’Arche." In *Ageing, Disability, and*


——. "Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial." Religion and Intellectual Life 3, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 87–100.


Silverman, William A. "From Our Own Correspondent: Medicine as 'Warfare.'" *Paediatric & Perinatal Epidemiology* 17, no. 4 (October 2003): 314.


Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Civil Society.* Edited by Jose Harris. Translated by Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887, 2001.


Summary

This project attempts to investigate, analyze, and demonstrate how persons in L’Arche communities grounded in the theology of Jean Vanier offer their peace witness to the world, and how their insight and practice might aid the church in its own participation in God’s peaceful redemption of creation. Persons labelled as intellectually disabled – designated “core members” in many L’Arche communities – are central in this mission, exercising their particular vocations in the founding narrative of the communal body. In this way, these L’Arche communities offer a social life “beyond inclusion,” where persons considered intellectually disabled need not bend to the norms of the dominant social imaginary. Befriending the often devalued “strangers” of modern societies facilitates transformations in persons’ and communities’ moral and theological understandings at the most profound levels. In his experience of L’Arche, Vanier found a vision of the church as a place of friendship and belonging, where the nondisabled increasingly perceived many with cognitive impairments as masters and teachers in being human and witnessing to God’s peace.

The approach taken by Vanier and other L’Arche communities committed to his theology can contrast with more mainstream models of social and ecclesial inclusion. These frameworks often assume an “anthropology of liberal citizenship,” where persons exercise individual autonomy by choosing for themselves their own good. Through guaranteeing “access” and “equal opportunity,” these models of inclusion promise full participation of persons with impairments of various kinds. Theologian Nancy Eiesland’s The Disabled God, and the ecclesial statements of the World Council of Churches and U.S. Roman Catholic Church contain features of this approach to including persons labelled as disabled. Yet their assumptions of empowerment through agency and rationality leave out many persons limited or lacking in the robust subjectivity needed to fully participate in the normative frameworks these texts offer. The church needs an orientation that goes beyond these frameworks to the communion and attentiveness that seeks belonging rather than liberal forms of “equality.”

Communities of L’Arche offer another narrative and social imaginary of how the church might relate to and host people with impairments. The movement’s theological story demonstrates a transformative understanding in regards to the place of and relationship with persons labelled as intellectually disabled. Begun as a “rescue project” for persons incarcerated
in institutional life, founder Vanier and others in L’Arche discovered how even persons considered profoundly intellectually disabled were expanding persons’ and communities’ sense of mission and identity. These understandings were challenged by the changing character of many arriving nondisabled assistants, as well as the increasing encroachment of social bureaucracies (and their logic) onto communities’ daily lives. Although already discerned in the original attempt to liberate persons trapped in degrading asylums, by the time of 9/11 Vanier understood the vocation of L’Arche in the world to be one of a witness to peace, radically welcoming difference and offering a vision for the renewal of the church.

In order for all persons to fully live their own vocations of peace witness, Jean Vanier insists that communities must be places of “disarmament.” According to Vanier, the desire for peace ultimately comes to naught without an honest and penetrating look at the origins of violence within the hearts of human persons. The brokenness inherent in the human condition produces in persons a fear of death and annihilation of self. This fear at the heart of being impels persons to project their brokenness onto external “enemies,” and build their own internal walls as protection from the dangerous difference of the other. At the same time, an insecurity of being also results in a desire to compete with the other in order to secure their own worth. Vanier experienced community as a place where persons came face-to-face with this dynamic of enmification and competition inside themselves, even experiencing within himself the violence which arises in the presence of a difference that cannot be eliminated or conquered. As Vanier and others welcomed and shared life in the crucible of community, they learned how to not just face their shadow selves but, more importantly, accept and befriend them. By so doing, persons in L’Arche enter a process of disarmament, unbinding themselves from the weapons and walls of the broken self. As persons become disarmed they open themselves to experience, hope for, and work for a peace far beyond the absence of overt hostility. For Vanier, peace encapsulates a state of personal and communal unity; an eschatological goal, imagined as the “eternal wedding feast”; and a dynamic process of encountering the other and building community. Understanding peace in this holistic and robust fashion results in a commitment to being and becoming signs of God’s peace in a world focused on competition and power. Communities of peace try to witness to difference as God’s gift rather than curse, and perceive of encounter and dialogue as forms of authentic Christian mission.
Persons receive and live this communion not abstractly but through the activities of community life, which form members in the habits and disposition which make for a holistic peace. An examination of narratives of persons in L’Arche communities committed to Vanier’s theology reveal the habits of mutuality, trust, patience, and tenderness as central to being communities called to witness to peace. These disposition are received through the embodied practices of welcome, story-telling, prayer, forgiveness and celebration, which act as arenas for the acquisition of the kind of peace which goes beyond a mere lack of conflict. The reception of peaceable habits which comes through training in communal practices helps form communities into peace cultures, where particular values, ways of life, and telling of time are prioritized and advocated as contributing the movement’s mission and identity.

Persons in L’Arche communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological vision continually affirm how their peace witness is not possible without acknowledging God as the source, means, and end of communal life together. From the founding of the first home in 1960s rural France to a global federation in the age of the Internet, Vanier has persistently argued that L’Arche always remains “God’s project.” Vanier’s vision of providence represents a kind of theological realism which undergirds the habits of trust and patience at the heart of disarmed communities. The paschal mystery lies at the heart of Vanier-inspired L’Arche communities’ social life, representing the example and font of the process of disarmament which liberates persons to become witnesses for peace. As the dynamic love between the trinitarian persons, the Holy Spirit has a particularly vital role in community life. Acquiring the habits needed to become and witness to God’s peace come ultimately as a gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads persons into the time of Jesus Christ.

A crucial aspect of the peace culture of communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological vision is its particular way of telling time. Many persons in L’Arche experience time as a gift given for relationship and encountering the other. Becoming disarmed means decelerating and becoming the “friends of time” who can live time as an abundant realm given for making peace and meeting God. This theologically informed temporality can contrast sharply with the way many late modern societies experience time. As opposed to understanding time as gift, many persons in contemporary societies experience time as empty and sped-up, producing alienated and desperate persons, as well as “wasted lives” who cannot “get up to speed” with mainstream society. Vanier found it was the presence of core members – particularly those considered the
most profoundly disabled – who helped many nondisabled assistants recognize this new way of experiencing a more expansive and eschatological mode of time.

As an embodied sign of the Gospel, L’Arche acts as a parable for the church on living faithfully in God’s time. As the people formed out of God’s story, the church knows that its life emanates from the Trinity. Birthed out of Israel’s covenant with God, the church anticipates and points to the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus and made present through the Holy Spirit. The church as the community living between the aeons sees people and the world differently, and gives the world an alternative to violence through its mission to be God’s peaceful people. In this way, the church is fundamentally an eschatological reality, living life “on the frontier” of God’s future. The church’s telling of time eschatologically distinguishes it from an empty and secular time of the world, and makes it sometimes appear highly contrary from the norms of a social imaginary based on clock time. Even when the church overly capitulates to instrumental clock time, living ecclesial life more in a mode of control than gift, the Holy Spirit still guides the church to fidelity through the call to repentance and forgiveness.

Christians must receive and cultivate the habits and dispositions needed to tell time eschatologically in order to faithfully live on the frontier of the new age. Believers do this through practicing the sacramental activities of the church which speak to their dependence on God and their commitment to their peace witness. This practice forms Christians in the mutuality, trust, patience, and tenderness which characterizes a commitment to being followers of Jesus. Worship stands as a crucial training ground for Christians in the narrative of the Trinity, and forms believers in telling time from God’s perspective. The church becomes conformed to the peaceful logic of the kingdom of God through welcoming others into God’s time; re-telling and re-living the events of the story of redemption; prayerfully remembering God as the source, means and end of all of life; bringing peace to the past through forgiveness; and making friends through celebration and eating the bread of life together. This peace does not remain confined to the church sanctuary but spills out into the streets through practices arising out of the church’s mission. The Holy Spirit forms Christians in the habits and dispositions of peace, and gives the church the freedom to perform the “trivial” aspects of life with patience and trust, as well as the boldness to act as public witnesses of the eschatological imagination.

For many Christians today the inclusion of marginalized persons, which includes those considered to be intellectually disabled, represents one of the great tasks for the church.
However, L’Arche shows that welcoming these persons into church buildings to participate in rites and programs cannot be the end goal of the church’s mission. Becoming friends with persons labelled intellectually disabled and recognizing their vocations more aptly characterizes the mission of the church because it coheres with the church’s mission to witness to the peace and unity of Christ. In so doing, the church might be transformed into that strange, eschatological community that tells time rightly and takes the time to befriend the stranger and reconcile with the enemy. Living in a theologically-informed temporality re-envisions the church to see new exemplars in discipleship, and witness to the world the kingdom of God, the true end of time.