

An Inquiry into the Theology and Practice
of Covenantal Living in L'Arche

Submitted by Katharine Ann Hall to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Master of Arts by Research in Theology and Religion
In September 2011

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Synopsis

This study is an inquiry into the charism of L'Arche and its basis in the notion of covenant. It has reflected upon the theology of covenant and community of the founder, Jean Vanier, his life experience in community with people with learning disabilities, and the vicissitudes of the embodiment of covenant in the structures and practices of the communities of the Federation of L'Arche.

The inquiry has sought to understand the meanings attributed to covenant in the life history of L'Arche both corporately and individually, and to examine in what way it is a determinant paradigm for the ongoing life of L'Arche. It has sought to hear the questions arising from within L'Arche as well as from contemporary society and the impact of secular encoded practices.

The inquiry is grounded in a series of interviews with committed long term assistants living with the community members with learning disabilities in small community houses, who are not a part of the founding generation. This group is a necessary witness to the transition from the founder, and in their life choice represent something of the mystery of the original vision. Through these conversations it has been possible to articulate the particularity and importance of their vocation for L'Arche, and to identify a 'gap' between the word and the action concerning commitment, in particular what happens to them beyond their 'working life'.

The study concludes that covenant is core to the original vision and if deepened corporately could provide a challenging language and frame for addressing the serious questions facing L'Arche as a result of a process of secularisation.

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Definitions

- i) **L'Arche:** In the text this will be used to refer to both the first community founded by Jean Vanier in Trosly Breuil, France in 1964 and generically to all the communities subsequently founded and officially members of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities.
- ii) **International Federation of L'Arche Communities:** The “Federation” refers to the non-for profit organisation registered in France and headed by the International Coordinators and International Board. A community is entitled to use the name “L'Arche” when accepted as a probationary or permanent member of the International Federation. Each community is a separate legal entity in accordance with local statutory requirements.¹
- iii) **Covenant:** In this text the term covenant bears the usage attributed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition: God's promise of faithful love. I have however referred to a definition given by Walter Brueggemann (“a relationship that matters intensely to both parties”) as a way of approaching this subject in language that is reflective of the language used in the communities of L'Arche and which has helped me understand Vanier's theology of covenant.²
- iv) **Covenantal living:** This refers throughout the study to the ways in which we humans embody the obligations of our covenant with God in our daily life with one another. These ways refer not only to the mode and quality of our interpersonal relationships but also to the corporate practices of a life together under the obligations of the covenant.
- v) **People with learning disabilities:** the terminology is always a sensitive matter ranging from 'the mentally handicapped' through 'people with learning difficulties' and 'people with developmental disabilities' to 'the

¹ www.larche.org/facts-figures-and-actors-who-we-are.en-gb.24.0.news.htm, (accessed 28/09/11)

² “a relationship that matters intensely to both parties”. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995) p. 135.

mentally challenged' and 'the differently-abled'. Usage in L'Arche varies according to the cultural and social context. 'Core members' has gained popularity in recent years. I have chosen to stay with the term 'people with learning disabilities' as it is commonly used in the United Kingdom.

- vi) **'Living with'**: Throughout the study this phrase has been used with a specific meaning and refers to the practice of making home, living together under one roof ,sharing meals, prayer, sorrow and celebration, with people with learning disabilities. It involves the concrete dailiness of caring for one another, and sharing the intimacy of home. I wish to specify this usage as this same phrase in the speech and writing of L'Arche and individuals within L'Arche is used to mean 'friendship' and 'belonging to' but does not necessarily include the element of being at home with as described above.

- vii) **Assistant**: This is a generic term within L'Arche for all who are living and working within L'Arche and who do not have a learning disability and is to be so understood throughout this study. It does not, however, include those who are named as employees or committee/board members. The word 'assistant' was literally transferred from french in the early days of L'Arche, and whilst in french it is also used in the professional world of care, in English it was adopted because it did not have a professional connotation and described a relationship of support and respect for the other rather than power. The fact that different words are used to describe the assistants and the people with learning disabilities catches the complexity of a community where members are equal at the level of the heart but not in other ways, and all that entrains in terms of covenant and commitment.

Introduction

The theology and practice of covenantal living in L'Arche

1. Aim of the thesis

The overall aim of this thesis is to examine the theology and practice of covenantal living in L'Arche, through the particular lens of an inquiry into the meaning and experience of covenantal living for long term assistants 'living with' people with disabilities in a L'Arche community. This inquiry will also look at both what enables and what prevents the living out of this particular vocation within L'Arche, and will ask the question whether this aspect of 'living with' should be seen as a necessary characteristic of the particular witness of L'Arche in our world today. It is hoped that in looking at covenant as the theological prism for the theology and practice of L'Arche new insight might be thrown on the real challenges and questions addressed to L'Arche at this point in its own evolution by today's social, economic and religious realities.

L'Arche is a federation of communities united by the Charter of L'Arche.³ This foundational document states that L'Arche was founded “in response to a call from God”;⁴ that the communities are “called into being by God”;⁵ “founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture”;⁶ “founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all the community members”;⁷ and are to provide the community members with the means

³ The International Federation of L'Arche Communities : for general information see www.larche.org/home.en-gb.1.0.index.htm, (accessed 28/09/11)
Charter of L'Arche, revised and approved by the General Assembly of the Federation of L'Arche in Cap Rouge, 1992.

⁴ Charter of L'Arche, 1992, Preamble, Line 1.

⁵ Charter of L'Arche, 1992, Preamble, Line 3.

⁶ Charter of L'Arche, 1992, I Aims 4.

⁷ Charter of L'Arche, 1992, III The Communities 2.1.

“to deepen their union with and love of God and other people”.⁸ The Charter reveals the language of covenant as the L'Arche's chosen language of identity and self description, and community as the location of the working out of covenantal living. The question to be asked is whether word and action match.

In order to examine the covenantal living practices of L'Arche it is necessary to return to the roots of the community and the theological tradition that has informed its language of both commitment and belonging, the theology of covenant and community, as articulated by the founder, Jean Vanier. Chapters 1 and 2 will therefore look at Vanier's theology of covenant and community as witnessed in his life and writings, in particular two major texts, *Community and Growth*, written early on in the development of L'Arche, and *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, written after forty years of community life in L'Arche.⁹ This review will provide a prism through which to examine the theological tradition out of which L'Arche has grown and help identify the determining characteristics of a life lived in response to God's covenant in L'Arche. These characteristics will then be referent points for the further review of existing practices in L'Arche and provide a frame for understanding the witness of the assistants in Chapter 4.

The inquiry focusses on the particular experience of long term assistants who 'live with' people with learning disabilities as this was the shape and intention of the founding model of L'Arche, who are a part of the second generation for L'Arche and so a bridge between the charism of the founding story and the development of a social structure that will sustain the spirit and experience of

⁸ Charter of L'Arche, 1992, III The Communities 3.3.

⁹ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979, revised 1989). Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

L'Arche over time.¹⁰ Today there are different ways of belonging to a community of L'Arche, many of which do not involve a commitment of 'living with' people with learning disabilities. As my research will show the ordinary way of living in community and long term commitment appears to have been marginalised and put in question for a variety of reasons both internal and external to L'Arche, and there is a felt experience both of dissonance between what is understood to have been the invitation and promise and what is being realised, and of the challenge this dissonance brings. The following quotation from a second generation assistant, committed long term in L'Arche, captures something of the anxiety, confusion and question that this dissonance evokes, as well as a sense of grave responsibility:

You could say, do we accept that we are a service provider organisation receiving £7,000,000 worth of government money and that we have to operate as the most efficient organisation as we can, be the best service provider as we can in order to keep that money? Is that what we have to do? Am I fundamentally a manager? Or are we an alternative radical, intentional faith community that believes in a vision of humanity, and relationships and welcome, and then out of the welcome of people with learning disabilities a certain amount of care and support results? But fundamentally we are a group of people sharing life together, and if being an organisation receiving money puts our relationships and beliefs at risk then we discard the organisation. Is that where we should go? [...] Are we going to lose something essential about L'Arche on my watch?¹¹

It is this “essential” to which the speaker refers that this study seeks to explore. Therefore in the second part of the study (Chapters 3 and 4) I shall turn to the lived experience. Chapter 3 will look at the premise of covenant in the founding

¹⁰ “When I came to Trosly- Breuil, that small village north of Paris, I welcomed Raphael and Philippe. I invited them to come and live with me because of Jesus and his Gospel. That is how L'Arche was founded. When I welcomed those two men from an asylum, I knew it was for life; it would have been impossible to create bonds with with them and send them back to a hospital, or anywhere else. My purpose in starting L'Arche was to found family, a community with and for those who are weak and poor because of a mental handicap and who feel alone and abandoned. The cry of Raphael and Philippe was for love, for respect, and for friendship; it was for true communion.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.97.

¹¹ Interview 9. Nine interviews were made as case studies for this thesis. The interviewees were all long term assistants in L'Arche and from different countries.

and ongoing story of L'Arche, and in the explicit structures and practices that have been developed to enable the embodiment of covenantal relationships in the communities. In order to trace this story and experience, and gain insight into the corporate recognition and understanding of covenant as a determining paradigm for a life lived in community in L'Arche, I shall explore both the witness as presented in the official documents and processes of L'Arche, as well as the recorded history. This review will allow for a discernment of the founding 'myth', the identification of and reasons for any shifts away from this myth, and the elucidation of whether covenant is contextual or essential.

The final voice consulted in this inquiry is that of the assistant. Through the analysis of the nine interviews taken for this study, I have been given privileged access to the current experience of covenantal living in L'Arche. Whilst the witness given is subjective and deeply personal, it is possible to discern shared understandings of their experience of covenant, belonging, and commitment in L'Arche. As the research shows this generation of assistants are engaged with the real struggle of giving contemporary form and language to covenantal living. It is in listening to the anomalies of their experience that I seek in the final chapter to identify the significance of covenant for L'Arche, and the necessary consequences for the communities if they wish to remain truthful to a life informed by covenant.

It is hoped that by articulating afresh the underpinning theological premises and insights, we shall be able to evaluate in the light of the Gospel message the consequences of choices made in L'Arche and the challenges presented by the current situation with greater wisdom and clarity. It is also hoped that in using covenant as the frame for reflection we shall be able to contribute to the conversation within L'Arche about what is necessary to enable and ensure the

“essential”, and for L'Arche to remain faithful to its originary vision.

2. Methodology

a. Textual engagement

I shall engage with the writings of the Founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, in order to elicit the theology underlying the founding charism of L'Arche. Given the aim of this study I shall concentrate on his theology of covenant and community and on two main texts which span the history of L'Arche. Vanier began the first community of L'Arche in 1964 by welcoming two men with learning disabilities into a small house in France so that they might be at home together¹². Since that initial step Vanier has lived and reflected on the meaning of 'community' and in particular in the context of L'Arche. Whilst most of his writings speak of community, there are two particular texts in which he explores in greater detail the meaning of 'living in community' - *Community and Growth*, and *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*.¹³

The first is an early work and a collection of short reflections based on his own experience of living in the community of L'Arche in France and accompanying the founding and evolution of other L'Arche communities throughout the world as well as of individuals. The second text is the fruit of fifty years of 'reflection, study, prayer and living in community.'¹⁴ Relationship, the fact that we are made to be in relationship, in communion one with another and with God, is central to both texts. Using an analogy that Vanier himself uses of the relationship and difference between the two disciples Peter and John, we might view these two texts as necessarily

¹² Vanier *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

¹³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1979, revised 1989)
Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

¹⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 7.

unified yet different in as much as the first labours with us the fact and askesis (discipline) of relationship in community, whilst the second shares the intimate life of Jesus with us and through him the gift of communion with God which is for all.¹⁵ We are invited in this second text to a life which both 'dwells in ' and is 'dwelt in ' by God.¹⁶ The reflection on St John is implicit in the first text, rather as a seed contains the potential of the new life of the fruit. In both of these texts we are able to trace the theological understanding and significance Vanier gives to being in a L'Arche community.

b. Ethnographic reflection

In order to gain insight into the self understanding of L'Arche concerning covenant and covenantal living I have taken an ethnographic approach.¹⁷ This approach allows for the description and understanding of the particular religious and social experience of L'Arche from an insider's perspective. It draws on the assumption that it is possible to describe what people think by listening to what they say, and that from this listening to identify the dynamic of thoughts, beliefs and knowledge. It is not objective. It cannot be quantified nor does it provide material for like on like comparison. It does however help provide an understanding of 'why' people choose to live in the way they do, and the meaning they make of their life experiences. It provides insight into cultural and social practices, and the unseen motivational and socially binding scripts that are at work.

¹⁵ Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 355 – 357.

¹⁶ Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 39 -40, 69, 272 -3.

¹⁷ David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step by Step*, (London, Sage Publications, 1989) p.15. Ethnographic research is typically based on a “phenomenologically oriented paradigm” which “embraces a multicultural perspective because it accepts multiple realities. People act on their individual perceptions and these actions have real consequences – thus the subjective reality each individual sees is not less real than an objectively defined and measured reality. Phenomenologically oriented studies are generally inductive; they make few explicit assumptions about sets of relationships. Such an approach is the basis of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967): The theory underlying a sociocultural system or community develops directly from empirical data.”

As an approach it values the particular witness of each member of the group and so demands that multiple realities and therefore perspectives are taken into account. It is not therefore easy to draw out water tight theories and rationales for behaviour. These inevitably must remain subjective, but nonetheless there are collective patterns that are influential and which are both consciously and subconsciously transmitted between the group and between generations. The transmutation of ideas across time can reveal the impact of changing life circumstances, and how these changes are incorporated into the frame of meaning and the subsequent significance given.

To this end I have undertaken seven verbal interviews subsequently transcribed into a written text, with assistants who have lived a minimum of ten years in a community house, and who perceive their vocation within L'Arche as anchored in 'living with' people with learning disabilities. All of these interviewees are single, female, and have been living in communities in Europe or North America between 18 and 35 years, and so their testimony spans the end of the foundational period of L'Arche into the second generation. The choice of this group, and so exclusion of people who might be considered founders and newer assistants was intentional, because this is the generation of assistants which has the task of communicating the original vision of the founders to the next generation and is faced with all the issues inherent in the period of institutionalisation which follows the period of foundation.¹⁸

The limits of these case studies are obvious – it is a small all female group and all the participants are ethnically white, from north-atlantic communities and Christian.¹⁹ Although the majority of communities and long term assistant members

¹⁸ i.e. joining L'Arche within the first 10 years and being involved in the foundation of a community.

¹⁹ North-atlantic: I use this term to refer to the communities in Europe, Canada, and the United States of America who constitute 75% of the total number of L'Arche communities in the world.

within L'Arche internationally are located in the communities in the north-atlantic countries, this group cannot be considered representative of L'Arche, which today is world wide and inter religious. However given the fact that L'Arche was founded in France in a Roman Catholic Christian context, it is appropriate to focus on the evolution within the 'parent' culture as opposed to contexts where it could be seen as a foreign implantation, and where the second generation question may take on a different meaning. Within the limited range there is nonetheless a wealth of reflection about the issues that are the subject of this inquiry.

Aware of the gender limitation of the interviewees, and the fact that there are many assistants who have lived as 'live-in' assistants prior to their marriage, I have included two additional interviews made with assistants who are married men. Both of these interviewees have been in L'Arche for at least 25 years, have lived in community houses prior to marriage, have been married to women who have also been house assistants within L'Arche, understand the covenant of their marriage to be shaped by their engagement in L'Arche; and .are currently carrying international roles in L'Arche. The objective of including their voices in the research was to provide a counter balance to the all female and celibate voice of the live in assistants and to enable the differences and similarities to become apparent.

c. Historical reflection

The inquiry will of necessity need to take into account the evolution and development of L'Arche as well as shifts in social and economic policies and practices. The communities of L'Arche are inserted in time and place and this study will explore the international patterns of development. Local factors and differences

See: www.larche.org/home.en-gb.1.0.index.htm, (accessed 28/09/11)
The reasons for the limitations of the study are time, and money.

will be heard in the interviews.

As an International Federation of communities L'Arche has generated its own body of referential texts which reflect the institutionalisation of the original charism. Some of these texts are foundational documents and others corporate discussion papers and material amassed from wide spread consultation within the Federation. This material is the official collective voice of L'Arche and marks the understood choices and developments within the self understanding of L'Arche as a body. It is another partner in the conversation of this research, and will be engaged with wherever appropriate.

3. Limitations of the research and the researcher

a. Strengths and limitations of the researcher

It is appropriate to identify my own strengths and limitations as the researcher. I have been a member of L'Arche living in community houses with men and women with learning disabilities both in the United Kingdom and India for 29 years. Such an experience brings with it the advantage of a wealth of lived and detailed ethnographic knowledge, and the disadvantage of a possible lack of distance and critique.

Furthermore I am not a biblical scholar and so am dependent on the works of others when analysing and interpreting the story of covenant as revealed in biblical texts. I have chosen to Walter Brueggemann as the primary conversation partner for the reflection on Vanier's theology of covenant because he places 'covenantal relatedness' at the heart of his own biblical interpretation and theology and offers a more overtly exegetical account of 'covenantal relatedness' than Vanier's intuitive and reflective approach. My intention is to draw on

Brueggemann's exegesis, insight and language so as to situate Vanier's theological interpretation of his experience within a wider frame of reference of biblical interpretation, and thereby gain tools and access to a fuller understanding of the dynamic of covenantal relatedness as specifically witnessed in the community of L'Arche and the reality of mutual relationship with people living with learning disabilities.

For Brueggemann reality is deeply contingent on speech and so works from the premise that testimony (the telling of what happened) is a mode of knowledge and a mode of certainty that is accepted as revelatory. He maintains that the Scriptures (both Old and New) are living testimonies that both speak about God and are witness to the speech of God (i.e. do theology) and reflect the character of God. It is key therefore to listen to both the what and the how of the voices of the witnesses. The characteristic of speech is its organisation around an active verb that "bespeaks an action that is transformative", and that thereby creates a new situation between two agents.²⁰ Brueggemann identifies the 'peculiarity' of Old Testament speech about God to be embodied in the dynamic of covenantal relatedness. This relationship brings about a 'novum' : mutuality, thus revealing a new and disturbing understanding and experience of God, self and other. The language of covenanted relatedness is promissory and so involves risk – the risk of both constancy and betrayal, as well as the potential for new life. It requires a serious engagement with power, difference and justice. It is subversive of the established order. As witnessed in the testimony of the Old Testament it precludes the desire for closure and certitude; it involves engagement with multiple voices; and it demands particularity whilst being universal.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1977), p.119.

Brueggemann maintains that engagement with disclosing patterns of speech as witnessed in the Old Testament, patterns of speech that were pluralistic and therefore disputatious, provides a way of discerning “what is and what is not 'true speech', that is speech about truth”, and therefore a construal of reality in contemporary society. Such engagement demands a community “with an intentional speech pattern of its own”.²¹ In Brueggemann's terms L'Arche is such a 'community of interpretation' acting within a 'certain form of life' prepared to 'acknowledge the density of its practices', 'unembarrassed by commitment' and living intentionally in response to the world proposed by the text, i.e. the testimony of Biblical Scripture. Brueggemann's invitation to attend to the 'intentional speech pattern' within this community (albeit with the understanding that speech is both verbal and non verbal) mirrors the process by which Vanier's own theological insight has evolved.

Vanier's theology of covenant has developed out of and is testimony to his experience of choosing to let his life and the life of his community be re-ordered by the testimony of both Scripture (in particular that of St John's Gospel) and life shared with people living with learning disabilities. Like Brueggemann he takes seriously Scripture's witness to the centrality of the dynamic of God's covenantal relatedness. Vanier's reflections are born out of a living process, a dialogical conversation between himself, Jesus (a life of prayer) and the voices of Scripture, people with learning disabilities and other members of the communities of L'Arche, a conversation that is transformative. This polyphonic conversation is an ongoing activity that demands risky relatedness and so is an embodiment of the very mutual vulnerability that it reveals, a vulnerability underwritten by the presumption of God's presence and recognition of humankind's contingency and absolute dependence on the mystery of God. Just as the testimony of his life is enacted in relationships of

²¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old testament, Testimony*, p. 743.

responsibility with Jesus and with his brothers and sisters in L'Arche, so in his written testimony Vanier's main concern is to meditate on the Gospel with reference to the present, and to engage the reader in a serious conversation that has the potential to bring about something new. In speaking about God he is always at the same time speaking about the world which God creates and of humankind's place and duties in that process of creation, of new life.

For Brueggemann the testimony and speech pattern of the Scriptures does not allow him to impose a resolution on the tension between the desire for a systematised theology and the descriptive work of biblical interpretation. Likewise for Vanier the experience of engaging with the testimony of Scriptures and with people with learning disabilities will not allow for a reading that is exclusive. The God of covenanted relatedness is a God that refuses closure, a God who whilst compassionately and faithfully present remains a scandalous, different, hidden and mysterious other, who ongoingly invites humankind into new speech.

b. Limitations of the research

As has been indicated above the research project is limited in its ability to engage with all the possible voices that could be heard in this conversation, but the most obvious absence is the voice of the person with a learning disability. The direct testimony in this study represents the voice of the verbal assistant. This absence must be recognised as a serious loss and reflects how through the prejudices of society and the facts of their own lives the voice of the person with a disability often remains silent. Nonetheless I would affirm that this very silence maybe 'heard' in the profound transformations experienced and witnessed by the assistants. The absence of the person with a learning disability does not represent the conscious moves made

within L'Arche to include them as full members within the life of the community.²² However their particular voice would warrant an independent study conducted in a way appropriate to their patterns and modes of reflection and speech.

As noted in the section above (Methodology. b. Ethnographic reflection), further limitations include the socio-geographic range of the study, the ethnic and religious background and the limited gender range for the interviews, and the impact these factors have on making meaning and understanding.

²² For example, National Speaking Group (L'Arche UK); representation on the international consultation group concerning Commitment and Belonging.

A Theology of Covenant

“My fidelity to Jesus is also realised in my fidelity to my brothers and sisters of L'Arche and especially the poorest”²³

This study has arisen from a real cry within L'Arche concerning the embodiment of its own self understanding and the implications of that identity. In order to gain insight into this cry I have chosen to examine the extent to which the theology and practice of covenant in L'Arche is still determinant. It is important therefore to return to the roots of L'Arche and to establish the theological premises concerning covenant that both underlie and have evolved from the foundation and development of the life and practices of L'Arche. In this chapter I intend to explore the theological understanding of covenant for Vanier, the founder, in and through his writing and experience of relationships with people living with learning disabilities in the context of the communities of L'Arche.²⁴ An elucidation of Vanier's understanding of covenant will provide a framework for the inquiry into the current working out of covenant in the life of L'Arche, and an essential backdrop for the analysis of the witness of the second generation of assistants in Chapter 4.

It is evident from his writings that Vanier's own understanding of the nature of God's covenant has evolved as a consequence of his deepening relationship with Jesus and with people with disabilities in L'Arche. This chapter will particularly look at how this experience has informed his understanding and so enabled Vanier to develop a theology of covenant that is multi-layered, and embodied in and through

²³ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989)

²⁴ I shall refer mainly to three texts: Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979, revised 1989); Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, (London : Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004); Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman God Made Them*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985, revised 2007).

Jesus, in the Eucharist, in the church and in the face of the poor, yet with universal intent. It will also explore the impact of this covenant on the relationships between the assistants, the people with disabilities, and the community (institution) of L'Arche.

It has been necessary and useful to begin this exploration of Vanier's theology of covenant from the writings of Brueggemann. Vanier's writing is not as explicitly exegetical as Brueggemann. It is theologically reflective, and intuitive, but is not very systematically organised. Therefore Brueggemann has provided me with tools with which to explore Vanier's theology of covenant. Working from the story of God's relationship with the people of Israel as relayed in the Hebrew Scriptures Brueggemann explores the evolution of their understanding of God's covenantal relationship with humankind – a theology of covenant which is monotheistic, has a distinctive character and which is not without its own tension and question.²⁵ He identifies in the Hebrew Scriptures how God constantly surprises the people of Israel in the fulfilment of his promise of love, inviting them ceaselessly to an intimate relationship. Brueggemann develops an understanding of covenant that is radical and determinant of our humanity and our relationships.²⁶ Vanier's theology draws on this tradition of the promise of intimate relationship, recognising its embodiment in Jesus and the new possibilities and implications this has for humanity. Therefore Vanier's reflection on covenant is from the radically different stance of the Incarnation and a trinitarian God. The fact of Jesus changes how one can speak of God, and whilst the utter difference of God, his sovereignty, remains, the dynamic of the covenant, of the promise of faithful love, is changed. In many ways the writings of Brueggemann

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995) pp.150 -166. This chapter on 'Covenanting as Human Vocation', whilst written as a conversation with pastoral counselling, provides a frame for looking at what it is to be human and in the context of the challenges of modern life.

already suggest the relational dynamic that is to be found in Vanier's reflection on and experience of Scripture (Hebrew and Christian), the tradition of the Church and his life as a Christian, living in community with people with learning disabilities.

Throughout this chapter I shall understand the term covenant to refer to “a relationship that matters intensely to both parties.”²⁷ In his reflections about the covenant of God with humankind as relayed in biblical texts and stories, Brueggemann maintains that such a definition underlines the actual and radical 're-definition' that God gives to the common understanding of covenant in the ancient Near East, and so to our understanding of the nature of God and of the nature of God's relationship with humankind.²⁸ We shall see in Vanier's reflections on covenant that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveals in radical and even shocking ways what this love affair with humankind means both for God and humankind, and how we can know in our flesh the intimate presence of the Other/other, without fusion or confusion.

In the first two sections of this chapter I shall lay a foundation and overview for an understanding of covenant based on the scholarship and insight of Brueggemann. In the third section I will develop the specifics of the unfolding of covenant in the life and writing of Vanier thereby looking at the shift of dynamic brought about by the embodiment of the covenant in the person of Jesus and the revelation of God as Trinity. For Vanier the newness brought about by Jesus does not deny Hebrew tradition, but incorporates and expands the understanding and working out of covenant in time. In conclusion I shall look afresh at the definition used in this chapter of covenant - 'a relationship that matters intensely to both parties' –

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995) p. 135.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and Life of Faith*, p. 135: Brueggemann notes the radical difference between this definition and the Near East usage of covenant as contractual i.e. *quid pro quo*. He also sees this as challenging any scholastic notions that God is above all 'issues and risks'.

through the lens of Vanier's writings and experience both as a Christian and as someone living in community with people with learning disabilities.

1. Covenant

In exploring the texts of the Old Testament Brueggemann examines how the story of God with the people of Israel and with individuals reveals an inherent tension in the perception and experience of God as both sovereign and faithful.²⁹ The sovereignty of God is characterised by glory, holiness and jealousy.³⁰ However this same God is engaged in a faithful relationship, which seems to qualify if not subvert God's sovereignty and self-regard.³¹

The relationship between God and humankind, known as covenant, is described as steadfast love, faithfulness, mercy, graciousness with the additional epithets of righteousness, justice and shalom.³² This covenant can be summed up in the phrase, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." (Jer.11: 4)³³ It is seen by both parties as an enduring relationship of fidelity and mutual responsibility. The people of Israel understood that its corporate life was rooted in and shaped by a relationship initiated by God. The relational expectation of God was that Israel would respond in trust and obedience.³⁴ The covenantal obligations can be summarised as the duty to :³⁵

- to respond in obedience to God's sovereign love (Exodus 24:3,7): that is to

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) p. 283.

³⁰ "You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20: 3 – 5.
See: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 283 – 296.

³¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 296.

³² Exodus 34: 6 -7a.

³³ Other references: Jer. 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23,27.

³⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 297.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 420. Brueggemann maintains that obedience to the one who loves is an appropriate response to self giving love, and does not detract from the gift (i.e. the gratuité of the giver) , thereby making no distinction between conditional and unconditional covenants.

take seriously the relationship offered and to respond in love to the self giving love of God. This involves acknowledging the sovereignty of God, the binding nature of one's own promise of fidelity, as well as the affective aspect of the desiring heart. Obedience is not seen as something negative but a fulfilling of one's own person-hood as someone who lives by, for and from God's freedom and passion.³⁶ All of this involves staying with the risk of relationship.

- to love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10: 19): that is to be obedient to and desirous of doing the purposes of God – to do justice and so to care for the well being of all members of the community and to be open and inclusive of the stranger.³⁷ This justice implies a preoccupation with the welfare of the other inclusive of the exercise of public power for the sake of the other.³⁸
- to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 19: 2-4) : that is to come into the Presence of God, and to abide in his Presence. This obligation obliges the partner of God to devote the whole of his life to the will and purpose of God and to live in such a way that he is ready and able to be in the presence of God. This is to live a life of communion.

Brueggemann notes that these two activities of 'doing justice' and 'being in the presence of God' are not necessarily complementary as they relate to the two characteristics of God that seem to stand in tension to one another: God's 'faithful sovereignty' is for his own life (holiness) and his 'sovereign faithfulness' is for the world, for others (justice).³⁹ However, Brueggemann suggests that the attitudinal

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 420 -1.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 422.

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 424.

³⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.429.

quality of integrity aligns these two modes of being in relationship with God.⁴⁰ Such integrity demands that life is lived intentionally with God, who is the ultimate focus. It is the “acceptance of the reality of God as the horizon, limit and centre of communal imagination.”⁴¹

Covenant also has consequences for God. God is the sovereign one; he has initiated the covenant, and in the face of a breach of faith has the right and potential to withdraw from and terminate the covenant. Brueggemann, tracing the story of the relationship of God with Israel in the texts of the Old Testament, recounts how in fact God, acting out of the passion of his love for Israel and being moved, responds with tenderness and compassion even at the cost of his own self regard.⁴² This pathos of passion witnesses to the choice of God to 'suffer with' his people.⁴³ This expression of compassion highlights an important characteristic of this covenantal relationship, the fact that both parties consent to put themselves at risk. Whilst the bond of the covenant signifies intent, either party is free to choose to act otherwise. This covenant is not one of compulsion nor violently enforceable, but in the choice to turn away the people of Israel deny their own deepest identity, that is to be for, with and from God. Brueggemann notes however that the Old Testament does not resolve the tension between sovereignty and fidelity, and that it is in the New Testament and Christian tradition that we find a complete identification of God's sovereignty and God's faithful love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 429 -30.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 445.

⁴² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 297 – 300 : the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah speak vividly of the response of God in the face of the betrayal of Israel. He chose not to end the relationship with Israel in the passion of anger/jealousy but to 'suffer with' and in this solidarity with Israel to sustain the relationship which rightfully could be terminated.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.302 : Brueggemann notes here that this radical decision on the part of God for covenantal solidarity and the emergence of pathos is an important statement about God. Whilst the Old Testament does not take the step of incarnation, (as witnessed in the God of the New Testament, where in the person of Jesus God came to be fully and personally engaged in the life of the world) one might argue that the seeds of this are already present in the Jewish witness to the character of God.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.311: He notes that this complete identification

2. The surprising consequences of covenant: being human

In the exploration of covenant above I have not separated out the consequences of covenant for the people of Israel and the individual, both of whom are covenantal partners, because of wanting to concentrate on the relational aspect of covenant. However it is evident that no individual is autonomous and all are contingent on both God and others for life. The relationship and difference between the corporate and the personal is nonetheless important. In this section, following Brueggemann, I will identify important characteristics of this covenantal relationship and the implications for an understanding of being human.⁴⁵

Fundamental to any understanding of what it is to be human is the act of creation. The Bible affirms that God is at the origin of human life, and therefore to be human is to be “grounded in Another”,⁴⁶ who initiates person-hood and who “stays bound to people in loyal ways for their well being.”⁴⁷ Humankind is therefore dependent on this Other for all their needs. The Bible furthermore claims that this Other is a specific God, known to us by name and into whose history we have been invited. Such a perception of what it is to be human stands at odds with much of modern ideology where the referent point is self rather than Another, where it is believed that we are the originators of our lives, and the source of our own well-being. In this understanding the self is the essential unit of meaning and to be free is to be self contained.⁴⁸ There is no room here for dependency nor obedience to an outside authority. This self understanding excludes and denies person-hood to people

can be found in the crucifixion where God embraces the abandonment of a broken covenant, but identifies difficulties and dangers with a too easy triumphalism. The major danger being that the present reality of a broken world is denied in the face of a the salvation wrought by the death and resurrection of Christ. [Cf; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God : The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1974)]

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp.150 -166.

⁴⁶ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.151.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.151.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp.153 – 4.

living with profound learning disabilities where dependency is inbuilt. It also refuses to face the contingency of life and therefore the fact of death.

Brueggemann identifies four specific claims about the actions of this Other One towards humankind, and six actions by humankind which are appropriate responses to God's initiative.

a. The actions of the covenant making Other

- That only God has the will and capacity to 'make real newness' and that this 'newness' in our lives as human beings is always gift, a gift that transforms.⁴⁹ And that it is this gift giving that makes it possible for us to give gifts to one another, which in their turn brings newness (James 1: 17).
- That the way of covenant making and of gift is through speech.⁵⁰ God's creation is made by God's word, as for example Israel is formed as a people by the call of God. God is not an object to be attained, had, realised by human kind but is a subject, and active agent. God as subject addresses another whom he calls into being by addressing him. The covenant making word of God is also a creating word. When God speaks his words are words of promise, a vow of fidelity: "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isaiah 43: 5); they are words of claiming through which He calls the other to be His people, servant, heir or child.
- That God is faithful to the other. He is committed in relationship. The covenant making word of God brings the other into being and in so doing gives him identity, that is as someone who is in relationship to God.⁵¹ For example God not only says, "I will be with you" but adds "And you shall be my people." Therefore in the bible to be a person means to be in

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.153.

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.154.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.155.

relationship to this Other, that is to belong to, for and with the Other. Covenant is contrary to any notion of human autonomy, instead it is this very binding that gives life and sets free (Rom.10: 1-13).

- That God re-defines human life and is an active agent on our behalf.⁵² In the making of the covenant God addresses human kind, and honours his freedom of choice. Furthermore in this new situation of relationship God acts for our well being, as seen in Jesus' message to John the Baptist : “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news brought to them.”⁵³

b. Six appropriate responses to God's initiative towards humankind

- i. To live in hope, that is to live trusting God's promises and to believe that nothing is outside his loving care, including death;⁵⁴
- ii. To listen to the One who speaks, and so to conceded that we are subject to Another, who legitimately addresses us by name and tells us who we are.⁵⁵ To listen seriously demands that we yield to the other, that we are at the disposal of the other and that we let our life be shaped by the other. This is a decision to live by grace.
- iii. To answer obediently through doing justice, and acting righteously with loyalty and graciousness.⁵⁶ In this way humankind will attain the maturity Paul talks of in Ephesians 4:13, that is to live a life toward this Other One in gratitude and awe.
- iv. To rage and protest against God and so to be a conversational partner.⁵⁷

⁵² Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.156 - 7.

⁵³ Luke 7: 22.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.157.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.157 – 8.

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.158.

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.158 - 9.

Such rage and protest acknowledges the parity of the covenantal partners and takes seriously the trustworthiness of a relationship with the One who has the power to make all things new.

- v. To grieve trusting the One who has the power to change.⁵⁸ Grief is the process of facing loss and hurt face on. Such hope-filled-grief is in contrast with denial and self- deception.
- vi. To praise God and to surrender oneself spontaneously and gratefully to the Other, the faithful covenantal partner.⁵⁹

c. Implications for our understanding of who we are and the purpose of our lives⁶⁰

Through the perspective of the covenant as revealed to us through the Bible it is clear that our identity is given to us by God. We are not able to create this for ourselves from within our own resources. The God of covenant not only calls us into being but also shapes our way of being in the world. To be human is to have a vocation, a calling to fulfill the purposes, the desires of God, just as for example the people of Israel were called to be God's people (Exodus 4: 22). As Brueggemann says, “The dynamic of being human is between the One who calls and the one who is called. And the agenda between them is a calling.”⁶¹ Vocation (calling) is about the fact that the purpose of our being in the world is related to the purposes of God. The promise of love, the covenant between God and humankind, is a bonding that sets us free to be who we are. The doing of God's purposes in the world (to do justice and to be holy; to love as we have been loved) can be understood as mission, or service.

⁵⁸ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.159.

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.159.

⁶⁰ The insights in this section are drawn directly from Brueggemann's analysis in Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp. 161-165.

⁶¹ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 162.

Life experience also tells us that we do not necessarily accept the gifts and proscriptions of covenantal living. Maturity, as spoken of in Ephesians 4:13 and Philippians 3:15, is about working out in our lives in free ways the givenness of God's purpose in our lives.⁶² However to refuse or resist this vocation is to turn in on oneself and to pretend that the centre of existence lies within oneself and that one can shape one's own destiny. In the language of the Bible this is a choice for death.⁶³

Furthermore as the covenant is about the relationship of love between God and humankind, it is by its nature precarious, a “dangerous freedom.”⁶⁴ In any true relationship there are two subjects who address one another and the bond between these two subjects is one of trust and faithfulness, and not of control. Neither party is free to exercise their freedom without taking into account the other party, and yet the very action of the other re-defines the reality of the other covenantal partner. They are vulnerable to one another. The other can be trusted but cannot be controlled. Key to the covenant with God is that one believes that God can be trusted, but that is a conviction and not a proof. In fact to demand proof would be to deny the other the freedom of his person-hood, that is to be someone who by nature belongs to, for and with the other. Furthermore it reduces the covenant to a bargain. And once the relationship has become a bargain there is no basis for hoping, listening, answering obediently, raging, grieving and praising, that is there is no basis for the actions that make us human.

3. Covenant as friendship with God and with one another (Jean Vanier)

Covenant is at the heart of Vanier's theology. His understanding and experience of covenant with God and with his brothers and sisters in L'Arche is centred in the

⁶² Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 162.

⁶³ Deut.30: 15-20.

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p.163.

person of Jesus, whom he calls the “wound of love”. The shape and nature of covenant begins and ends in vulnerability.⁶⁵ The choice to be in relationship is for both parties a risky business. The covenant made manifest in the life death and resurrection of Jesus is characterised by his relationship with his Father and his friendship with his disciples. This friendship is the mutual indwelling referred to in the Gospel of John and bears the imprint of vulnerability.⁶⁶

Vanier's reflections on the Gospel of John⁶⁷ are an exploration of how God fulfills his covenant in and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and the consequences for humankind both personally and corporately.⁶⁸ He speaks of the covenant⁶⁹ as a personal relationship with Jesus⁷⁰, as a corporate relationship between the community and Jesus,⁷¹ as a personal relationship between specific individuals and as the relationship between the community and individuals.⁷² In all these expressions of covenant the initiative lies with God, in as much as the relationship can only be understood as covenantal if it begins and ends in an encounter with God.⁷³

a. Keys to the Vanier's theology of covenant

The following passages from Vanier's witness to his life in L'Arche with people with a learning disability are keys to his theology of covenant.⁷⁴ In these quotations we

⁶⁵ 'Vulnerability' is a word frequently used by Vanier. I am understanding his usage as indicating the consequence of being open towards another, that is loving gratuitously, in the hope of a response of gratuitous love but without the surety of this love being reciprocated, thereby being exposed to the refusal of one's love and the experience of not being loved by the other. Therefore vulnerability is a precursor of both joy and pain.

⁶⁶ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 127, 272.

⁶⁷ Vanier, *Drawn in the Mystery*.

⁶⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 256- 257.

⁶⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 94 - commenting on John 15: 9a, 12.

⁷⁰ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 142.

⁷¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 102 -103.

⁷² “When we know our people, we also realise that we need them, that they and we are interdependent; they open our hearts and call us to love. We are not better than they are – we are there together, for each other. We are united in the covenant that flows from the covenant between God and his people, God and the poorest.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95.

⁷³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 61.

⁷⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*.

hear the language of the covenant (as explored earlier).

- i. Covenant as: justice; caring for the well being of the other; hospitality to the weak and the stranger; fidelity and enduring loyalty; intention; belonging, being with; exile and home coming :

When I welcomed those two men from an asylum, I knew it was for life; it would have been impossible to create bonds with them and then send them back to a hospital, or anywhere else. My purpose in starting L'Arche was to found a family, a community with and for those who are weak and poor because of a mental handicap and who feel alone and abandoned.⁷⁵

- ii. Covenant as: response to the suffering cry of the the specific other for tender intimacy and communion; transformation and the irruption of new life; the gift of person-hood and identity:

The cry of Raphael and Philippe was for love, for respect and friendship; it was for true communion [...] Their cry for love awoke within my heart and called forth from me living waters; they made me discover within my own being a well, a fountain of life.⁷⁶

- iii. Covenant as: Jesus, the revelation and embodiment of covenant, the initiative of God's Love in each of our lives; relational vulnerability; personal and corporate; God's presence to us as we are present to each other; being at the disposal of the other; living with and indwelling; God both hidden and revealed:

Jesus reveals an even greater unity between the personal contemplation of the Eternal and the personal relationship and bonding with people who are broken and rejected. This is perhaps the great secret of the Gospels and of the heart of Christ. Jesus calls his disciples not only to serve the poor but to discover in them his real presence, a meeting with the Father. Jesus tells us that he is hidden in the face of the poor, that he is in fact the poor. [...] To live with the poor is to live

⁷⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.97.

⁷⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

with Jesus; to live with Jesus is to live with the poor (cf. Matt.25).⁷⁷

- iv. Covenant as: vocation; expression of God's love as encompassing all of human reality ; the experience of human parity as people who both love and fail in their response to God's love; mutuality and interdependence:

If this call for love awakens compassion in the hearts of those around them, their fears and anguish and inner pain can also awaken fears and the inner pain in those who hear the cry. [...] In L'Arche, many assistants have felt this inner pain which can provoke anger and even hatred for the weaker person; it is terrible when one feels surging up inside oneself the powers of darkness and of hate. [...] they discover in their own brokenness, that they are truly brothers and sisters with the people they came to serve. They discover too that Jesus is not only hidden in the poor around them, but in the poor person within their own being.⁷⁸

The community of L'Arche is a particular working out of God's covenant in and through the lives of people with learning disabilities. It is a place where the cry of the poor is heard, and where in the act of being attentive to the other each person can discover within his/her own being “a well, a fountain of life”,⁷⁹ and the fecundity of divine love.⁸⁰ The discovery of compassion for the other also enables the recognition within oneself of the forces of death, and one's own cry for and dependence on God's promise of faithful and redemptive love.

b. The person of Jesus is the covenant

In the first section of this chapter, we saw how there seemed to be an ongoing tension between the sovereignty of God and his faithful love, and that the two

⁷⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95.

⁷⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 99.

⁷⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.97.

⁸⁰ Brian Brock “Supererogation and the Riskiness of Human Vulnerability”: ed. Hans S Reinders, *The Paradox of Disability*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010) p. 137.

covenantal responses of 'doing justice' and 'being holy' were likewise not necessarily complementary. Brueggemann suggested that the attitudinal quality of integrity would align these two modes of being in relationship with God and that such integrity demands that life is lived intentionally with God as the ultimate focus – “the horizon, limit and centre of communal imagination.”⁸¹

In the New Testament and the Christian tradition this paradox finds both expression and resolution in the person of Jesus. In obedience to his own sovereign nature as self giving love (communion) and his desire to be in intimate relationship with humankind, God takes the initiative and draws ever nearer in the gift of his Son, Jesus.⁸² In Jesus, as both God and man, we witness a life lived intentionally with God, his Father, and a life lived in fulfillment of God's desire to love humankind to the end.

The very life, death and resurrection of Jesus bring into being a new understanding of God's total and radical commitment to his promise to love faithfully. It also brings new understanding to the vocation of being human, and therefore a fundamental reappraisal of the “communal imagination”.⁸³ God has expressed his covenantal obligation in a way which redefines the understanding of

⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 429 – 430.

⁸² John 3: 16.

⁸³ “The quest for the eternal, all-beautiful, all-true, all-pure, and the quest to be close to the poor and most broken people appear to be so contradictory. And yet, in the broken heart of Christ, these two quests are united. Jesus reveals to us that he loves his Father, and is intimately linked to him; at the same time he is himself in love with each person and in a particular way with the most broken, the most suffering and the the most rejected. To manifest this love, Jesus himself becomes broken and rejected, a man of sorrows and of anguish and of tears; he became the Crucified One. And so communities formed in his name will seek communion with the Father through him and in him; they will also seek to bring good news to the poor, and liberation to the oppressed and the imprisoned.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 93.
(cf: Walter Brueggemann, “The practice of homefulness”, *Church and Society*, (May/June 12, 2001). Citing Jeremiah 22:16: “ He judged the cause of the poor and needy, then it was well. Is not this to know me?”, Brueggemann observes that this text reveals a knowing of God (being holy) in terms of social practice (doing justice). The two phrases are not sequential and therefore indicative of cause and effect but synonymous. He comments, “Caring for the poor and the needy is equivalent to knowing Yahweh. That is who Yahweh is and how he is known. Yahweh is indeed a mode of social practice and form of social relation.” Such a reading would be consistent with the nature of God as understood through the lens of the life of Jesus in the New Testament, but not necessarily justified in the body of Hebrew Scripture.)

both God and of humanity.⁸⁴ It shifts our understanding of the ways in which we can fulfil our covenantal obligations not only to God but also to one another.

c. Embodiment of vulnerable love

“The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.”⁸⁵

Jesus is the embodiment of the covenant: he is faithful love (passionate desiring to be in communion); he is holy (the presence of God) and he is justice (giving and ensuring the well-being/ life of the other). The intimacy of loving and being loved, of the covenantal relationship between God and man is united in Jesus.⁸⁶ He is the incarnation of God's promise to be present: word made flesh. The life of Jesus was centred in both his relationship with God, his Father, and with those amongst whom he dwelt and called to be his friends. The consequence of Jesus' relationship with humankind is the invitation to and possibility of communion with God, a life of indwelling by and in God. Human life is therefore shaped and defined by this Other, made known in the person of Jesus, who calls us into the new identity of the beloved.

The Word became flesh in Mary's womb in order to reveal God as friend, and beloved. In this act of vulnerability he came to invite us to participate in communion, compassion and the ecstasy he lives with his Father. The mission of

⁸⁴ “The barriers that separated the finite from the Infinite, the temporal from the eternal, the human from the divine, have disappeared [...] God has appeared in the flesh, has become vulnerable in the flesh. He has come to offer us his friendship, to invite us to become his beloved. He has become little and vulnerable, to live a communion of hearts with us and to join him in giving life to others.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.275.

⁸⁵ John 1,14.

⁸⁶ “ All that Jesus is and does is for the glory of the Father, All he does reveals who God is: an incredible Lover.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 219.

Jesus was to lead humankind to communion with God.⁸⁷ This participation in the intimate life of God has been made possible through the gift of Jesus.⁸⁸ He has both revealed and embodied the life of communion with the Father.⁸⁹ In Jesus the vocation of being human is therefore defined as participation in the life of God, a life of communion because God longs to be one with us and to make his home in us. This indwelling is consensual. It is a relationship that has its origin and end in another. Jesus' relationship with the Father is “the source of our relationship with him”.⁹⁰ This is the model of relationship that Jesus proposes and enables in our lives with one another. Relationships that come from him and lead us back to him, and are not closed in on themselves, but constantly opening out to others.

The location of the covenant is in the body of Jesus, and this fact gives new significance to our own bodies, and to humanity as one body.⁹¹ For Vanier this is the extraordinary good news – that in our bodies, that is in time and space,⁹² and in all that is limited (for our bodies are indicative of limit, otherness, difference, change and mortality),⁹³ God has made his home.⁹⁴ Just as Jesus announced that his body is the new temple, the dwelling place of God,⁹⁵ and the place of encounter with God, so too are our bodies.⁹⁶ The way to God is through not despite our humanity.⁹⁷ We can

⁸⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 90.

⁸⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 257.

⁸⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 59.

⁹⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 129.

⁹¹ “We are all bonded into one body, the body of humanity, which ever since the Word became flesh and one of us, is the Body of Christ.” : Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.103.

“His body is the body of God and gives meaning to the body of each person;

all who see and touch his body,

or who are in communion with him through his body,

see and touch God.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 256.

⁹² “Jesus is at the heart of history

the centre of humankind drawing all people to the God of love.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 321. Vanier identifies that 'heart' as the moment of crucifixion, when Jesus is hanging between the other two men at Golgotha, the place of the skull.

⁹³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 20.

⁹⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 69.

⁹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:9.

⁹⁶ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 68 - 69.

⁹⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 257.

be a source of life and love for others. The promise of God, his dwelling with us,⁹⁸ his presence to us is made real in the now, not only in the time to come (eschaton);⁹⁹ his glory is revealed in human form and especially in the wounded heart of humankind.¹⁰⁰

d. The wound of loneliness: by his wounds you have been healed¹⁰¹

The deepest yearning of humankind is for the fulfillment of the promise of love - the thirst to be beloved, to love and to be loved.¹⁰² Loneliness is the deepest wound of the heart and is inherent in the human condition.¹⁰³ To be unloved or to feel that one is unable to love is a further suffering.

The Love of God is personal, and specific. In Jesus it is known in human form, and has a name and place in history. Thereby the historicity of being human, the fact of our lives, is honoured and valued. Jesus comes to bring new and eternal life (the very act of creation that is God's alone), through a personal relationship with each one.¹⁰⁴ He comes to all but he seeks out the one who "is no-one, with no name, who is nothing in the eyes of society,"¹⁰⁵ who is abandoned and excluded.¹⁰⁶ His compassion is such that in his death on a cross and descent into Hell he becomes the abandoned and excluded. The Love of God is to be found where there is brokenness and death. He is present to our refusal, our rejection, abandonment and

⁹⁸ Exodus 29: 45.

⁹⁹ This indwelling by God is called friendship by Vanier. He writes:

"In human friendship, the other person abides in us virtually, intentionally, spiritually, not with a real presence.

In friendship with Jesus, he abides in us, in a real presence." Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 273.

¹⁰⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 345.

¹⁰¹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 329.

¹⁰² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.59.

¹⁰³ Loneliness is the

"[...] total emptiness of a human heart, the final and absolute purification

in order to become the place where God resides." Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 289.

¹⁰⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁶ John 4 – the Samaritan woman; John 5 – the man in the asylum.

death.¹⁰⁷

Jesus desires to be in relationship with us, and to be in relationship is to be vulnerable to the other.¹⁰⁸ “Every time we enter into a relationship we take a risk.”¹⁰⁹ To love is to give oneself to the other, but there is neither surety of fidelity, nor foreknowledge of where the relationship will lead. For Jesus it meant being led to the crucifixion. It demands that we accept not to control the other but to become vulnerable.¹¹⁰ The dynamic of relationship is based in trust.¹¹¹ In the terms of the biblical witness this way of being in relationship might be described as the duty to welcome the stranger.¹¹²

The notion of being a stranger only has meaning if there is a prior expectation of relatedness. Firstly to be a stranger is to be estranged from the sources of life and love. When I refuse or deny God, when I turn in on myself and seek to be my own source of life then I am not in relationship with the One who gives me life and identity. This is the path of death. The causes of the estrangement are diverse, but often have a primary source in the lack of having been loved by the other.¹¹³

Secondly, this strangeness (which is the very fact of being unique) is a double edged sword. The strangeness of the other, (and for Vanier, none is seen as more strange, more different and more vulnerable than the person living with profound learning disabilities), can be a source of fear and a cause of rejection and abandonment. The cycle of fear and rejection is a vicious cycle, and the weakest are

¹⁰⁷ Vanier says that loneliness is the “total emptiness of a human heart, the final and absolute purification in order to become the place where God resides.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 289.

¹⁰⁸ Jesus “affirms a new path that involves risk, insecurity, vulnerability [...]” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 77.

¹¹¹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 83.

¹¹² Deut. 10: 17-18; Luke 10: 29-39.

¹¹³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 13-14.

most vulnerable. It is this very cycle of death that Jesus came to break.¹¹⁴ He became on the cross ultimate suffering and vulnerability. Hung between two others at the place of the skull (Golgotha), he is at the heart of history, the centre of humankind.¹¹⁵ God is literally present in the heart of our human brokenness, where we are most abandoned, rejected, and suffering, where we abandon and reject most. He is with us. God's promise of love embraces our failed response, our broken covenant.

As heard in the quotations at the beginning of this section, Vanier points to the mysterious way in which Jesus is present in the wound of our hearts and how this wound, this death can become a source of life,¹¹⁶ and fecund.¹¹⁷ The water flowing from the side of the crucified Jesus is the sign of new life, the gift of God's life, the gift of the Spirit ;¹¹⁸ “the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way, is living at the centre of the wound”.¹¹⁹ God is hidden in the heart of our wound and is present to us 'face to face' in the face of the other.¹²⁰ This is the particular gift of the person with a learning disability, who in their deeply human cry to be loved, and in who he/she is for and in God, reveals this extraordinary truth. Their presence makes known the presence of God.¹²¹

This gift is given to all who are willing to receive it. When Jesus appeared to Thomas, he made known to us that through his wounds we are healed (cf: Is.53:5). Vanier writes that this encounter with Thomas is a model and an invitation

¹¹⁴ Jean Vanier, *The transforming power of people with disabilities*, unpublished talk given in Zurich 2009. In the opening paragraph of this talk Vanier refers to the words of Adam, “I was frightened because I am naked and so I hid.” Genesis 3: 10. This is the fear and the nakedness we try to hide and from which Jesus came to set us free. Jesus naked on the cross 'the naked King' is both the ultimate vulnerability and identification with this nakedness. It is through the cross that it is transfigured and so becomes a source of life. Cf. Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 322 -324.

¹¹⁵ Vanier, *Drawn to the Mystery*, p. 321.

¹¹⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

¹¹⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95.

¹¹⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 328 -329.

¹¹⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 140.

¹²⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.299.

¹²¹ 1 Corinthians 1: 27-28.

for our lives today.¹²² We too can meet Jesus in the estrangement and wounds of our own hearts, and these very wounds can become a sign of God's loving presence and forgiveness.¹²³ This gift is also given to all who are ready to encounter God in the wounded other, who “in their vulnerability [...] like Jesus, are begging for our hearts and our friendship”.¹²⁴ Our lives together are a working out of the mystery of the wounds that heal.¹²⁵

e. Covenanted to one another: friendship as communion with God

God's promise of faithful love, his covenant with humankind, is given body in Jesus, whose life task was to lead humanity into the 'womb' of the Father, to bring them home by making home in them (John 15: 9 -10).¹²⁶ The journey of communion is by the road of death. We are called to grow in union with God and this demands the loss of, the dying to all that separates us. It is only at the time of our death that we will live the final birth into the heart of the Trinity.¹²⁷

We are invited to be friends of Jesus, and as Jesus is a friend of each of us to be friends of one another. In him the covenantal obligation to enact justice in our care for the well-being of the widow, the orphan and the stranger, that is to love our neighbour as ourself, is redefined. He commands that we “love one another as he has loved” us (John 13: 34). We are commanded to love the other as Jesus loves us.¹²⁸

As we welcome Jesus (enter into a personal relationship with Jesus and receive his

¹²² John, 20: 26 – 29.

¹²³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 203. Referring to John 11: 38 -44; and Ezekiel 37: 12,14.

¹²⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.239.

¹²⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 345-6.

¹²⁶ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 287.

¹²⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 287.

¹²⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.297 & Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.94. Vanier by implication could be read to be saying that to love as Jesus loves is in effect to be Jesus for the other.

cf: “From little children they will become friends of Jesus; more than that, they will become Jesus and the Temple of God.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 251.

loving of us), so we are able to welcome the other; as we welcome the other we “will be one in God and with and in each other.”¹²⁹ The union with God creates a new unity between humankind. God's promise to be with and for humankind is made good in our lives and relationships.¹³⁰ We are responsible for giving home to one another and therefore to God. The experience of covenantal love is to be found where there is both compassionate responsibility for the other, a responsibility that carries the other in his/her suffering and growth towards liberation, and the recognition and acceptance of the need to be carried and loved by this other.¹³¹ This reveals the necessity of vulnerability and interdependence. The 'Broken One' is present at the heart of God, and at the heart of our broken relation with him and with one another. God is present at the heart of what it is to be human: one who is in need of love. This pattern of a life of relationship, trust, and the conversation of love finds origin in the life of the Trinity.¹³²

Holiness, as abiding in the presence of God and justice, as loving kindness that gives life to the other, become one and the same act. The promise of love is embodied love, a love that is not distant but dwells in us. God is present not only in the life to come but in the facts of our life on earth and together. This is known in the life of Jesus and in his ongoing presence through the Spirit in our acts of loving kindness towards one another, and in the mutual indwelling which is the character of the love of God.¹³³

The covenant of God in Jesus, the fulfillment of the promise of love, sets us free to become who we are, that is people who together are called to fulfill the

¹²⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 297; Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 94.

¹³⁰ Matthew 25: 34- 45.

¹³¹ “It is a vulnerable God who comes as a beggar, asking us for help. It is he the Broken One who will awaken us in love and gives us new life.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 96.

¹³² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 59.

¹³³ Commenting on John 15: 9 -10: Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 273.

purposes and desires of God. In participating in the life of God as made known in Jesus, we are therefore called to “communicate this life to others”.¹³⁴ This is God's life and therefore it is humankind's mission.¹³⁵

The face of God has been revealed in Jesus, and we see this face in one another, when we 'love as he loved us.'¹³⁶ We are invited to become friends with Jesus through mutual indwelling. Jesus waits for us to accept this friendship, and so to be friends with one another.¹³⁷ The source of this friendship with Jesus is the union between him and his Father (John 17: 21-24); it “flows from the communion that is God.”¹³⁸

The paradigm of this call to friendship with Jesus is revealed in the washing of the feet.¹³⁹ “It is a gesture that creates and expresses a communion of hearts.”¹⁴⁰ Vanier also sees this as the paradigm of the life in the communities of L'Arche.¹⁴¹ It is “an intense moment of communion through the body”.¹⁴² Jesus embodies his words, his message – that he will love them “to the end” (John 13:1). In this action Jesus reveals what it is to be his friend. He takes the initiative, and kneels before each of them as one who is humble, and who in yielding welcomes the difference of the other. This is a gesture of hospitality and vulnerability. He takes off his outer garment, his clothing of status and difference. This is an act of intimacy, a sign that he is at home with his friends, and that he lays aside all that prevents communion. Later others refuse his invitation to communion and take the initiative to strip him of

¹³⁴ Vanier, *Drawn to the Mystery*, p. 95.

¹³⁵ “[...] to give life, eternal life,
and to reveal the face and heart of God to people.
It is to be a presence of God in the world,
where there is an absence of God.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 257.

¹³⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95.

¹³⁷ Revelations 3:20.

¹³⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 273.

¹³⁹ John 13: 3-17.

¹⁴⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 231.

¹⁴¹ Jean Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997)

¹⁴² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 231.

his clothing, and so render him vulnerable through acts of violence that are depersonalising and bring death. There is a vulnerability that is life giving and a vulnerability that brings death.

In his interaction with Peter Jesus says clearly that to be faithful to the covenant, that is to becoming his friend, it is essential to let one's feet be washed, to allow oneself to be loved, and to receive life from the other. In washing the feet of his friends he invites us to honour those who are the weakest and poorest (1 Corinthians 12: 22 -27), and that which is broken within ourselves; and to see therein the presence of God, the Father.¹⁴³ Washing is an act of cleansing, of forgiveness, of removing what prevents communion and the giving of new life. In Jesus' command to his friends to wash the feet of one another and to love as he has loved them, he indicates the new shape of the covenantal obligations.

f. “He loved them to the end.”¹⁴⁴ One with God and one with each other

Jesus not only invites us to be his friend but 'is friend' to his disciples and embodies what this friendship would look like in the intimate gesture of the washing of their feet. This is the shape of a 'relationship that matter intensely to both parties'. This is the shape of the relationship God has with us. In the doing of this for one another, as Jesus commands us (John 13: 14-17), we fulfill our covenantal obligations to do justice and to be holy. We will furthermore be 'blessed', that is be close to God, live in his presence and become like him.¹⁴⁵ In living out the beatitudes, we become like Christ – are “clothed in Christ” (Galat. 3:27)¹⁴⁶ and just as the Father and the Son are one so Christ is one in us.¹⁴⁷ However this action is set in the context of totality: “He

¹⁴³ Jesus sees in each of disciples “a presence of His Father, whom he loves and respects.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 233.

¹⁴⁴ John 13: 1.

¹⁴⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 239.

¹⁴⁶ Vanier, *The Scandal*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 298.

loved them to the end.” It was in his death, the surrender of his life and in his complete trust in the promise of the Father's love for him, that humankind was set free. Commenting on John 17 Vanier indicates this was the completion of what it means for God to love humankind, the end to which the life of Jesus was leading.¹⁴⁸

Vanier traces the path of growth into union with God. Friendship with Jesus commands friendship with one another, which involves both service and the gift of life and becoming “one with each other as the Father, and the Son are one in the Spirit”.¹⁴⁹ This is a unity which cannot be achieved by human means. The friends of Jesus are “together, one in God, because God is in them”.¹⁵⁰ This unity is 'achieved' in the death and resurrection of Jesus,¹⁵¹ and the sending of the Spirit, who answers our cry and does the work of God in and through us.¹⁵² Vanier uses the imagery of the friendship of lovers and of the wedding feast of love to describe this love which honours and delights in the other including all that is different, in which each gives and receives, and where “each is a delight for the other because in each one is seen the face of God”.¹⁵³

Vanier identifies as the paradigm of this covenant between people, which arises from the covenant gifted by God, the interaction between Jesus, Mary and John at the foot of the cross. The covenant is born of vulnerability. The last gesture

¹⁴⁸ “It is no longer God descending into flesh,
but the flesh of humanity ascending into God
It is no longer the Word who becomes a human being,
but human beings transformed into God.
All is complete.
The Word of God came from God,
and now returns to God,
with all his friends, brothers and sisters in humanity united together.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 292.

¹⁴⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 298. Vanier commenting on John 17.

¹⁵⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 298.

¹⁵¹ “Unity does not come from the acceptance of external structures, or laws, dogmas, or ways of worship. It surges up from a life that flows from within us and through us all together. It is hearts and minds bonded together because they are bonded in communion with Jesus.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 302.

¹⁵² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery* p. 259.

¹⁵³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 299.

of Jesus towards his friends as he died on the cross was to “bring Mary and John into oneness as he and the Father are one, to create a covenant of love between them.”¹⁵⁴ This act is both final and originary. Even at the point of death something new is born.¹⁵⁵

g. The humble love of Jesus is the glory of God: holiness and presence¹⁵⁶

Vanier identifies the glory of God as the majesty, power, wisdom and infinity of God, manifest in God's unique capacity to 'make new' as in creation, in the awe-filled events of history (such as seen in the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15); the changing of water into wine (John 2) the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11), and in the resurrection of Jesus. He also underlines how God became 'small' so as to dwell in us, and to live in us so that life might be given through us and we might be transformed into himself. The humble love of Jesus is the glory of God.¹⁵⁷ We give glory to God when we recognise that all that is beautiful in us comes from God, and when through our words and gestures, and our lives together, we make known the humble and compassionate God. We become the glory of God when we are alive with the love of God.¹⁵⁸

Jesus prays that his followers might be holy (John 17: 17-19). This holiness is gifted to us. It is not something we can attain; it is given to us as we welcome the

¹⁵⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 325.

¹⁵⁵ “He says:

'Behold your mother.'

By giving his mother as the mother of the beloved disciple

Jesus is calling her to give life to the beloved disciple,

to bring Jesus to birth, as it were, within him,

so that the disciple may dwell in Jesus and Jesus in him.

And in the same gesture,

the beloved disciple is being called to become Jesus for his mother,
for she has only one son : Jesus.

Here is the supreme unity of love and communion.”

Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 325.

¹⁵⁶ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 294.

¹⁵⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 294.

¹⁵⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 294.

stranger, as we welcome the “Holy One who comes to dwell in us”.¹⁵⁹ Holiness is for all those who are “poor enough to welcome Jesus.”¹⁶⁰ The gap that separates the finite from the Infinite – that essential Otherness - is bridged as we welcome the one who cries out to us.

The covenantal obligation to be holy as God is holy requires the covenantal partner of God to come into the Presence of God, and to abide in his Presence.¹⁶¹ It obliges him/her to devote the whole of his/her life to the will and purpose of God and to live in such a way that he/she is ready and able to be in the presence of God. This is to live a life of communion as made known in Jesus. “As followers of Jesus, we are all called to be a presence of Jesus”, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶² Vanier witnesses that in responding to the cry of the poor, we come into the presence of Jesus, who responds to our own cry. In the person living with profound learning disabilities there is a cry for communion that opens up both himself and the other who responds to the healing presence of the love of God, and to communion with God.

Conclusion

Through reference to Brueggemann we have been able in this chapter to identify the fundamental characteristics of God's covenant with humankind – a promise of faithful and enduring love that honours the specific difference of God and humankind. This covenantal love is true to both the nature of God as creator, and the nature of humankind as created.

For Vanier God fulfils his promise of love in Jesus, a fulfilment that redefines the covenantal obligations of humankind. In Jesus' social practice (that is

¹⁵⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 295.

¹⁶⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 296.

¹⁶¹ Leviticus 19: 2-4.

¹⁶² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 343.

the covenantal obligation of justice as care for the well being of the other) becomes one with social relationship. Jesus inaugurates in his flesh a new dynamic of covenanted relationship. God's covenant with humankind is triangulated in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In becoming human Jesus, as God, opens up to humankind intimacy with God, the Father. The promise of love becomes a promise of communion and participation in the life of God. Jesus through his relationship with the Father is present to humankind through the Spirit. Our relationship with Jesus is the source of and potentiality of our relationships with one another. In Jesus we see how for God his relationship with humankind is 'a relationship that matters intensely for both parties.' We have seen how for Vanier this covenanted relationship:

- Matters: This relationship matters because it has consequences for God, for humankind, individuals and intentional community. This relationship is embodied in the Word become flesh and so has matter. It is located in time and space, and in the life and story of humanity with all that is life giving and thereby overcomes all that brings death. Embodiment defines and limits, yet these very limits are themselves the potentiality for more love. For Vanier the person with learning disabilities reminds us of the dependence and contingency of human nature as well as recalling the fact that the capacity to be in relationship is key to communion with God and one another. This capacity belongs to and is potential in all humankind. It is universal. Human life matters to God now. The fulfilment of the covenant in Jesus is the hope within which the promise of love is being realised now in our lives together in God;

- Intensely: God promises to love humankind 'to the end'. The covenantal promise, that God will be with us, is total in time and content. As witnessed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the love of God is passionate, both ardent and suffering – costing all. In our lives our love of God and one another demands a painful truthfulness. God's covenant embraces all that leads to death and the wounds of love can become in us a source of life. It is constituted by a vulnerability that costs (is hung on the cross). It is intent on the other, demanding attentive presence, integrity and commitment;
- Both: this relationship honours the sacredness and uniqueness of both covenantal parties. It needs and respects the difference of the other, just as in Jesus God is fully human and fully God with no confusion. This relationship is characterised by friendship and intimacy, as well as teaching and enabling us to deal with differences and conflict. The desire to be in a loving and liberating relationship can become mutual, and interdependent. The bonds of 'belonging are for becoming', for growth into the “stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). The imagery of covenantal relationship is of birth – the birthing process of the losing of oneself for the becoming of another – and of newness, the creation of new life;
- Parties: This covenant is known in the specific (in time and space), in particular and personal relationships, yet it also involves the recognition that whilst each is unique, we are united in our difference as one body and all the parts of the body are essential to the whole. Through Jesus humankind is invited into the life of the Trinity, a life of giving, and receiving; of communion, unity and abundant fecundity. The desire of God is presented in the metaphor of the wedding feast, which intimates the final

and to be longed for consummation of love in the heart of the Trinity. In Jesus union between God and man has been realised and humankind lives in the dynamic of this both yet to be and fulfilled promise.

Vanier acknowledges the gap, the ongoing fact of our broken obedience to the covenant with God and the working out of this covenant between ourselves. The Holy Saturday of 'waiting' is ever present, and witnessed in the vulnerable dependence of the person living with learning disability. The presence of God is both given and waiting to be given and received in our lives now. God, through the wounded and glorious Body of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, is present – as gift, now, and as presence - in the unfolding of our lives. Therefore God is both revealed and hidden. His is a love that is given without price except to himself. The condition, our covenantal obligation, is that we 'know' him through loving as he has loved us. This loving is realised in a life given for the other, a life where we listen and yield to the presence of the other and let ourselves be shaped by this other; a life lived by grace.

A significant characteristic of this covenant as revealed in Jesus is that it is vulnerable presence, and involves risk. This is the newness the life of Jesus gives, and is made known in the 'weakest and the poorest'.¹⁶³ The initiative lies always with God. It is through his loving gaze that we discover that we are beloved. This knowledge and experience of being loved by God enables us to turn to one another with a loving gaze. In the other we are invited to see the face of Jesus, the one who already loves us. Our commitment to one another in community is born of the trust and the hope that God is faithful and that these relationships, with all that is as yet broken, are the place wherein “ we will be reborn”.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ 1 Corinthians 1: 27-30.

¹⁶⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 75.

Vanier's theology of covenant is underpinned by the recognition that vulnerability is at the heart of our relationships with God and one another, and that there is a mysterious link between suffering, offering and the gift of life.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 155.

A Theology of Community

“Founded in forgiveness and completed in celebration”

In this chapter we shall look at how Vanier's theology of community is an essential development and embodiment of his theology of covenant. Community is the context in which humankind comes to know the covenant of God in their lives, and struggles to both realise the desire to love and be loved, and through relationships shaped by God's covenant, to fulfil their covenantal obligation to God. As Vanier says, “We are in community for each other, so that all of us can grow and uncover our wound before the infinite, so that Jesus can manifest himself through it.”¹⁶⁶ An examination of Vanier's theology of community as embodied and learned through his life with people with learning disabilities will help clarify the nature of community as lived in L'Arche, and provide an understanding of the underlying premises of covenantal living, and so help elucidate the discomfort, anomalies and question surrounding community and 'living with' as an essential characteristic of L'Arche. The chapter is divided into three parts – the first section giving a general overview, the second section detailing the specific character and narrative of community life lived with people with learning difficulties and its theological importance as understood by Vanier, and a conclusion.

1. General Overview

Jean Vanier began the first community of L'Arche in 1964 by welcoming two men with learning disabilities into a small house in France so that they might be at home

¹⁶⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 330.

together.¹⁶⁷ Whilst most of his writings speak of community, there are two particular texts in which he explores in greater detail the meaning of 'living in community' - *Community and Growth*, and *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*.¹⁶⁸ The first is an early work and a collection of short reflections based on his own experience of living in the community of L'Arche in France and accompanying the founding and evolution of other L'Arche communities throughout the world as well as accompaniment of individuals. The second text is the fruit of fifty years of "reflection, study, prayer and living in community."¹⁶⁹ In both of these texts we are able to trace the theological understanding and significance Vanier gives to being in a L'Arche community – where the historical reality of fallen relationships might be lived in the perspective of the hope that has already been realised in Jesus; where the mystical knowing of the beloved disciple John is enacted in the action of the fallen and forgiven Peter; where vocation and mission are united.¹⁷⁰

At the end of the Introduction to *Community and Growth* we are given a clue as to Vanier's underlying rationale for living in community - an "adventure which in the end is one of inner liberation - the freedom to love and be loved". He concludes with a quotation from John's Gospel 15:9,12-13 (a foundational text for Vanier) and comments on the relationship between the Love of God and love between 'brothers and sisters', and therefore what it is to be human.¹⁷¹ For Vanier a community is a sign of hope, a sign that we are loved by God; and the celebration of

¹⁶⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London:Darton, Longman, Todd 1979, revised 1989) p. 97.

¹⁶⁸ It is interesting to note the influence *Community and Growth* has had in traditional religious communities.

¹⁶⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*. p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp.355 -357.

¹⁷¹ "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love [...] This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." John 15: 9,12-13.

a life with God in and through our relationships with the poor ,with one another, and with the poor within ourselves.¹⁷²

Vanier states in the Introduction to *Community and Growth* that when he is speaking about community he is referring to “groupings of people who have left their own milieu to live with others under the same roof, and work from a new vision of human beings and their relationships with one another and with God”.¹⁷³ He notes that his “definition is a restricted one”.¹⁷⁴ He is not writing about an ideal but about the relationships and the narratives that happen between people,¹⁷⁵ in intentional residential communities, that is communities of intimacy and mission shaped by their relationship with Jesus.¹⁷⁶ Nonetheless he adds that much of what he writes could be applied equally to married life, or to non-residential communities where there are individuals deeply bonded to one another and where there is a commitment to regular encounter, shared mission and prayer.¹⁷⁷ Reviewing the history and evolution of the communities of L’Arche this has in fact been the experience. The communities have opened their doors to members who are non-residential, and married. This opening out of the original model is indicative of two underlying premises held by Vanier:

¹⁷² “We are all bonded into one body, the body of humanity which, ever since the Word became flesh and one of us, is the Body of Christ. We are called together in love and in compassion to be a witness and a sign of the waters flowing from the heart of God, calling all humanity to the Eternal wedding feast of Love. And we must remember that the waters are not just from the heavens and from the places of light, but also from the broken earth: gentle springs of living water are flowing from the broken bodies and hearts of the poor. We must learn to drink from them, for they bring us into the presence of the wounded and broken heart of Jesus, the Crucified One.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 103.

¹⁷³ Vanier *Community and Growth*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁴ Vanier *Community and Growth*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁵ “Community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and I. In community we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we would want them to be.” Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, (New York and Mahwah: NJ, Paulist Press 1992) p. 35.

¹⁷⁶ “I began L’Arche in 1964 in the desire to live the Gospel and to follow Jesus Christ more closely. Each day brings me new lessons on how much Christian life must grow in commitment to life in community, and on how much that life needs faith, the love of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit if it is to deepen. Everything I say about life in community in these pages is inspired by my faith in Jesus.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.10.

- that community is about the relationships between people and that the form and structure of the community must embody practices of sociality that serve this primary goal of communion;¹⁷⁸ and
- that community is always an invitation to “fecundity”,¹⁷⁹ to an inclusiveness and openness towards the other that reflects the intimacy and abundance of the Trinity.¹⁸⁰

Vanier explicitly links living in community with what it means to be human, that is to be “united to the Eternal”.¹⁸¹ It is the meeting place with God,¹⁸² and because he is specifically speaking of communities formed in the name of the “Crucified One”,¹⁸³ this meeting with God will be through and in Jesus and the poor.¹⁸⁴

2. Specific detail concerning the character and narrative of community

a. Word made flesh: Community as the Body of Christ

In the Wit lectures Vanier, explores the relationship between what we might call failed intimacy and life in community.¹⁸⁵ He looks at the life of Jesus as revealed in

¹⁷⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 108.

cf: the interesting work of Victor Turner concerning the relationship between “communitas” and “societas”, the former being the social experiences that bond people together in ways that are “anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct and non rational (though not irrational), I-Thou or Essential We relationships in Martin Buber's sense”, and the latter being structure that “holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions.”.

However it is communitas that is the whole, and contains the parts of societas. Both are necessary to human living. Communitas enables growth and societas conserves. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974) pp. 46 -47; and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

¹⁷⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery* pp. 98, 267.

¹⁸⁰ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 59.

¹⁸¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 99 – 100.

¹⁸² Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, p. 8.

¹⁸³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 93.

¹⁸⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95. [cf: Walter Brueggemann commenting on Jeremiah 22,16 “ This is an extraordinary text which shows how Yahweh is understood in terms of social practice [...] The two elements are not sequential, nor are they related as cause and effect. Rather the two phrases are synonymous . Caring for the poor and the needy is equivalent to knowing Yahweh. That is who Yahweh is and how Yahweh is known. Yahweh is indeed a mode of social practice and form of social relation.” Walter Brueggeman “The practice of homefulness” *Church and Society*, (May/June 2001: No.12)]

¹⁸⁵ In 1988 Jean Vanier delivered two lectures at the Divinity School, Harvard University thereby inaugurating the Harold M. Wit Lecture Series on 'Spiritual Life in the Contemporary Age' which were subsequently collated in book form: Jean Vanier *From Brokenness to Community* (New York

the Gospels and identifies three phases within the development of his relationship with his friends:

- Jesus calls people into deep intimate relationships of communion with himself. He looked at them; he loved them; he invited them to come and be with him and to enter a friendship with him. In the invitation he made it clear that if they entered this friendship and accepted his love then they would have to own their choice and accept the consequent loss of other possibilities. Therefore relationship implies choice and choice results both in joy and grief; (cf: commenting on Mark 10:21 Vanier notes that the invitation is “not primarily to generosity but to a meeting in love.”).¹⁸⁶
- Jesus invites those who have accepted this personal invitation to a relationship of communion to be a part of his community, to live with others who have also been called, and so to be friends with his friends. This choice involves even greater losses and grief because it is a place where all that is dark in our hearts, our jealousies, our rivalry, anger and violence are revealed to us; a place of pain because of the loss, conflict and death we experience. But it is also a place of resurrection.
- As soon as the community of disciples has been formed Jesus sends them out to “go and do the impossible” that is to liberate people from the demons of their fear, loneliness, hatred and egoism so that they too in their turn can love, heal and liberate others. This journey of liberation, and integration of the 'demons' is long and hard. To 'do the impossible' we have to become 'poor' so that we may experience the life of God flowing within us, and so that the life given through us flows from the heart of God.

and Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press 1992) pp.29 – 30.

¹⁸⁶ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, p. 71.

Vanier continues, “The mystery of community lies between the call of Jesus to communion with him, 'Come and be with me', and the sending off to announce the good news of love, to give life to other people.”¹⁸⁷ This 'between' is the story of Jesus, his life amongst us, a story of his love and our failure to respond, which can become the gateway to our salvation. What Jesus lives in his body including the relationship with the Father, we too are invited to live in our bodies, in the body of community. Therefore this life together is also a place of pain¹⁸⁸ even of death¹⁸⁹.

Whilst in the Wit lectures Vanier implies that these steps of personal intimacy with Jesus, a life of communion with others and the effecting of the mission, are sequential and so separate, the experience of life in a L'Arche community is witness to the fact that they are interdependent and interactive; that they are one and the same act. This points us to the heart of Vanier's theology of community and the spirituality of L'Arche¹⁹⁰ – the body as home to God.¹⁹¹ The body is the place of the revelation of God's ongoing love for humankind - “The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us,”¹⁹² and the Love of God is embodied through the Holy Spirit in mutual and intimate relationships between people, especially the 'poor'. Throughout the two texts we see Vanier insisting on the co-inherence of the history of humankind and the life of God,¹⁹³ a life of intimate interdependence, of encounter, of the exchange of life, and of becoming.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, p. 30.

¹⁸⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 84.

¹⁸⁹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 210 - 213.

¹⁹⁰ “The spirituality of L'Arche is manifested in the way we live with people who have handicaps and see Jesus in them. But a spirituality is always oriented to a mystical life; its finality is always a communion with Jesus and his Father in the Holy Spirit, and in the communion with brothers and sisters.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 110.

¹⁹¹ Vanier reflecting on John 2,13 – 22, the identification of Jesus of his own body as the temple, “his father's house”, and 1 Corinthians 6:19, comments: “We human beings are also called to be the home, the dwelling place of God.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 69.

¹⁹² *John 1:14*.

¹⁹³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 13, 256 – 7.

¹⁹⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.59, quoting from David Clark, *Yes to Life* (London, Fount 1987) p. 54.

b) Community: a response to the cry for Love and a home for our hearts

Vanier maintains that the deepest yearning in humankind is the thirst for communion - intimacy and union with the other.¹⁹⁵ This thirst for communion is constitutive of what it is to be human and is our fundamental need and therefore the source of all other needs and desires.¹⁹⁶ This longing to love and be loved would also appear to be constitutive of God as manifest in the life death and resurrection of Jesus, and the life of the Trinity.¹⁹⁷ The essential character of the Love of God is that it is for the sake of love, gratuitous, and not dependent on expectations being fulfilled, but nonetheless awaiting a response of love, that is a love that is likewise gratuitous.

When, however, as a small and dependent child this thirst for communion is not met then the heart is wounded, and this wound, unless countered by a strong experience of love, 'limits' the development of the child. In order to survive in the world the child buries the wound deep within and develops compensatory behaviours and defensive patterns of being in the world and of interaction with each other in order to protect and hide that which is vulnerable and desiring within us. When the person becomes an adult, the child within carries on yearning for communion and belonging, but it is a yearning shadowed with ambivalence about what this communion would mean; we are afraid to trust and make ourselves vulnerable to the other.¹⁹⁸

This 'deep wound', often manifest in loneliness, is within each of us, and we long for “an infinite and incarnate love that does not suppress liberty; that does not

¹⁹⁵ “[...] all she wants is loving touch and communion.”: Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

¹⁹⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 13.

¹⁹⁷ “[...] the communion that is God.” Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 273.

“And God created man and woman as a sign of the Trinity; he created them to be in communion, one with the other, in this way reflecting his Love. God yearns for communion to be a sign of this communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit: 'That they may be one, as the Father and I are one'. (John 17:11).” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp.13 -14.[Freud notes that there is a tendency to compulsively repeat the victimising situation until there is an experience that breaks the destructive cycle.]

manipulate us but gives freedom and creativity”.¹⁹⁹ It is in community that this wound is revealed to us and made vulnerable to healing. However we can only look at and accept this wound when we are “loved by God in an incredible way”,²⁰⁰ through an experience in prayer and through “the experience of being loved and accepted in community”.²⁰¹ The wounded body is the the location of our encounter with God, of healing and liberation.²⁰² Community, as the body of our relating and the place where the members of the community are “there for one another”, can become a place of response, revelation and belonging.²⁰³

The communities of L'Arche exist as a response to this cry for communion²⁰⁴ in people living with learning disabilities.²⁰⁵ The assistants are called to care not only for the physical well being of the person but to respond to the deeper cry for communion. This response is embodied in the daily acts of making home together, of taking care of the bodily needs of one another, through sharing meals, through 'wasting time' through grieving and celebrating together, through acts of gentle kindness.²⁰⁶ In being present to the cry of the other for love the hearts of the assistants are awakened with compassion,²⁰⁷ and as they begin to build relationships of trust they discover within themselves a 'fountain of love' and a 'capacity to give life'.²⁰⁸ Vanier speaks of this as a mystery of compassion – 'the

¹⁹⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 27.

²⁰⁰ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 27.

²⁰¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 27.

²⁰² “[...] the wound in all of us, and which we are all trying to flee, can become the place of meeting with God and with brothers and sisters; it can become the place of ecstasy and of eternal wedding feast. The loneliness and feeling of inferiority we are running away from become the place of liberation and salvation.” Vanier *Community and Growth*, p. 28.

²⁰³ “We are in community for each other, so that all of us can grow and uncover our wound before the Infinite, so that Jesus can manifest himself through it.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.330.

²⁰⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 92 – 93, where Vanier makes explicit reference to God hearing the suffering of his people, the people of Israel, remembering his covenant and actively responding to their cry (cf: Exodus 3: 7 – 8).

²⁰⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

²⁰⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 297 – 298.

²⁰⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 97 - 98.

²⁰⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 98.

sacrament of the poor.²⁰⁹ - for in the vulnerability of suffering, and of dependence there is a presence of Jesus.²¹⁰

c. Community as a place of encounter

The Identity Statement of the Federation of L'Arche states that “We are people with and without intellectual disabilities, sharing life in communities.”²¹¹ The structure of the shared life presupposes both presence and mutuality (which whilst honouring the differences of abilities and needs recognises the parity of longing for communion), and thus renders fertile the possibility of authentic encounter between two seemingly unequal parties.²¹² It is more than an emotive experience, for encounter is characterised by conversion, an experience that is radically life changing. Each party welcomes a newness into their life which has the potential for disruption, and which is given by the other. Therefore this encounter is precarious as it cannot be conditional and prescriptive of outcomes, and brings in its wake unexpected new life. This encounter, where new life is communicated between the assistant and the person with a learning disability, is definitional and central to the communities of L'Arche.

Vanier sees the account of the washing of the feet in John 13:1-17,²¹³ “an intense moment of communion through the body”,²¹⁴ as a paradigm for a life of mutual intimacy and transformation.²¹⁵ In this encounter Jesus takes the initiative (as is the story of God with humankind throughout the Scriptures). He loves the

²⁰⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 96.

²¹⁰ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 96.

²¹¹ Identity Statement of the Federation of L'Arche, approved by the General Assembly of L'Arche International, 2005 in Assisi.

²¹² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 127.

²¹³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 225, 230, 232 – 233.

²¹⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 231.

²¹⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 232.

disciples “to the end”,²¹⁶ and as Vanier comments “[...] he will love totally and unconditionally, giving life, his life.”²¹⁷ The depth of the encounter is to be found in the vulnerability with which the other welcomes the gift. In the initial refusal and then confusion of Peter's response Jesus reveals to us that encounter is marked by what is received rather than what is given.²¹⁸ Vanier commenting on the command of Jesus that his disciples do what he has done²¹⁹ notes that to “actually wash each other's feet can and does become a source of grace, a presence of Jesus”.²²⁰

d. Community as place of revelation

In this encounter with the vulnerable other, the person with a disability, is not seen as an object of care, but “rather as a source of life and communion”, as subject and an active agent in the life of the community.²²¹ This other, who in his dependence and suffering reveals his capacity to be a force of love in the heart of the other,²²² sets free the waters of life within the assistant.²²³

However the cry for love is also full of pain and anguish, the fear of being rejected, of not being lovable and whilst it can call forth love and compassion this same inner pain can awaken fear and inner pain in the other. The very life of the person with a disability (an unequivocal sign of otherness, difference and vulnerability) can bring the assistant face to face with the precariousness of his own life, and his own experiences of vulnerability, and contingency. Furthermore the person with a disability can also reveal the wound in the heart of the assistant,²²⁴ and

²¹⁶ John 13:1.

²¹⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 224.

²¹⁸ John 13: 6 – 8:

²¹⁹ John 13: 14.

²²⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.230.

²²¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 95.

²²² “Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Luke 9: 48.

²²³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 96

²²⁴ “I am led into my own woundedness by the woundedness of the other.” Christian Salenson,

his/her own capacity to hate, be violent, his/her own anguish and refusal of love, his/her own cry of loneliness and yearning for communion.²²⁵

If these forces of death are faced then the assistant discovers that in this brokenness, he is one with the person with a disability. There is a unity of experience in which the assistant becomes brother, and that Jesus is present not only in the poor before him but in the poor person within his own being.²²⁶ The same source of life (Jesus) is within him and therefore God, in the crucified and risen Jesus dwells in him.²²⁷ The paradigm of the resurrection of Jesus, of life out of death, the paschal mystery is made possible in our own bodies. This mystery of vulnerability is the place of mutuality and is accessible to all. It is universal. It is the place of intimacy and new life.

Vanier points to the death of Jesus on the cross as the sign that God is present in our suffering, and that new life flows from his wounds and that “through his wounds we are healed,” and not only are we healed personally but we can become a source of life for others, for the whole body.²²⁸ Vanier draws on Paul's image of the community as the Body of Christ and the particular place of honour reserved for the most despised parts of the body,²²⁹ and how whilst the person with a learning disability is often perceived as having little 'use' in the world, in God's plan of fullness for humanity they are essential,²³⁰ and give access to our self

L'Arche, A unique and multiple spirituality (France, L'Arche en France, 2009) p. 41.

²²⁵ Vanier *Community and Growth*, pp. 98 – 99.

²²⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 99.

²²⁷ Commenting on John 16, 32 Vanier says ,

“ Loneliness is the total emptiness of a human heart,
the final and absolute purification
in order to become the place where God resides.
But even in this loneliness God is present
because Jesus is with us in agony and anguish.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 289.

²²⁸ cf: Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 327-29; 345 – 6. The water of life flowing from Jesus' pierced side and the wounds in his hands are seen by Vanier as is a symbol of the transmission of life, the life of God

²²⁹ 1 Corinthians 12: 22 -26.

²³⁰ 1 Corinthians 1: 27 – 29.

understanding.²³¹

Jesus reveals to us that our bodies are integral to our relationships. They are the doorway to the other in all their beauty.²³² This beauty is made known by attentive presence. For just as through the wounds of Christ God tells us of God, so too the wounds of each person tell the story of his relationships with others and with God.²³³

e. Community as place of friendship : being at home in one another

Vanier reflects on how the community is a place where we learn what it is to be 'friends' of Jesus. As indicated in the preceding paragraphs this friendship involves allowing Jesus to dwell in us and we in him.²³⁴ This mutual indwelling is characterised by trust, vulnerability, and is passionate. It involves hospitality of the other in all their difference and the gift of life to and for the other. It is about love, a love that is in need of the other and vulnerable.²³⁵

Throughout his study of John's Gospel Vanier traces the development of friendship between Jesus and his disciples,²³⁶ a friendship that has its origin and end in his intimate communion with the Father.²³⁷ Vanier notes that not only does Jesus invite his disciples to love as he has loved them,²³⁸ but also to give their lives for one another.²³⁹ This friendship is about becoming one with another in community, as the Father and Jesus are one, because God is in them.²⁴⁰ It is possible because this friendship is more than service. It is the friendship of lovers, and so involves dying

²³¹ 2 Corinthians 12: 9

²³² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 232.

²³³ Salenson, *L'Arche*, 93.

²³⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 272 – 277.

²³⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 225.

²³⁶ e.g. Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 272-277

²³⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp. 298 – 299.

²³⁸ John 13: 12.

²³⁹ John 13: 13.

²⁴⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 298.

into new life.²⁴¹ The love that is constitutive of mutual indwelling is a love that delights and give thanks because each sees in the other the face of God.²⁴² Nowhere is Vanier more explicit about the goal of life in community than in his reflection on John 17 where he sees community as the place of 'birth' into the heart of the Trinity.²⁴³

Vanier furthermore indicates how this community is itself given birth in the pain and suffering of Jesus on the cross, and the loss, and grief of his mother and friends.²⁴⁴ Through his words to his mother Mary and the Beloved disciple Jesus brings into being a new 'family' and so initiates a life in community that will continue his life on earth.²⁴⁵ We are invited to become the Body of Christ and to be one.²⁴⁶ This is the fact and meaning of community.

f. Community as the sign and embodiment of unity and hope

Difference, and the inherent longing for union with the Other are constitutive of

²⁴¹ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 299

²⁴² Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 299.

²⁴³ Commenting on John 17 :20 -21. "The Word became flesh in order to lead us into the heart and "womb" of the Father. There will be many stages on the road to oneness with God [...] we remain very human with our prejudices and compulsions for spiritual power and recognition, and educated, formed and rooted in our various cultures. Our journey in faith will be a growth in trust in Jesus as he gradually leads us to live in the Father. Just as we are called to grow in human maturity, goodness and wisdom, we are called to grow in union with God, dying more and more to our self-centred needs. Then we will live the final birthing that Jesus refers to here, a birthing in the heart of the Trinity." Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 287.

²⁴⁴ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 325.

²⁴⁵ John 19: 26 -27.

²⁴⁶ "The final gesture of Jesus to bring Mary and John into oneness

as he and the Father are one,

to create a covenant of love between them.

Jesus does not say to the beloved disciple,

"Behold my mother."

He says: "Behold your mother."

By giving his mother as the mother of the beloved disciple

Jesus is calling her to give life to the beloved disciple,

to bring Jesus to birth, as it were, within him,

so that the disciple may dwell in Jesus and Jesus in him.

And in the same gesture,

the beloved disciple is being called to become Jesus for his mother,

for she has only one son, Jesus.

Here is the supreme unity of love and communion." Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.325.

being human. There is both a realised and hoped for unity in God, who is the origin and end of all creation. This unity is radical, in that it is at the origin of all that is created; it is fundamental and so the foundation upon which community can be built; and it is determinant in that it comes first and so determines all that follows, all that is put in place to realise a life shared together.²⁴⁷ This is likewise true of a community. Each person is unique and sacred and in the Christian tradition is “made in the image and likeness of God”.²⁴⁸ Difference is an essential characteristic of this unity.²⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit works with this very difference in realising the unity which is already accomplished in God, who is triune, one in difference. This is the hope from and towards which the community lives.

In a L'Arche community this fundamental unity is the paschal experience of life out of death as realised in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and witnessed in the lives of and mutual relationship with people living with learning disabilities. Whilst this paschal experience is essentially personal, it has become the dominant metaphor for shared life in L'Arche in the sense that L'Arche was founded on and lives out of it.²⁵⁰ In encompassing difference and accepting weakness as a source of life, the community is witness to the unity that already exists in God. The life and achievements of the community are not the fulfilment, but a consequence of this hope.

²⁴⁷ Salenson, *L'Arche*, p.81.

²⁴⁸ II.1. Charter for the Communities of L'Arche, Cap Rouge, General Assembly of the Federation of L'Arche, 1993.

²⁴⁹ 1, Corinthians 12.

²⁵⁰ “The experience of living with disability is the cornerstone of your plurality, as witnessed in your capacity to live together as men and women with and without an identified disability. This is your first and primary diversity. Me to, I am wounded, and I am stop denying that. I can trust my own weakness etc. It is as if deep calls to deep: the person with a disability needs me, yet enables me to live an experience of primordial importance. Disability is the gateway – I am led into my own woundedness by the woundedness of the other.” Salenson, *L'Arche*, p.38.

g. Community as forgiveness

The reality of community is that each individual is faced with the question and challenge of the other, and with his/her own limitation to love and to accept to be loved. Conflict is therefore also to be found at the heart of community. The reasons for conflict and tension are multiple, and anguish is a normal reaction to being brought up against our own lack and limitations. The response to anguish is often denial and patterns of being with others that mask the pain.²⁵¹ Such behaviours block the possibility of receiving the love of others and likewise of being a person of real compassion. The fruit of untruth is both self death and the denial of life to others. It often results in tension and conflict in the community. Yet conflict and tension can be both creative as well as destructive. In order to face and to accept the other as they are with all their behaviour which is both life giving and death bearing, we are obliged to face our own self.²⁵² The other can become a mirror. However in order to become conscious of our limitations, our sinfulness, it is important that there has been a prior experience of having been loved, respected and trusted. This is the task of each one of us – “to perceive the beauty and value” of the other,²⁵³ and to help him/her discover his/her own capacity for love, goodness and positive action, “to regain confidence in themselves and the Holy Spirit,” and to enable them to work on their wounds.²⁵⁴ This process of self and mutual acceptance is often born of a crisis. It involves time, openness, self awareness, honesty, patience, but most of all a desire for truth and willingness to listen even if what is heard and discovered is challenging

²⁵¹ “[the addiction} springs from a habit they adopted to fill a terrible emptiness in them and to calm the pain of anguish, loneliness and guilt. [...] We can all be addicted to something which is disguised in the clothes of virtue and goodness, but which in reality masks and calms anguish. [...] We all have difficulty resisting them, accepting the pain of emptiness and anguish, and walking in truth towards healing, towards communion with God and towards compassion for others. [...] must help each person to live more and more clearly and deeply from an inner confidence of being loved by God just as they are.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 132.

²⁵² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.121.

²⁵³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 122.

²⁵⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.122.

and hurts.²⁵⁵ It involves a decision to unmask illusion, and falsehood, and to let the truth about ourselves be seen. To refuse this is to hide behind “our fears, our injustices, our incompetence, our hypocrisy.”²⁵⁶ It involves the realisation that without the Spirit of God neither the individual nor the community is able to grow in truth and freedom.²⁵⁷

Forgiveness is the gift of the Father through the Spirit when we take the initiative to ask for help.²⁵⁸ Only then are we able to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with our brother and sister. The paradox of intimate relationship, one with another, if it is to be lived in truth and love, is that it must *per se* include each opening to the presence of a third, the Spirit of Jesus. Our failed relationships can be the opportunity of turning to God, and so of forgiveness, freedom and lives lived in truth.

h. Community as celebration

Moments of celebration ,whether for example a birthday party, a meal or the Eucharist, are opportunities for a glimpse of this hoped for unity. The greatest pain of humankind is separation and loneliness, experiences of death, and its deepest cry is for life. Life is the experience of unity, peace, and the joy of communion. Unity, our belonging to one another and to God, is born of daily love, mutual acceptance and forgiveness, and celebration is the song of joy and thanksgiving that both flows

²⁵⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 122 – 123.

²⁵⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.135.

²⁵⁷ “Jesus was sent by the Father not to judge us and even less to condemn us to remain in the prisons, the limitations and dark places of our beings, but to forgive and free us, by planting the seeds of the Spirit in us. To grow in love is to allow this Spirit of Jesus to grow in us. [...] true growth comes from God, when we cry to him from the depths of the abyss to let his Spirit penetrate us. Growth in love is growth in the Spirit.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 133. cf: Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 120.

²⁵⁸ “If we are to grow in love, the prisons of our egoism must be unlocked. This implies suffering, constant effort and repeated choices. To reach maturity in love, to carry the cross of responsibility, we have to go beyond the enthusiasms, the utopias, and the naiveties of adolescence.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 133.

from this experience of unity and creates and deepens it.²⁵⁹ Celebration is therefore the “true meaning of community in a concrete and tangible way,”²⁶⁰ and “unites everything that is most human and most divine in community life.”²⁶¹ Celebration is an expression of salvation (fullness of life) and the abundance of new life as given by God, as known through lives shared together. Therefore for Vanier, the poor must be at the heart of celebration.²⁶² Celebration symbolises our “deepest aspiration – an experience of total communion”.²⁶³

i. Community as abundance and fecundity

Community is not there for itself but for others, and so it must go beyond itself.²⁶⁴ Mission is a consequence of the over flow of new life received. Jesus came to give life and abundantly, and he asked “his disciples to continue this mission of life giving”.²⁶⁵ Community is an invitation to fecundity, to an inclusiveness and openness towards the other that reflects the intimacy and abundance of the Trinity. The abundance of community life is the sharing of the water of eternal life.²⁶⁶ Therefore, community is a place where each one has the potential to become a source of new life and so to participate in the mission of Jesus.²⁶⁷

²⁵⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 315.

²⁶⁰ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 314.

²⁶¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 315.

²⁶² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 319.

²⁶³ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 314.

²⁶⁴ “A community is never there just for itself or its own glory. It comes from and belongs to something much greater and deeper: the heart of God yearning to bring humanity to fulfilment. A community is never an end in itself: it is but a sign pointing further and deeper, calling people to love: ‘Come and drink at the source which is flowing from the Eternal and which is manifested in each act of love in the community, in each moment of communion.’” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.102.

²⁶⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 87.

²⁶⁶ “It is a life given and flowing from the tomb of our beings which has become transformed into a source of life. It flows from the knowledge that we have been liberated through forgiveness; it flows from weakness and vulnerability. It is the announcing good news that we can live in humility, littleness and poverty, because God is dwelling in our hearts, giving us new life and freedom. We have received freely: we can give freely.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 99.

²⁶⁷ “Jesus came to give us life – eternal life, the very life of God – through a personal relationship with each one of us. We are called to communicate this life.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 95.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how community life is eschatological in the sense of the working out in concrete lives and relationships, in the now of history, the hope of communion with God, a communion already realised in Jesus. It is where the covenant with God is lived. Community is the place where humankind can discover through the Spirit the ongoing presence of Jesus in their lives. Community is the potential to live as the body of Christ. There are three essential elements to community life: prayer (the relationship of communion with God), consciousness of being bonded by Jesus into a single body (of belonging and living our true identity) and, and service to the poor (being responsible for one another's well being).

As Vanier comments community is the “what happens between” - what happens between now and the end of time, and what happens between people, and between people and God.²⁶⁸ In this 'between' Jesus invites us to be apart of his community, to live with his friends. In a community of L'Arche the person living with a learning disability, a person who so often falls into the gaps of society, calls the assistants into community and into relationships of mutual acceptance. To choose to live in community is to choose to come face to face with the forces of death within and the force for life. This life together is a place of encounter with Jesus, and also a life shaped by and in Jesus. It has the potential therefore to become a place of resurrection, a community “founded in forgiveness and completed in celebration.”²⁶⁹

Community is about the secret intimacy that happens between God and humankind in and through the relationships that happen between humankind.²⁷⁰ This intimacy is something that is risked, but not controlled nor contained – a glimpse of

²⁶⁸ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, pp. 29-30.

²⁶⁹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.330.

²⁷⁰ cf: “We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the place and the place is called community.” Martin Buber quoted by Parker J. Parker, *Place called community*, (Philadelphia, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 212, 1977) p. 4.

eternity. However for this communion, this glimpse of eternity to be experienced the community must be embodied. Therefore the form and structure of community, the institution of community, must embody practices of sociality that enable and serve this primary goal of communion, yet will never create the experience of communion. This remains God's gift, just as the the work of honest and just sociality remains the labour of humankind, and so of L'Arche.

Listening to the story

“I am the Vine and you are the branches”

In this chapter we shall look at the presence of covenant in the foundational story and ongoing development of L'Arche and in the explicit structures and practices put in place to enable the embodiment of covenantal relationships in the communities. This review requires a return to the foundational story and experience, a review and questioning of the lived experience, a discernment of the ways in which the founding 'myth' has shifted, the reasons for this shift (both what has enabled and what has prevented the communities being true to the original vision) and the elucidation of what in the founding story is contextual and what is essential to L'Arche. This will enable us to gain an insight into the recognition, understanding and consequences of covenant in the ongoing story, and whether it remains a determinant principle for L'Arche.

L'Arche has developed from a single community into an international federation of communities. This development covers 47 years, stretches across 40 countries and is made particular in 137 communities of varying sizes.²⁷¹ Therefore the material presented below can only be a general overview, indicating the patterns of development and change. Each country and each community will have its own story and context and its own set of influencing factors. However the development of an international federation, the intentional participation in and membership of this overarching body and adhesion to the foundational charter by each community mirrors a movement which also takes place in each community – the movement

²⁷¹ These figures were obtained from the official L'Arche International website: www.larche.org/home.en-gb.1.0.index.htm, (accessed 28/09/11)

from a small cohesive founding group sharing a charismatic vision to a large and diverse group where the ties are looser and communication is more complex. If the community/federation of communities is to remain united during this process of expansion and necessary development of social structures, then it must find ways of integrating the diversity. Explicit structures that embody the shared underlying vision and a common symbolic language are required. The point of unity, the source of the identity and unity of L'Arche, needs to be named and recognised as determinant for the ongoing development and integrity of the communities both singly and collectively. It is therefore valid to examine general trends as we seek to understand the development and practice of covenant in L'Arche.

This chapter also provides an essential background and context for the following chapter in which we seek to hear the lived experience, hopes and concerns of assistants of the second generation of L'Arche, who have lived the transition from the experience of charismatic foundation to the development of structures that seek to embody the charism and provide continuity and unity for the communities.

Material for this chapter has mainly been drawn from the official documents of L'Arche International, the reflections of members of L'Arche as recorded in the reports on the work of the Identity and Mission, and Commitment and Belonging Processes and in the presentation made by the International Coordinator Jean-Christophe Pascal for the General Assembly of L'Arche in 2008.²⁷² I am also indebted to the scholarship of Kathryn Spink whose book provides

²⁷² Identity and Mission Process 2003- 2005; and the current Commitment and Belonging Process 2009 -2012. These two processes were set up by L'Arche International and involved all the communities in the Federation in a process of sharing, reflection and discernment. Jean Christophe Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report Session 3. Commitment*, (unpublished: delivered at the General Assembly of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, Kolkata 2008: ref: AGI -Kol- 08- Text-Rapport- JCP – Engagement -EN) In this talk he drew heavily on an article previously published in the Letters of L'Arche by Patrick Fontaine, “*Another Look. The will to be changed, the desire to be transformed*”, Ed. Tina Bovermann, (France, Letters of L'Arche No. 125, 2008).

a well written and in depth account of the life of Jean Vanier and the founding story of L'Arche.²⁷³

This chapter will be divided into four sections: 1. Introduction; 2. Looking again at the founding story; 3. The trail of covenant in the ongoing story of L'Arche; and 4. Forty years on: covenant and L'Arche today.

1. Introduction

L'Arche was founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier when he welcomed two men with learning disabilities into his life and home in the village of Trosly Breuil in northern France.²⁷⁴ This foundation was a response to the cry of a people marginalised both by society (politically, economically, socially) and by church.²⁷⁵ The first community was begun in a particular historical context, was Roman Catholic and radical in terms of the given social response to people with learning disabilities. Today the communities, spread throughout the world, are ecumenical and inter-religious and shaped by a wide range of social, cultural, economical, religious and political concerns and demands. They have evolved from a single model of community as shared living (i.e. living under one roof), and include a multiplicity of ways of being

²⁷³ Kathryn Spink, *The Miracle, The Message, The Story. Jean Vanier and L'Arche*, (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

²⁷⁴ For a more detailed account see: Jean Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, (New York Crossroad Classic, 1995); Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, (New York Crossroad Classic, 1995). These books about the story and spirituality of L'Arche have been much used within L'Arche for teaching. Spink in her book records new material which fills out the story, e.g. about the nature and importance of Vanier's relationship with Père Thomas (p.56), the story of Dany (p. 61), Vanier's own question as to whether the mystical life of L'Arche is being sufficiently handed on (p. 264). Spink, *The Miracle*.

²⁷⁵ Throughout time and place the person with a learning disability has been regarded with great ambivalence – from fear and rejection to deification. The predominant response has been one of negation. They have been viewed as sub normal and therefore not human and so not worthy of the same respect and value as others. They have been abandoned and violated in body, mind and spirit. They have been a scapegoat for society, seen as the source and cause of evil. Their difference has been seen as a threat to 'normal' people, perhaps reminding them of their own contingency and death. Their lives of dependence challenge models of human self sufficiency and autonomy. Their lives have been engendered through policies of euthanasia, medical experimentation, and abortion. In the church they have been seen as mystical (fools of God) or excluded. The development of rationality as the criterion for being human as excluded them from participation in the civil and religious society.

a part of the community, for example, independent living, supported living, community households, family households. The general concept of community has been severely tested by changing social patterns, just as the original identity of Christian community has been challenged not only by the changed demography of L'Arche but also the changing religious patterns within the different societies in which L'Arche is present and within the different religious institutions to which members of L'Arche adhere.

2. Looking again at the founding story

In this section I shall look at the events and character of the founding story in order to show how the reality of God's covenant is the determining paradigm, both charismatically and structurally for the communities of L'Arche. I will also point to the inter-relationship and difference between God's covenant and our working out of this covenant in our lives together, “our covenant”.

In 2008 Jean-Christophe Pascal, International Coordinator for L'Arche, offered a reading of the founding story to the Federation of L'Arche, in which he identified three key experiences that have shaped the subsequent development of commitment in L'Arche.²⁷⁶ He argued:

- i) that in 1964 Vanier's original decision and act of welcoming Raphael and Philippe (two men with learning disabilities) from an asylum into his home was an act of generosity;
- ii) that the decision in 1965 to accept leadership of an already existing institution for people with learning disabilities resulted in the insertion and participation of L'Arche in the world of professional and institutional care and therefore the contractual care model was co-existent with the premise

²⁷⁶ Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report Kolkata 2008*.

of generosity (i.e. self-gift) at the inception of L'Arche.²⁷⁷ This has ensured the possibility of fulfilling its mission with competence through government recognition and financing, and interaction with other care professionals, but at the same time has had unforeseen but radical and profound effects on the evolution of L'Arche;

- iii) that in 1965 Vanier underwent an experience of personal transformation, a fruit of his growing relationships with the members with learning disabilities and therefore the initial act of generosity became an experience of communion; and that Vanier recognised this experience as the 'Good News' of the gospels, and chose to go out and witness to this experience throughout the world.

From this analysis Pascal suggested that the keystone of commitment in L'Arche is the desire for relationship that is transforming, and that these three factors, self gift, professional involvement, and life giving transformation are therefore experiences constitutive of commitment in L'Arche. He also identified that the shared goal/ mission of L'Arche consists in revealing the “transformative potential of relationship with people with learning disabilities to the world.”

This analysis is important but I would like to suggest that it is limited. It does not give sufficient weight to the experience of covenant in Vanier's story prior to 1964 and the underlying and radical paradigm of covenant in the founding story; and offers a limited interpretation of the necessary engagement with social structures. Vanier did not found L'Arche out of nothing.

²⁷⁷ The contractual care model, seen as a service provision business, is today mandatory in most countries due to social care and employment legislation and prevailing paradigms of self understanding.

a. Covenant as the premise for the foundation and development of L'Arche

- i) A prior love: “All that is good and holy in me flows from the covenant with Jesus in the Church.”²⁷⁸

The founding of L'Arche was a consequence of Vanier's desire to be in relationship with Jesus and to belong to the church. L'Arche was also founded on suffering, the suffering of people with learning disabilities and the corresponding shock and pain of compassion within the heart of Vanier. It was the primary relationship with Jesus, a first love, which enabled Vanier to hear the cry of the person with disabilities and which impelled him to act with compassion towards them.²⁷⁹ This response and act of compassion towards the other (generosity) was a fulfilling of his covenantal obligation (his response to the faithful and prior love of God).²⁸⁰

Vanier, rooted in a biblical and specifically Christian understanding of covenant, and shaped by his contact with the thought of Père Thomas Philippe O.P. and his own doctoral studies on Aristotle,²⁸¹ understood the mutual and transforming

²⁷⁸ Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 144.

²⁷⁹ “ There was something terrifying about it [the psychiatric hospital] but at the same time something profoundly of God. In places of horror, there is a kind of presence of God. Peace and chaos – one is frightened and captivated.” Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 57.

²⁸⁰ The covenantal obligation to care for the 'poor, the widow and the stranger'. See Chapter 2.

²⁸¹ Vanier completed and presented to the Catholic Institute in Paris his doctoral thesis on Aristotle “ Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics” in 1962. In his later book , Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness. Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001, translated by Kathryn Spink) he records his indebtedness to Aristotle for his own development of a Christian anthropology, and to deepen his understanding of covenant as relating to all humankind, as universal. In this book he also records where he essentially differs from Aristotle's view of being human, differences which can be seen to have informed the development of L'Arche and germane to his own deepening mystical experience and theology .

- i) Vanier defines person- hood as the capacity for relationship based on the Biblical understanding of a person “being for, with to another”;
- ii) Vanier gives primacy to a life of relation whatever their abilities, social and economic standing, thus valuing the encounter;
- iii) for Vanier friendship is more than magnanimity and includes reciprocity and receiving love from the other; he recognises in God's covenant with humankind that there is disparity in all save the desire for communion.; that friendship includes the sharing not only of all that is good/generous but also what is limited and affective;
- iv) Vanier lives from a morality of compassion (as witnessed in the ethics of the Jewish and Christian tradition) therefore the heart is the mainspring of human life and relationship. This means too that a weaker person has the potential to bring help to another from his humanity, rather than from his self sufficiency /strength.
- v) that in keeping with the Biblical vision of time as linear, of history as evolutionary and having a teleological pull (God's promise of faithful love) there is room for change, for the work of the heart, the possibility of hope and room for gift.

relationships he encountered in his life with people with disabilities to be a manifestation of God's covenant.²⁸² For Vanier the shape and form of this covenant is revealed in the person of Jesus, who takes seriously our humanity and chooses to be in relationship with the poor, the marginalised, the excluded, who becomes the poor, the marginalised and the excluded and who enters into mutual relationship with his friends.²⁸³ Entering into a particular 'friendship' with each person, Jesus acknowledges the specificity and sacredness of the individual. Each relationship is unique and mutual. In this loving he invites his friends to "love one another as I have loved you",²⁸⁴ and so indicates how in giving hospitality in their lives to the one who is excluded they are encountering him.²⁸⁵ This engagement with the vulnerable other also comprises Jesus' promise that he and his Father will come and dwell in their hearts,²⁸⁶ and so that they will become a 'home' to God.²⁸⁷ This indwelling can be promised but its acceptance cannot be obliged because it is the fruit of relationship. For Vanier this presence to one another, and these relationships become a communion of hearts, and thereby a community.²⁸⁸ Relationships of fidelity, and thereby God's covenant which enables them, are therefore at the origin

vi) Vanier understands that it is Jesus who gives human evolution its true orientation – that is as a movement towards unity and communion in God; and also gives new meaning and importances to human reality/the body both singly and corporately as the location of the presence of God;
vii) He identifies that in Jesus humankind is neither destined to the static determinism of nature, nor to the omnipotence of total freedom, but in obedience finds the freedom to become fully human., an obedience to being in relationship, and an obedience to creatureliness limitedness.
At the same time (from 1950) Vanier was being formed at the level of his heart and mind by his spiritual guide, Père Thomas Philippe O.P. in a mystical spirituality and theology centred on the Incarnation and the importance of the body as the location of grace, the primacy of love and the heart and the special place of the poor in God's plan. 40 years later in Vanier's reflection on John's Gospel (Vanier, *The Mystery*, 2008).we are able to see the synthesis and radical development of these important influences on his thinking and understanding of covenant This book – the fruit of his personal life with Jesus and life in community with people with learning disabilities - bears witness to a mystical understanding of a life in communion with God and with one another through Jesus. The seeds of this experience and understanding of covenant were present at the foundation of L'Arche.

²⁸² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp 91-95.

²⁸³ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp.272 - 276.

²⁸⁴ John 13: 34.

²⁸⁵ Matt. 25: 40.

²⁸⁶ John 14:, 15-17, 23.

²⁸⁷ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 69.

²⁸⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 68.

of community and of L'Arche.

The story of L'Arche can therefore be seen as rooted in and shaped by God's covenant with Vanier. God's particular gift to Vanier was the revelation of the extraordinary nature and language of covenant and the grace of communion through a life in community with people with learning disabilities.

ii) A covenantal relationship at the foundation of L'Arche

Vanier's decision to begin L'Arche was also the fruit of the experience of covenant through and in particular people, people who loved him for his own sake and who in their trust of him enabled him to attain human and spiritual maturity. Vanier himself identifies the significance of his own father's trust, and attributes the foundation of L'Arche to his relationship with Père Thomas Philippe, O.P.²⁸⁹

Through the relationship of spiritual father, Père Thomas Philippe offered Vanier both a formation of heart and mind and a profound experience of covenant.²⁹⁰ It was an experience of new life, which made possible the development of his personal conscience and gave him confidence in his own intuitions concerning the leadings of the Holy Spirit.²⁹¹ This growth into human and spiritual freedom was not

²⁸⁹ In 1942 at the age of 13 Vanier informed his father of his desire to join the British navy. His father's response made a deep impression on Vanier. "I often say that when he said, 'I trust you,' he gave me life." Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 19.

Re. Père Thomas and the foundation of L'Arche see: Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.xiii.
²⁹⁰ "If people find that I am very free in my intellectual life even in my interpretation of the Gospel of St. John and in my development of an anthropology which is bound to human and spiritual reality, it is because I was moulded by the thinking and methods of Père Thomas." Spink, *The Miracle*, p.45.

The key elements of the mystical theology of Père Thomas which were influential in the development of Vanier's own understanding and theology and which are visible in the spirituality of L'Arche concern the particular relationship between the body and spiritual realities:

- i) the role the body in the Incarnation;
- ii) the importance of the body in the transmission of grace;
- iii) the primacy of love;
- iv) the place of the heart in our relationship with God;
- v) the place of the poor in the heart of God.

See for further detail of the relationship with and influence of Père Thomas Philippe O.P. (1905-1992) on Vanier and the spirituality of L'Arche: Spink, *The Miracle*, Chapters 3 & 4.

²⁹¹ See: Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 318 – on the relationship of truth, personal conscience and the Holy Spirit.

however without its suffering and sacrifice.²⁹² Nonetheless it was this relationship of affiliation and trust that led Vanier “into the heart of Jesus,” and to service and friendship of the poor.²⁹³ It was Père Thomas who first invited Vanier to “come and see” the reality of people with learning disabilities and whether Jesus wanted “something to be done”.²⁹⁴ In describing their relationship Vanier uses terms that have become hallmarks of his theology and the spirituality of L'Arche – an experience of mutual indwelling, and intimate friendship that opens out into a relationship of communion with God.²⁹⁵ The relationship between Père Thomas and Vanier lies at the foundation of L'Arche and has informed and shaped the development of Vanier's theology of covenant and community as witnessed in the specific expression of covenant in the communities of L'Arche.²⁹⁶

b. The risk of intimacy and the limitations of our love

Pascal accurately notes that the decision to assume leadership for a small institution for people with learning disabilities in 1965 resulted in the model of employment /paid service being coexistent with the premise of self gift at the beginning of

²⁹² “I knew that what is deepest within me came from him so I could not deny him without denying myself. So it was not just a question of being faithful to each other. It would have been suicide. That was why it was so painful.” Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 82.. This suffering included the pain of the denouncement of Père Thomas as unorthodox and too mystical in his spiritual direction and the subsequent period of enforced seclusion and exclusion from the exercise of his priesthood. Vanier chose to remain faithful to Père Thomas although this involved the renunciation of an ecclesial career. Later after the foundation of L'Arche the differences of opinion about the orientation of L'Arche caused much heart ache between the two men but the communion between them was never broken. cf: Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 44

²⁹³ Speaking of his first encounter with Père Thomas in 1950 Vanier said, “I needed a master, a teacher, a spiritual father. There was a sort of experience of Jesus and I bonded to him. How can one explain that? We are touching on the inexplicable.” Spink, *The Miracle*, pp.37 -40. “[...] and gradually I discovered who I was : first of all that I was loved by Père Thomas and by God, then that I had a mind that helped me understand, to see the light of truth. I didn't go to Père Thomas just to be nourished; I went to be born, to develop consciousness of who I was, and that came little by little.” Jean Vanier, *Our Life Together. A Memoir in Letters*, (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008) p. 341.

²⁹⁴ “Jesus wanted something to be done.” Spink, *The Miracle*, p. 57.

²⁹⁵ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, pp.39-40. The whole of Vanier's study of John's Gospel could be said to pivot around the ever deepening meaning of the Greek word, 'menein' and its particular manifestation in both the daily and mystical life of L'Arche.

²⁹⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.xiii.

L'Arche. This coexistence has proved over the years complex and today threatens to become the dominant model in L'Arche. However it can also be argued that the first choice of Vanier was not for a model of bargain, but for the working out of covenantal love taking seriously the suffering and contingencies of human life and relationship.

When we return to the founding story as relayed by Vanier, we hear a story shaped by the language of covenant as known in Jesus – response to the cry, commitment and fidelity, hospitality, relationship, mutuality, risk, compassion and communion with God.²⁹⁷ The choice by Vanier to respond to the cry of three strangers (Raphael, Philippe and Dany) and to invite them to live with him in his home was an act not of mere generosity, in which case he could have followed the altruistic model of providing for their welfare in a separate facility,²⁹⁸ but a risky act that carried the possibility of intimacy and communion.²⁹⁹ In fact Dany was not ready to cope with living outside of a large institution and returned after 24 hours.

Through this episode Vanier learned a painful lesson about the recognition and

²⁹⁷ “When I came to Trosly-Breuil, that small village north of Paris, I welcomed Raphael and Philippe. I invited them to come and live with me because of Jesus and his Gospel. That is how L'Arche was founded. When I welcomed those two men from an asylum, I knew it was for life; it would have been impossible to create bonds with them and then send them back to a hospital, or anywhere else. My purpose in starting L'Arche was to found a family, a community with and for those who are weak and poor because of a mental handicap and who feel alone and abandoned. The cry of Raphael and Philippe was for love, for respect and for friendship; it was for true communion. They of course wanted me to do things for them, but more deeply they wanted a true love; a love that sees their beauty, the light that shining within them; a love that reveals to them their value and importance in the universe. Their cry for love awoke within my own heart and called from me living waters; they made me discover within my own being a well, a fountain of living water.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 97.

²⁹⁸ “I realised instinctively that what they most needed was a family environment, a place of belonging where they could be themselves, grow in inner confidence and freedom and enjoy life with others.” Vanier, *Our Journey Together*, p.1.

²⁹⁹ Throughout his naval service and later during his time in Canada as a lecturer in Philosophy, Vanier had sought ways of responding to Jesus and had made contact with contemporary movements serving and living with the poor, both lay and religious. Catherine Doherty's Friendship House in Harlem (USA), Tony Walsh's Benedict Labre House (Canada), Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, Little Sisters and Brothers of Jesus, Cardinal Léger's Foyer de Charité. The common threads of these communities were the desire to respond to the suffering of the poor with compassion, hospitality and mercy, the recognition of Jesus in the face of the poor and a simple life in community living with the poor. These same elements - Jesus, the poor and community - are present in and essential to the choices Vanier made in founding L'Arche and in the subsequent development of covenant within L'Arche.

acceptance of his own limitations, and also the fact that the suffering of each is unique and requires an individual and personal response.³⁰⁰ This was a first experience of what it means to be compassionate, to accept the cost of staying with the suffering other, and to take the risk of being changed by this other. It was also the beginning of a deeper awareness of the real needs of people who have suffered, and the complex relationship between compassion and competence, between structure and freedom of spirit and between the individual and the group.

Therefore the subsequent choice to be inserted in the world of professional care and contractual obligations can also be seen as a recognition of human limitation, and an option to engage with the social reality of our humanity and our real human need for both relational and material security – the embodiment of “our covenant”.³⁰¹ This interdependence is reflective of what it is to be human, nowhere better seen than in the lives of people with disabilities, and also points to a primary existential dependence on God. If we view the decision in this light the model and pattern of covenantal relationship remains the primary and underlying focus of the community. It brings with it risks and the need for honest discernment about whether choices made are in fact consistent with covenantal relationship.

When we recognise the prior covenant of God with Vanier, revealed in his relationship with Jesus, and through the Church and particular people, and the way

³⁰⁰ The story of Dany was only widely known in L'Arche (and beyond) as a result of the publication of Spink's book, *The Miracle*. This fact reminds us of how difficult it is for us to accept our own human limitedness, and the length of the journey to truth and healing.

³⁰¹ It is interesting to note that this decision to take on board Le Val Fleuri (the small institution in the same village as the first house) was seemed to other community members like a deviation from the original vision and model. Yet meaning was ascribed to the decision. L'Arche was God's work and the community belonged to him. It had been created as a response to the cry of the poor, and could involve for the assistants the loss of false certitude and idealism. These characteristics of responding to the cry of the other, being led by the needs of people with learning disabilities, and discernment of and surrender to the will of God have remained guiding principles for both individual members and the communities of L'Arche. One of the original assistants reflecting on this experience said, “The community there (at the first house) was poor in every way except in its prayer which was magnificent but it got poorer because we could not even have the kind of community we wanted.” Spink, *The Miracle*, p.70.

in which the radical language of covenant has shaped his life and actions, we are offered an important nuance in Pascal's formulation concerning commitment. The underlying premise of commitment in L'Arche is the desire for the transformation of our desire – to love for the sake of Love.

3. The trail of covenant in the ongoing story of L'Arche

a. Community and the development of social structures and practices

For Vanier covenant is real and involves engaging with all that makes us human. Covenant encompasses human limitation, suffering and pain, and demands embodied responses of loving care. It therefore includes choices and the humble acceptance of limitation in the fulfilling of the gospel imperatives.³⁰² Shared life in community offers a particular structure for the embodiment of covenant. It aims to create a place of real belonging, and commitment to one another in and through the personal experience of being loved by God. In his early writing and in the first Charter of L'Arche Vanier's desire for this belonging to be inclusive and expansive is visible, yet at the same time he recognises the fact that belonging is particular and that there is a need to identify the actual person /people to whom he belongs.³⁰³ Only then can he be a “universal brother”.³⁰⁴ Clarity about the content of this belonging, both in terms of particular people and the consequences of commitment, are key to

³⁰² This real dynamic has led to clear choices , e.g. welcome of people with learning disabilities, reception of government funding to ensure stability and continuity perhaps contrary to a more radical approach of gospel poverty, to be a lay community inclusive of married and single people, people of different faiths, to develop policies that guarantee competent care.

³⁰³ The choice of limiting hospitality in L'Arche communities to people with learning disabilities provides a good example of Vanier's approach. This decision was based on specific experiences and the recognition of the specific needs of people with learning disabilities , and a recognition of the limitations and frailties of human love and relatedness. It caused tension with Pere Thomas who understood the gospel imperative to be universal i.e. all who were poor and therefore felt that L'Arche should have an open door.

³⁰⁴ “My people' are my community, which is both the small community who live together, and the larger community which surrounds it and for which it is there. 'My people' are those written in my flesh as I am in theirs. 'My people' is my community made up of those who know me and carry me. They are a springboard to humanity. I cannot be a universal brother or sister unless I first love my people.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp.16 – 17.

the issues raised concerning the meaningful announcing of covenant in L'Arche (cf: Section 3. c. below) and the actual embodiment of covenant in the communities of L'Arche. A lack of clarity has dogged the development of a comfortable acceptance of the notion of covenant in L'Arche.

Early on in the story of L'Arche, Vanier recognised the difference and essential complementarity between the social structures of community and the experience of communion that happens between people and between man and God. This relationship between body/form and communion/loving presence is central to his theology of both covenant and community.³⁰⁵ In the introduction to his book, *Community and Growth*, Vanier identifies the need for places of belonging,³⁰⁶ places that have enough structure and yet openness to allow for growth.³⁰⁷ He acknowledges the complex balance and wisdom needed to provide enough security for healing and growth in people who are often without inner structure or who are wounded at the level of the heart,³⁰⁸ and yet at the same time enough challenge and freedom to enable them to mature and so be “led to true community.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989 [2nd Revised Edition]) p.97. In this seminal description of covenant and L'Arche we see clearly the juxtaposition of form (living with, found a family, a community, to do things for) and heart (“the cry [...] for love, respect, friendship ; it was for true communion.”) For body and communion see also : Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.103.

³⁰⁶ “Today even more than ten years ago, when the first edition of this book was written, people are crying out for authentic communities where they can share their lives with others in a common vision, where they can find support and mutual encouragement, where they are witness to their beliefs and work for greater peace and justice in the world – even if they are frightened of the demands of community.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 2.

³⁰⁷ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp. 6 -7.

³⁰⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, pp.3 – 5.

³⁰⁹ “Young people need help in order to integrate the vision into their own hearts and minds and to develop their own inner freedom and choices, learning little by little to be led inwardly by love, rather than from outside, by rigid laws. They must be led to true community where they can become men and women of prayer and compassion, open to others and to the world, particularly to the poor, the oppressed, the lost , and the vulnerable, and thus become artisans of peace.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.5.

b. Community life: earthing the charism

The challenge for the communities has been to find ways of living and working together that embody the demands of covenantal living as shaped by the gifts and needs of people with learning disabilities. Vanier when looking at the needs of the most vulnerable in the community had no illusions that what they needed was security and friendship. Therefore the communities needed to be well administered, and effectively lead, and to collaborate with other agencies – social policies and services, government legislation, professionals, financiers. But they also needed to be places which celebrated the beauty and gift of each person, enabled healing and growth of body, mind and spirit, and facilitated the development of intimate and long term friendships within the rhythms of shared daily life.

The structures and practices developed are characterised by the desire to enable a life of communion, of conversation face to face, yet which take seriously the frailties of human love and relatedness.³¹⁰ The structures seek to enable human and spiritual growth and maturity, the development of personal conscience and self and group awareness.³¹¹ They have to embody both risk and security, allow for a vulnerability that is life giving, ensure justice and meet material needs.³¹²

³¹⁰ Community life has typically been centred around 'life together' in a community home. This shared life is structured around the needs and rhythms of the members with disabilities, the practical activities of home life, celebrations and a life of prayer together. However whilst the structures of the community recognise the gift of intimate relatedness, it also recognises the potential dysfunction a 'familial' context may produce and the risks especially for the most vulnerable. Therefore to work towards the greatest possible maturity and the well being of all there is also a system of regular supervision and inspection, established policies and practices.

³¹¹ e.g. The practice of accompaniment (spiritual, community and psychological) for assistants is a recognition of the need of each assistant to grow for their own well being but also for the well being of the community especially the most vulnerable members. There is a real danger in a context where suffering is central that patterns of victim-hood may develop within the unconscious of the group or individual and be played out in behaviours that are destructive and immature.

The development of creative work, therapeutic activities, different life styles, professional care support and regular reviews for the members with a disabilities recognises their potential for growth and healing, and the specific support required for this.

³¹² Whilst employment laws introduce a model i.e. contractual/ quid pro quo and seem to work against a model based on self gift, and trust, they provide a reminder of the requirement of justice inherent in the covenant.

The following two examples witness to the ways in which L'Arche has tried to creatively embrace a covenantal life in community.

i. **Daily life and celebrations as meeting places with God**

For Vanier the life of Christ is present in all the details of our human existence. Therefore he has looked for signs of the reality of the Eucharist in the events of every day. He has sought ways of embodying that celebration, that joy of living in the daily life together, such as in the celebration of birthdays. The Eucharistic table finds resonance in the daily meals shared around a common table, the broken body of Christ in the body bathed and cared for day in and day out and the eucharistic presence of Jesus in loving attentiveness one to another.³¹³ The gift and obligations of the covenant with God are to be worked out in holiness and social justice.

ii. **Servant Leadership**

The patterns of leadership developed also provide an example of the way L'Arche has sought to work out a life committed to relationship and the transformation of the heart, and the challenges this way has presented. The preferred model seeks to ensure that authority is exercised from the position of service rather than power. It seeks to ensure listening, respect of difference and conversation. Actual authority is seen as partial and interdependent. Therefore each community has a management committee/Board drawn from local people with particular competencies who provide a public interface and carry legal authority. The professional

³¹³ “It is very clear to me that the Eucharist is at the heart of every community that is body centred, and maybe every community should be body centred [...] 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. Sometimes that brings us close to the whole relationship between the Word and the Eucharist. Then as you touch the Eucharistic body you touch the division of the churches, the pain and then maybe you are holding the whole mystery of the broken body of Jesus.” Spink, *The Miracle*, p.147.
cf: Chapter 4.

medical/psychiatric support comes from outside of the community. The spiritual leadership is given by the priest/pastor or delegated person. The community leader's particular role is to be the servant of the community and to carry the story, spirit and vision of the community. The model is of shared responsibility and dialogue, and demands relationship between the various parties. In reality the community leaders often feel that the processes of consultation and dialogue have leave them shorn of adequate authority, are slow and lacking in clear decisions, and leave them carrying the workload and the day to day reality.³¹⁴ The demands of regulatory bodies, and of professional standards are marked by efficiency, planning and record keeping, whilst the servant leadership model proposed demands patient listening, time for growth and change, and inclusive decision making. The two styles of functioning are not necessarily contradictory but demand maturity, clarity of vision and the capacity to hold seeming opposites. In practice this has been very challenging for the leaders, and there has been a tendency to prefer either to be an administrator or to be a pastoral leader thus disappointing expectations and at times causing tension both inside and outside the community and resulting in troubled leadership.

Many of the early choices about the way of life, the pattern of commitment and formation for assistants, the model of leadership and the carrying of authority, the decision making processes and structures can be seen to have been made on the assumption that there would be a long term committed body of assistants in the community. That this has not been so has brought the viability of the options taken

³¹⁴ At the end of the Identity and Mission Process 2005 there were six points raised that needed to be addressed by the Federation. One of these was the exercise of authority, and lack of clarity around the chain of authority..

into question today. The lack of understanding and clarity regarding the underlying premises for different community practices has also given rise to contradiction and tension.³¹⁵

As a consequence of Vanier's particular vision and choices made early on in the story, L'Arche occupies a liminal place in both civic and religious society. It is neither seen as a 'proper' religious community yet is centred on the Gospels and has a shared life of prayer nor is it seen as a 'proper' professional care service yet takes seriously care of people with learning disabilities.³¹⁶ It is neither a family home yet lives in a familial way, nor an institution with a model of staff and client and yet has a discipline of appropriate care and respect for the members with learning disabilities. In much the same way as people with learning disabilities question the norms of society so too have the communities of which they are members.

c. One Mind, One Heart, One Spirit

Covenant as a determining principle can be seen to be at work in the development of the international structures, in particular the Federation of L'Arche, the Charter, and the Covenant. The spread of L'Arche from a single community to an international federation of communities was not planned. It was led by the Spirit and the cry of the poor. Communities were founded in rapid succession across the world on a basis

³¹⁵ For example, the processes of discernment for leadership roles and decision making, the necessary formation, evaluation and discernment of vocation for assistants based on a shared understanding of community as a way of life and not a career or primarily a place of employment, the mutuality of expectation between the community as a body and individuals if there is to be viable long term commitment, and the importance of facing into tension and working through conflict as a path of human and spiritual maturity.

³¹⁶ Vanier has taken a line of inclusion (maybe based on the experience of suffering witnessed in the lives of people with disabilities who were so often excluded), and non ideological closure whether religious or social. Therefore the communities are 'open' and so do not have an exclusive religious adherence or single therapeutic model. This approach carries its own potential difficulties – a lack of named points of unity. I would maintain that Vanier has never denied that Jesus is the source of his life and action, but whether the radical implications of this are recognised by the members of L'Arche today remains a question, hence the equivocations and loss of orientation in recent years.

of affiliation and trust.³¹⁷ The basic criteria for new foundations were the desire to respond to the cry of the poor, and to be in a relationship of communion with Jesus.³¹⁸ There was no blue print of what constituted a L'Arche community. Each of the early foundations was a response to the needs of particular people with learning disabilities and an earthing of the initial charism in their diverse particular social, economic and religious context. Diversity was present from the beginning. The communities were autonomous and were only linked through their personal relationship with Vanier.

i. The Federation of L'Arche:

structures that embody and enable a unity of vision

In 1972 in response to the desire and felt need to establish and maintain greater unity amongst the first thirteen communities Vanier called together the founders of these communities, who began the process of establishing an international structure and writing down a shared vision. The fruit of this first meeting was the formation of the Federation of L'Arche Communities, and the eventual adoption of a constitution which articulated the purpose of the Federation and the animating principles, and put in place international structures to realise these purposes.³¹⁹ Over the years the structures of the Federation have been revised in order to meet the changing complexity brought about by the increased number of communities, but the goal of

³¹⁷ An example of the distribution of communities in the first 10 years: 1964: France; 1969: Canada; 1970: India; 1972 Denmark, Belgium; 1974: Ivory Coast, UK; 1975: Haiti.

³¹⁸ As with the first community clarity about the option for people living with learning disabilities as opposed to any body who was socially marginalised and in need often came later after experiences that revealed the limitations of the community to welcome beneficially all and sundry. Cf: Spink, *The Miracle*, pp. 68-69.

³¹⁹ The constitution of L'Arche has been revised across the years , the latest adopted in 1999. The purpose of the Federation is "to unite the communities in the common vision and spirit declared in the Charter of the Communities of L'Arche" and "[...] the communities of L'Arche adopt this constitution and structure to foster solidarity among communities, unify their diversity, establish the conditions for membership , develop new communities and to create conditions for trust, service, dialogue and mutual support." *Constitution of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities*, Paray-le-Monial, General Assembly of the Federation of L'Arche, 1999.

the structures have remained the same: to facilitate the lived sense of communion and the fact of belonging to the international family/ the Body of L'Arche.

The experience of communion with God through a life shared with people with learning disabilities was the focus of unity between the original thirteen communities,³²⁰ and the underlying character and purpose of the international structures have been therefore to enable “communion”, to unify diversity and to foster solidarity through the exchange of resources, and international encounter.³²¹ The General Assembly of the Federation meets in a different part of the world every three years. Whilst this is the Body that makes major decisions concerning the orientation of L'Arche, in effect its prime purpose is the renewal of links, and the regeneration of international intimacy between the communities.

The primary unit of the Federation is the community, and local ownership has been seen as fundamental. The international structures were established as a way of ensuring unity of vision, not of imposing unity of practice. However in order to preserve the primacy of relationship certain principles and practices have become part of the fabric of L'Arche throughout the world, even if at times contrary to local cultural practices. Over the years guidelines, for example, concerning management, leadership discernment, founding a new community, remuneration, and membership have been prepared at an International level drawing on the wisdom of the whole Federation in order to promote common underlying principles.

In establishing the Federation a conscious choice was made not to set up a centralised international organisation but a body, a people. The decision to adopt a written constitution signalled an important shift from a single charismatic leader to a

³²⁰ “These moments of communion are the revelation that God has created deep bonds between us.” Vanier, *Our Inner Journey*, Toronto, L'Arche Publications, quoted in Spink, *The Miracle*, p.135.

³²¹ This has been realised in diverse ways through the provision of international retreats and formations, the direct exchange between communities of practices and policies, and the Federation Meeting held once every six years.

more corporate model. With the introduction of an elected International Coordinator the principle that the identity and authority of L'Arche is to be found in the wisdom of the body and through attentive listening to the member with learning disabilities and not in one personality was established.³²²

The Constitution of the Federation sets out a way of being and working together that is more than collaboration. It articulates clearly the principles underlying the structures and the exercise of leadership roles within the Federation: Servant Leadership; Partnership; Subsidiarity; Accountability; Participation; Inculturation.³²³ These principles require that people are in relationships of trust and respect with one another and are ready to work with their differences and conflicts. They seek to enable empowerment and a recognition of unity in diversity. They are not about control and demand the maximum maturity of all concerned. Such principles and the subsequent practices both create and are dependent on there being a body of committed relationships. They also assume a shared openness to the working of the Spirit, and trust in God's faithfulness and abundance. The functioning of the Federation serves to embody a set of covenantal relationships.³²⁴

The Constitution (1999) describes the communities as “communities of faith, rooted in prayer and trust in God,” with the people with a disability and those who share life with them “at the heart”.³²⁵ It refers to the Charter as the foundational document; and specifies that the role of the International Coordinators is to be

³²² Vanier stepped down as International Coordinator in 1975, and left the International Council in 2003. He has in his person nonetheless remained an anchor and source of wisdom and authority.

³²³ Article 1. Principles, *Constitution*, 1999.

³²⁴ “III.2.1. Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all community members. [...] Such unity presupposes that the person with a handicap is at the centre of the community life. This unity is built up over time and through faithfulness. Communities commit themselves to accompany their members (once their membership is confirmed) throughout their lives [...] III.2.2. Home life is at the heart of L'Arche. The different members of the community are called on body. [...] III.2.3. The same sense of communion unites the various communities throughout the world. Bound together by solidarity and mutual commitment they form a world-wide family.” Charter of L'Arche, 2003.

³²⁵ Article 2.1 Communities, *Constitution*, 1999.

“attentive to the signs of the Spirit of God at work in L'Arche.”³²⁶ So whilst there is no explicit reference in the Constitution (1999) to covenant with God and with one another as an underlying model for the Federation, the language, structures and principles seem to make explicit a covenantal framework for the life of the communities together.

ii. The Charter of L'Arche and the search for shared identity³²⁷

The Charter of L'Arche articulates the vision of L'Arche and is the corner stone of the shared identity of the communities of L'Arche.³²⁸ Until 1993 there were two Charters, one that was written for an inter-faith context and so secular, and one that was explicitly Christian.³²⁹ Neither charter made explicit reference to any notion of covenant. In 1993 one International Charter was written and adopted so as to take seriously the ecumenical and interfaith identity, the evolving understanding of the experience and nature of L'Arche and to recognise and ensure unity within the Federation. It is striking to note that this Charter is more explicit about covenant.

The Charter (1993) only makes reference to the Christian origins of L'Arche in the preamble to the main text.³³⁰ However, its language draws heavily, although only occasionally explicitly, on the Judaeo-Christian story and the notion of covenant.³³¹ It is divided into four sections. The first two sections concerning the

³²⁶ Article 3.4. International Coordinator and Vice International Coordinator, *Constitution*, 1999.

³²⁷ Charter of the Communities of L'Arche, agreed by the General Assembly of L'Arche, Cap Rouge 1993

³²⁸ In 1973 two reasons were given for the need for a charter: i) to safeguard the spirit of the initial vision as verbal tradition was inadequate; and ii) to keep alive the fundamental vision of L'Arche. Charter of the Communities of L'Arche 1973.

³²⁹ In 1970 a charter was written in India as part of the legal requirements of the country. In 1973 the first international charter was approved by the newly constituted Federation of L'Arche making explicit the Christian roots and identity of L'Arche. “The first aim of L'Arche is to create communities inspired by the Beatitudes and the spirit of the Gospel.” The Charter of L'Arche, 1993, Section III para.1.

The two charters coexisted until 1993.

³³⁰ “L'Arche began [...] in response to a call from God [...] to share their life in the spirit of the Gospel and of the Beatitudes that Jesus preached. From this first community, born in France and in the Roman Catholic tradition [...].”

³³¹ For example, II, 2.1 “Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all the

Aims and Fundamental Principles contain many references to covenant as revealed in biblical texts. They refer to the covenantal character and actions of God:

- who hears the cry of the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan:³³²
“L'Arche seeks to respond to the distress of those who are too often rejected”;³³³
- who offers hospitality to the outsider and includes them in society: “to give them a valid place in society”;³³⁴
- who calls humankind to its true identity, as people who live in communion with God and one another: “a sign that a society, to be truly human, must be founded on welcome and respect for the weak and the downtrodden”;³³⁵
“the deepest need of a human being is to love and to be loved”;³³⁶
- who desires unity and forgiveness:³³⁷ “In a divided world. L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope.[...] to be a sign of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation”;³³⁸
- who desires relationship despite the disparity between God and humankind and promises to be faithful: “Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture [...]”;³³⁹
- who binds people together and makes covenant with a people: “all bound together in common humanity”;³⁴⁰ “who call others to share their lives.”³⁴¹

community members.”

³³² Exodus 3:7.

³³³ Section I Aims 1, Charter, 1993.

³³⁴ Section I Aims 1, Charter, 1993.

³³⁵ Section I Aims 1, Charter, 1993. cf. Matt.25: 40.

³³⁶ Section II Fundamental Principles 1, Charter, 1993

³³⁷ John 17: 22.

³³⁸ Section I Aims 4, Charter, 1993.

³³⁹ Section I Aims 4, Charter, 1993.

³⁴⁰ Section II Fundamental Principles 1, Charter, 1993.

³⁴¹ Section I Aims 2, Charter, 1993.

The theological basis of the communities is articulated most clearly in Section II Fundamental Principles, 4,³⁴² and Section III The Communities, 1.1.³⁴³ Whilst no direct reference is made to the heart of the Christian tradition - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the paschal mystery, these sections of the Charter when read in the context of Vanier's theology as made known in his writings, can be understood to make implicit reference to the Christian story and covenant.

The most explicit reference to covenant is made in Section III 2. Called to Unity.³⁴⁴ This whole section could be viewed as a summary of the underlying theology and spirituality (the embodiment in daily life) of covenant in L'Arche. The relationship of communion between God and humankind is made explicit and the working out of this covenant in the relationships between people is given form and bears the characteristics of God's covenant: personal, respecting and welcoming difference, long term commitment, known in the daily life, having at its heart, as its preference the needy and vulnerable, faithful in joy and suffering, forgiving, and binding people into one body/ one family.

The other sections of the Charter make explicit the community way of life in L'Arche and the importance of the communities being open and integrated in the world. They promote growth at all levels of being so that each person might attain

³⁴² "Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognised and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed." Section II Fundamental Principles 4, Charter 1993.

³⁴³ "They seek to be guided by God and by their weakest members, through whom God's presence is revealed." Section III The Communities 1.1, Charter 1993.

³⁴⁴ "2.1. Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all community members. This implies welcome and respect for difference. Such unity presupposes that the person with a handicap is at the centre of community life. This unity is built up over time and through faithfulness. Communities commit themselves to accompany their members (once their membership is confirmed) throughout their lives, if this is what those members want.
2.2. Home life is at the heart of a L'Arche community. The different members of a community are called to be one body. They live, work, pray, and celebrate together, sharing their joys and their suffering and forgiving each other as in a family. They have a simple life-style, which gives priority to relationships.
2.3. The same sense of communion unites the various communities throughout the world. Bound together by solidarity and mutual commitment, they form a worldwide family." Section III The Communities 2, Charter 1993.

maturity in his/her relationship with God and with others. The Charter describes L'Arche as a community that is intentional and mission oriented. Both of these characteristics are a consequence of a relationship with God and the preferential option for the person with a learning disability. The Charter witnesses that L'Arche is grounded in God's covenant, as made known in the person of Jesus, and accessible to all humankind.

iii. The history of Covenant Retreats and the announcing of the covenant

In the previous two sections we have looked at how the vision and shared identity of L'Arche has been given form and articulation through its structures and the writing of a Charter. In this section we shall look at how L'Arche has sought to address the need for an explicit naming of the bond between God and individuals and L'Arche, and between members within the communities.

A. Recognition and naming of the bonding between people and the commitment to one another

In 1979 at an international retreat in France the language of covenant was given to the desire of assistants to express and acknowledge the bonds that had been created through Jesus between them and the people with disabilities in their communities and their desire to remain faithful.³⁴⁵ Vanier, when asked how he understood and

³⁴⁵ "I would say a solemn moment when I can realise the depths of the commitment, seize it in all its fullness and then say 'Yes!'" Excerpt from the letter of Robert Larouche, March 1977 (Archives of L'Arche International, France.)

Robert Larouche, a French Canadian, founded L'Arche in Haiti in 1975. In a letter addressed to his brothers and sisters in L'Arche he expressed his desire to put words to his own experience and commitment to his relationships with the people of Kay San Josef (L'Arche Haiti). He shared his understanding of his journey in L'Arche, of how he felt called by Jesus to respond to the cry of Yveline, Joliboa, and others in Haiti and how he wanted to find a way of committing himself more fully. He recognised that in order to live this commitment faithfully he needed Jesus but that he also needed a sense of unity with others who were answering the same call. He articulated a desire to belong with them not only in a "spiritual community (created through our mutual desire to live the spirit of the Beatitudes in L'Arche)" but also in a "tangible community which gives strength to each person and which makes us trust each other and trust Jesus who is guiding us."

how he would describe this commitment responded that it was best described as an experience of covenant.³⁴⁶ He spoke of his own relationships with Père Thomas, Raphael and Philippe as a relationships given by Jesus and sacred. He believed “that Jesus was truly and mysteriously present in these relationships”.³⁴⁷ The formula used at the retreat to announce this commitment, this covenant, made it clear that this was not a vow nor the creation of a group amongst themselves, but a public announcement of a deep personal call to a commitment to Jesus and the poor in the different communities,³⁴⁸ and a recognition of a shared spirituality in which relationships with the poor are experienced as a privileged way of entering into the heart of Jesus, and the Church.³⁴⁹

However the fact that Robert's letter had spoken of the desire for a 'tangible' community and the fact that this new step had been undertaken outside of any decision making structure of L'Arche created tension and confusion within the wider body of L'Arche leaving some people with a feeling of exclusion and lack of clarity about what this 'covenantal announcement' meant.³⁵⁰

At the same time, as the seed had been germinating in Robert Larouche's heart Vanier himself had been preparing a book on community, *Community and*

³⁴⁶ Père Marie Dominique O.D. was the brother of Père Thomas Philippe O.D. and former professor of theology and philosophy for Jean Vanier at Le Saulchoir, Paris.

³⁴⁷ Appendix 2: History of Our Covenant in L'Arche, Guideline Document International 201, *The Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey*. (L'Arche International Mission Council 1999).

³⁴⁸ “(name) you are invited to live a covenant in L'Arche with Jesus and with all your brothers and sisters, especially the weakest and the poorest. Do you want this?” Guideline Document International 201, *The Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey*. (L'Arche International Mission Council 1999)

³⁴⁹ “Another element in the early history (and pre-history) of L'Arche is mysticism: that our daily lives in L'Arche can be a true sadhana (an Indian concept of the path to God) which implies deep union with God.” Excerpt from a letter addressed “*To All Who Have Announced The Covenant*” (Christine McGrievy, Jean Christophe Pascal, International Coordinators, 2003)

³⁵⁰ “L'Arche is founded on suffering. In deepening our understanding of L'Arche history we became more aware that this suffering has its origin in exclusion. We also recognise the experience of exclusion that was felt at the time of the first covenant retreat and the need, from the beginning, to integrate the covenant in the community.” Excerpt from a letter addressed “*To All Who Have Announced The Covenant*” (Christine McGrievy, Jean Christophe Pascal, International Coordinators, 2003)

Growth, in which he expressed many thoughts about covenant.³⁵¹ In this text he indicates that the specificity of L'Arche is that there are not two groups – the assistants and those who are helped, but one,³⁵² and that the relationship between the members with disabilities and the assistants is one of inter-dependency.³⁵³ He stated clearly that the covenant of God with the poor/his people is prior, and that the 'yes' of the covenant retreats in L'Arche is about receiving this gift from God through the poor and choosing to be a part of this covenantal relationship. The 'yes' is about a determination³⁵⁴ to be faithful to a relationship that is already in existence.³⁵⁵

The international covenant retreats have become a part of the shared life of L'Arche and evolved as different contexts raised new issues. The first retreats were held in Roman Catholic contexts and the announcement took place during the Eucharist, making a clear link with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the location of the new covenant. However with the advent of ecumenical retreats (in 1986), where there is no Eucharistic hospitality, the announcement has been made during a para-liturgy of the washing of the feet.³⁵⁶ The choice to wash one another's feet as recounted in the Gospel of John³⁵⁷ provided a symbolic enactment of what was at the heart of the experience of L'Arche, the covenant Jesus makes with each person and desires us to make with one another in community.³⁵⁸ Subsequent inter

³⁵¹ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 1979.

³⁵² Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.91.

³⁵³ “[...] we are there together, for each other. We are united in the covenant that flows from God and his people, God and the poorest.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.95.

³⁵⁴ “To be covenanted with others is to be earthed with them. It is God who has called us together to be a sign of fidelity and of love. If we begin to live in covenant as we enter community, it is sealed at a particular moment, maybe a very solemn one.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.82.

³⁵⁵ “There comes a point in a friendship when you and I recognise the relationship and determine to be faithful to it. By articulating this something happens to our relationship.” Bill Clarke, quoted in Spink, *The Miracle*, p.191.

³⁵⁶ After much consultation with both Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians it was decided that a re-enactment of the washing of the feet as related in John's Gospel both united people and opened up the sacramental nature of the daily life in L'Arche. See: “Para- liturgy of the Washing of the Feet”, Annexure 3, Guideline Document International 201, *The Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey*. (L'Arche International Mission Council 1999)

³⁵⁷ John 13: 34-35.

³⁵⁸ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p.251.

faith retreats adopted the same para-liturgy without the renewal of baptismal vows and incorporating other sacred texts.³⁵⁹ Whilst this adoption has been made without extensive or explicit theological reflection, it has been readily recognised as symbolic of a lived experience in the communities.

B) The Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey³⁶⁰

The announcing of covenant in L'Arche has had a chequered history and despite various attempts to clarify what is intended, it is still shrouded by tension.³⁶¹ A detailed reading of the International document on Covenant of 1999 reveals two possible sources of for this tension.

The many voices of covenant

At face value the document appears contradictory and highlights the many questions surrounding covenant. It is evident that throughout the document there are at work multiple layers of understanding about 'covenant'. There is a constant narrowing and expanding of the concept of 'covenant' which is consistent with Vanier's own theology of God's covenant as made known and embodied in Jesus yet with universal intent and so accessible to and for the well being of all humankind, and having privileged expression in the life of the Church, in community and with the 'poor'. Such an understanding has the following consequences:

- covenant is both particular and universal, and therefore whilst a relationship of covenant originates in a particular relationship it is nonetheless a bond

³⁵⁹ These retreats have been predominantly made in a Hindu/Christian context.

³⁶⁰ Guideline Document International 201, *The Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey*. (L'Arche International Mission Council 1999)

³⁶¹ “The questions around the covenant remain ambiguous and unresolved: 'Covenant is important but we need to change the language. Covenant expresses God's faithfulness to us: we need to help it find its place in our lives.' It is obvious that the structures mentioned above i.e. membership and covenant will not prove to be a viable means to foster commitment and belonging for the whole Federation.” Excerpt from Report Stage 2 – final doc. February 2011, Commitment and Belonging Steering Committee, Section C.1

that includes all people in L'Arche and so is not a commitment to any one person or community;³⁶²

- covenant is embodied in Jesus and the Church and is expressed symbolically through Judaeo-Christian language , i.e. in scriptural texts from the Bible, in the Eucharist, and the Washing of the Feet, yet is described as also being revealed in other sacred scriptures and embodied in all religions;³⁶³
- covenant is both personal (i.e. God and me) and necessarily corporate (God and the church; God and the community; me and you).³⁶⁴

God's covenant and “our covenant”

Secondly the document captures the experience of L'Arche and manifests the interplay and tension between radical openness and necessary limitation, between relationships which are personal and intimate yet essentially corporate and between lives which are flawed and limited and yet also home to God. It reflects Vanier's desire to embrace what is particular (and embodied) and his mystical relationship of communion with Jesus which has no bounds. There is however a lack of clarity about the difference between God's covenant with humankind and “our covenant” with one another, which is necessarily limited and needs to be embodied in particular people and to have social structures that enable human flourishing. Covenant involves free choice and relationship and therefore always remains risky but it also has obligations. The covenant document seems to indicate that the announcing of covenant is a promissory act yet is imprecise about with whom this

³⁶² Section I, para 1: Guideline Document International 201.

³⁶³ Section I, para 3: Guideline Document International 201.

³⁶⁴ Section II and Section III: Guideline Document International 201.

promise of intent to be faithful is made.³⁶⁵ There is inadequate information or clarity about the real embodiment of covenant in the life of L'Arche as a body.³⁶⁶ This lack of clarity appears to result in a contradiction in that the notion of “our covenant” in L'Arche remains personal when in fact it is purporting to speak of a corporate reality whose source and model is the embodied covenant made known in Jesus and the Church.

4. Forty years on: covenant and L'Arche today

Two major processes of self reflection that have been undertaken by the Federation of L'Arche since 2003 in a response to a growing awareness of a loss of clarity concerning the fundamental charism and identity of L'Arche.³⁶⁷ During the forty years since the original foundation there has been not only a rapid growth in the number of and the size of communities, but also significant changes throughout the world – socially, economically and culturally.³⁶⁸ Changes within the Federation have brought about losses as well as stimulating creativity and unexpected possibilities. The numerical growth of the Federation, and the rapid change over of assistants in the communities has seemed to work against the “familial” knowing of one another and the personal intimacy that was present in the early years of the Federation and which resulted in bonding and responsibility one for another. It has been difficult to

³⁶⁵ “[...] announcing one's covenant is an important act. It is putting flesh upon an intention to live the spirituality of L'Arche. It is giving our word to others, asking for their prayers.” Section III, para 1: Guideline Document 201

³⁶⁶ e.g. With whom is the covenant made – L'Arche International, or a particular community and with whom in that community? What are the practical consequences of announcing covenant between the individual and the body?

³⁶⁷ Identity and Mission Process (2003- 2005); and the current Commitment and Belonging Process (2009 -2012).

³⁶⁸ Although outside the range of this study we might cite the political shift in the balance of world power and meta narratives (epitomised in the binary characterisation of the free West and the countries of the iron curtain; free market and centralised controlled markets; individual rights and self determination and collective responsibilities and identity) of the mid twentieth century (when L'Arche started) and the early twenty first century when the democratic/ free market capitalist and communist models seem to have spent their energy and a different fundamentalism (religious?) seemed to fill the vacuum. Such social/political/ and economic shifts inevitably play a part in the history of L'Arche.

maintain a shared understanding of the foundational story and its place in the ongoing story. Multiple factors have challenged the identity of the communities and the cohesion and unity of the Federation.

These factors can be summarised as follows:

- Context: The context of L'Arche has changed in the last forty years, particularly in North Atlantic countries. The world of learning disabilities has evolved and service provision policies and legislation impose constraints that work against community and spiritual dimensions. L'Arche is also no longer seen to be on the “cutting edge” of the provision of care for people with learning disabilities;
- Changes in L'Arche: There are many more ways of living in L'Arche than offered in the original model. There is a pattern of long term assistants choosing to live outside of community houses. Employed staff are required in the face of chronic assistant shortages and shifts and working hours are required by legislation. The language and model of contractual employment has become more predominant and the culture of work has brought insecurity for long term assistants as this often means they have to leave at the end of a role. Few new assistants resident in the community houses intend to make long term commitments and so the possibility of renewing the original model is limited. There has also been a rapid change over of leaders and a need to appoint people from outside of the community as community leaders;³⁶⁹
- Changed social models: In the past the community proposed two models –

³⁶⁹ This choice has had benefits in that new blood has been injected into the system and people have brought in much needed skills and are better equipped to cope with the increasing intervention at a State level. The danger is that their more managerial model of leadership outstrips the model of servant leader and the pastoral nature of the role.

married or celibate. Today there are many more life style choices, modes of conjugality, and accepted sexual orientation;

- Changing religious context: Religious expectation and experience has changed radically in the last forty years; and there is a wider diversity of religious adherence, or none;
- Changed social values: Concepts of community, simplicity, vocation and long term commitment and stability stand in direct antipathy to current social values of individualism, consumerism, and all the variety of choice and change that entails;
- Personal or corporate: A lack of clarity in the communities around institutional authority and communal identity has resulted in commitment/membership becoming a personal and individual choice;
- Need for greater inclusion: In recognition of the fact that members with disability are active agents in mutual relationships, it is necessary to put in structures and practices that ensure their participation in the conversation concerning covenant, commitment and membership;³⁷⁰
- Cultural diversity: Due to the expansion of L'Arche there is a greater degree of cultural and religious diversity within L'Arche. This requires that L'Arche undertake a more conscious theological sharing about covenant as the underlying premise of L'Arche.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ “We are people with and without intellectual disabilities, sharing life in communities belonging to an international federation.”

³⁷¹ The basis for this summary is drawn from Jean Christophe Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report Session 3. Commitment*, (unpublished: delivered at the General Assembly of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, Kolkata 2008: ref: AGI -Kol- 08- Text- Rapport- JCP – Engagement -EN)

a. Identity and Mission

Between 2003 – 2005 all the communities of L'Arche undertook a common process of sharing and reflection in a response to the changed and changing reality both within the communities and around them.³⁷² The process itself embodied the desire to listen to all voices and to allow for the working of the Holy Spirit. The method of reflection was one of discernment based on prayer and reflection on both Scripture and experience. The goal of the process was to enable a review of the key elements of the founding story of L'Arche and in the light of the ongoing story to examine where the founding myth has drifted and what in the original story was contextual and not essential.³⁷³

The fruit of this work was an Identity and Mission Statement (2005). This statement is complementary to the Charter of L'Arche and seeks to capture the key elements of the identity of L'Arche in a language that is simple, and accessible to diverse social and religious cultures. During the first stage of the process 'relationship', 'transformation'³⁷⁴ and 'being a sign' were identified as significant characteristics of the identity of L'Arche.³⁷⁵ Whilst the final statement does not use

³⁷² Identity and Mission Process.

³⁷³ This process involved not only Jean Vanier telling the founding story and identifying the key elements (both grace-filled and suffering) and characteristics but each community and each community member telling their sacred story in the same way. It involved naming the graces as well as the shadows of the story, and the identification of the components of the Identity and Mission of L'Arche today. This was a process that sought to enable the 'Body' to speak, to hear all voices.

³⁷⁴ Jean Vanier, *An evening on Francis and Clare of Assisi*, (unpublished talk given to the General Assembly of the Federation of L'Arche in Assisi, May 2005). In this talk Vanier clearly equates transformation with experiences of compassion, and true encounter which lead to covenantal relationships in which “our hearts are transformed”. For him this is “the experience of the reality of the Gospel.” However this word (as so many in the lexicon of L'Arche) seems to have multiple applications and therefore the deeply spiritual / conversion of heart understanding is not necessarily the meaning ascribed when listening to its usage in L'Arche. It seems to be often used to refer to an experience of self awareness/discovery/acceptance without reference to God or the gospels. In this sense it has a psychological and human resonance without a transcendental axis.

³⁷⁵ The consensus on the essential elements of L'Arche were:

1. People with developmental disabilities and others sharing life together;
2. relationships that are a source of mutual transformation;
3. Faith and trust in God.

Other elements included: acceptance of weakness and vulnerability; competence and quality of care; cultural and religious diversity; membership of an international federation; openness to and engagement with the world.

the language of covenant, fidelity, promise, response to the cry, inclusions of the 'stranger' and communion/union with God, it seeks to express the importance of the dynamic of relationship between people with and without disabilities and a potential for mutual transformation. However I do not think this statement captures the mystical meaning of the experience or point towards a theology of God's hidden presence in the brokenness of the world, nor the hope of the paschal message. The risk in the language chosen is that the transcendental pull is lost, and the identity of L'Arche is reduced to the frame and scope of the horizontal relationships between us.

Of equal interest in this process were the six failures and obstacles³⁷⁶ which were identified in the second stage of the Identity and Mission Process as having distorted or hindered the living out of the basic convictions of L'Arche.³⁷⁷ The first three obstacles named are related directly to the question of the development of covenant in the institution of L'Arche and appear to raise serious questions about how far the communities have already been secularised.

1. Difficulty in recognising and naming God as central to daily life together, and the tendency for faith to remain a private matter;
2. Insufficient understanding of the founding story of L'Arche, limiting the

Source: Jean Christophe Pascal and Christine McGrievy, *Annual Report of the International Coordinators*, (France: L'Arche International, 2005, internally published).

³⁷⁶ Six failures and obstacles identified in Stage Two of the Identity and Mission Process 2003-2005:

1. Difficulty in recognising and naming God as central to daily life together, and the tendency for faith to remain a private matter;
2. Insufficient understanding of the founding story of L'Arche, limiting the community's flexibility, creativity, vision and sense of identity, and hindering the story's potential to challenge and transform;
3. Structures and patterns that do not effectively develop or sustain commitment, vocation and membership, and that do not sufficiently foster the interrelationship of community life, faith life and service provision;
4. Lack of clarity about authority and ambivalence about giving authority to leaders;
5. Difficulty in recognising, admitting and handling limits;
6. Many hurt and broken relationships, often because of lack of loving and honest communication.

³⁷⁷ This second stage sought to identify the shadow of the history of L'Arche, and the negative effects as they impact the present.

community's flexibility, creativity, vision and sense of identity, and hindering the story's potential to challenge and transform;

3. Structures and patterns that do not effectively develop or sustain commitment, vocation and membership, and that do not sufficiently foster the interrelationship of community life, faith life and service provision.

The overall process of reflection has been beneficial for the Federation and renewed a sense of hope, and of being able to struggle with the issues. It has enabled ownership of L'Arche and prepared the ground for the necessary shift from the founders to the second generation – a process of coming of age. It has opened up a capacity and thirst for dialogue and conversation and provided a frame for the ongoing and challenging work ahead. What the work does not identify but points too is the need for serious reflection on the underlying theological premises (in particular covenant) of L'Arche and its reformulated Statement of Identity and Mission, and their embodiment in practices that allow for human flourishing and commitment to the spiritual life of L'Arche.

b. Commitment and Belonging (2009 -2012)

In 2008 the International Coordinator launched a discernment process across the whole Federation on the subject of Commitment and Belonging.³⁷⁸ This undertaking arose from the Identity and Mission Process (2003-2005) during which it was noted that the structures of L'Arche were inadequate to the task of developing and supporting commitment, vocation and membership. A review of the history shows

³⁷⁸ Jean Christophe Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report Session 3. Commitment*, (unpublished: delivered at the General Assembly of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, Kolkata 2008: ref: AGI -Kol- 08- Text-Rapport- JCP – Engagement -EN) In this talk he drew heavily on an article previously published in the Letters of L'Arche by Patrick Fontaine, “*Another Look. The will to be changed, the desire to be transformed*”, Ed. Tina Bovermann, (France, Letters of L'Arche No. 125, 2008).

that there have been two steps taken by the Federation in an attempt to embody and ensure commitment and belonging. The first step was taken in 1978 with the development of the announcing of covenant, and, as discussed in Section 3.c.ii) above, was initiated with confusing messages about the personal and communal, about promise and intention, about inclusion and exclusion, and has subsequently held an ambiguous and tendentious place in the story of L'Arche. This has certainly had a negative impact on the ongoing development of commitment and belonging, but the questioning has also been a challenge to ideological certitude. The second step was taken in the late 1980s when guidelines concerning Membership for the whole Federation were developed.³⁷⁹ Few communities or regions have chosen to follow through with this work, even though its need is acknowledged.³⁸⁰ Attempts to address the questions surrounding membership have often resulted in fear, tension and resistance, as if the process of membership highlights differences between people in ways that work against the unity of the community. Exclusion has

³⁷⁹ Updates have subsequently been issued the latest being : *Guideline 203 L'Arche International* , approved by the General Federation of the Communities of L'Arche 1999.

³⁸⁰ In 2006 L'Arche Canada approved a Membership Document. (Zizi Pascal, *Membership Document approved May 26th 2006.PDF*, www.larchecommons.ca/files/show_file.php?id=288, (accessed 28/09/11)

In this document the link between covenant and membership is recognised: “1 Introduction: The process of a person's membership in a local L'Arche community is not a legal process meant to create legal relationships, yet it is a process with formal steps, anchored in personal and communal faith and in mutual relationships in community. This process takes a long time and is lived out through the different types and phases of membership. We discover over time that we are interdependent and are bound together in a covenant given by God. (*cf. A Covenant in L'Arche*)”. Too it distinguishes between belonging and membership (we might compare this distinction to the point made earlier about Vanier's insistence upon the form and the spirit – body and communion and the statement about commitment being personal yet having a significant communal dimension in the International Document (1999) on covenant “Covenant in L'Arche: an expression of our spiritual journey.”) and incorporates public announcement and recognition within the process: “Introduction 1: Belonging is a personal, inner reality; membership is a communal, outer reality. Membership is the outward recognition and support of an inner sense of belonging and confirms what is already being lived. Membership is an on-going intentional process of commitment to the community, rooted in mutual trust and relationships, for the growth of each person and for the community's mission.” L'Arche Canada Membership Document 2005.

This document utilises the language of vocation and covenant, and makes the commitment process between the community and the individual mutual and concrete. There is a commitment to the long term well – being of the confirmed member., *cf. Confirmed Membership 4.4.1*, L'Arche Canada Membership Document 2005.

This document acknowledges a multiplicity of ways of being a member: *3 Types of membership and ways of belonging* , L'Arche Canada Membership Document 2005.

This process of membership enables long term commitment that respects all parties.

remained a predominant fear.

In launching the current process of reflection on commitment and belonging the International Coordinator has encouraged the communities to take seriously the central dynamic of L'Arche, that relationships with people with learning disabilities open us up to the possibility of transformation, and to approach the process with an attitude of 'expectation' that something new will be given, and that the process itself offers the possibility of personal and communal change.³⁸¹ He suggests that in giving priority to transformation, commitment and belonging can no longer be viewed as something static and concerned with identity and place within a community, but as dynamic. This perspective takes into account the fact that relationship is never a closed reality, but avoids the struggle to find a form that meets the human need for commitment that is exclusive yet has inclusive intent. The final comments of the International Coordinator, however, witness to an underlying paradigm of God's covenant with humankind. For him personally commitment is “[to] choose the unknown, to abandon myself, with my people, in trust [and] to allow God to bring about fullness and abundance from everything that's nothing at all.”³⁸²

However, although the Commitment and Belonging Process is incomplete,

³⁸¹ Matt. 22: 2 – 10; Luke 14: 15 – 24. i) Just as the 'ideal ' guests did not respond to the invitation and the wedding hall was filled with unexpected guests who did not fit the original criteria, so too is L'Arche L'Arche today is hybrid and made up of all sorts of ways of being committed and belonging. “this parable calls us to no longer be afraid of opening up our frontiers and to welcome one another in diversity which is not the one we have chose.”

ii) What would be the necessary criterion for inclusion in L'Arche, and therefore commitment? What limits should be set on hospitality in L'Arche. The parables suggests the requirement demanded of the guests was that they put on a 'wedding garment'. Therefore the sole criterion is that they desire to change their clothes which in the biblical tradition (cf: Gen. 3: 7; Luke 15: 22; John 20: 5; Revelation 7: 14.) is about transformation. Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report* , (Kolkata 2008).

iii) Diversity is both a fact and fundamental to the identity of L'Arche, and the Charter of L'Arche (III 2.1.) calls the communities to unity founded on God's Covenant. Christine McGrievy, Vice International Coordinator for L'Arche, *International Coordinator's Report Session 2: Unity and Diversity (Keeping alive our mission)*, (unpublished talk at the General Assembly of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, Kolkata 2008).

³⁸² Pascal, *International Coordinator's Report*, (Kolkata 2008).

the Report from the Second Stage (2011) indicates that the present expression of covenant and the conversation about membership remains complex :

It is obvious that the structures [of] membership and covenant will not prove to be a viable means to foster commitment and belonging for the whole of the Federation. We should focus on how we are living the mission.³⁸³

c. Current status of the Announcing of Covenant in L'Arche

Despite the considerable reflection and sharing in L'Arche since the last document concerning covenant in L'Arche the matter remains uncomfortable. The Covenant Commission (2003-2006) reflecting on the relationship between covenant and the new Identity and Mission Statement (2005) commented it did not encompass all aspects of the covenant, and that announcing the covenant made a difference.³⁸⁴ This Commission also commented that there was further identified for further work around the relationship of a culture of contract and a culture of covenant, highlighting in their reports that there are conflicting self understandings at work within the rhetoric of L'Arche.³⁸⁵ The Commission was unable to provide tools for making further sense of this tension.

In April 2010 the International Vice Coordinator circulated a letter to all the communities recapitulating the story of covenant so far, acknowledging the gifts, but noting that “the questions raised at the inception of the covenant remain. In the last

³⁸³ *Commitment and Belonging Process, Steering Committee Report on Stage Two – long version* (CB – 110221 – Report Stage2 – final doc., L'Arche International, February 2011), Section C: 1.

³⁸⁴ Covenant Article for International Newsletter of L'Arche, Spring 2006 (International Covenant Commission).

³⁸⁵ i) The need to explore the relationship between covenant and mission;
ii) The need to look at the 'shadow'/ tensions that hang around covenant in L'Arche;
iii) The need to look at the relationship between contractual and covenantal relationships;
iv) The need to reflect on how minority voices within the Federation are able to access their 'prophetic' voices ;
v) The need to work with the communities on developing decision making and other community practices that are founded on the principles of covenant and mission as well as contract and service provision.

Recommendations from the Covenant Commission at the end of its mandate 2006 (not published).

few years tensions have been growing”.³⁸⁶ The letter further identified that in many communities covenant is no longer spoken about and that for some young people “the word has no meaning”; that in the first stage of the Commitment and Belonging process people spoke of the covenant as unclear and exclusive; and that strong tension was experienced around the announcing of the covenant at the end of the retreats.³⁸⁷ The letter concludes that therefore the process of announcing the covenant has been put on hold whilst further reflection is undertaken.

Conclusion

This chapter captures something of the complexity and vitality of the reality(ies) of L'Arche, and the genuine struggle of the communities to be faithful to their founding charism and to be united in their diversity. We have seen how the communities are engaged with the value systems and speech of their contemporary reality, and that they are both challenged and shaped by competing voices. We have heard too how they are seriously engaged with making sense of their experience, seeking to recognise what has changed both within L'Arche and in the world, and trying to understand the choices that they need and desire to make today.

In this chapter there have been recurrent themes: the relationship between what Robert Larouche called the 'spiritual' and the 'tangible' community, between spirit and embodying structure; the relationship between inclusion and exclusion; the relationship between and the difference and likeness of God's covenant with humankind and “our covenant”, that is the working out of our response to God's covenant in our relationships with one another in L'Arche.

Across the years the Federation of L'Arche has sought ways of developing

³⁸⁶ *To all the members of the communities* (Letter from Christine McGrievy, Vice International Coordinator, April 2010).

³⁸⁷ Process of reflection in all the communities of L'Arche over a period of three years 2009 – 2012 on the subject of Commitment and Belonging in L'Arche.

symbolic language and structures that embody the underlying vision, and name the source of identity and the points of unity. The person of the founder, Vanier has (and continues to do so) provided a essential point of unity for the Federation. There has been a conscious attempt to shift that point of unity into the Body of L'Arche through the development of the structures of the Federation, and a shared vision in the Charter and in the announcing of covenant. This shift has been taken seriously in the two discernment process concerning Identity and Mission, and Commitment and Belonging. However as the troubled and confused story around commitment and belonging reveals there appears to be deeper issues at stake. These issues are of prime importance to L'Arche. A failure to name them or an attempt to bring about a quick closure to a disturbing reality in the communities entrains a real danger of secularisation.

I would like to suggest that the deeper issues concern the true origin of L'Arche and the purpose of L'Arche, and whether covenant is understood to be contingent to L'Arche or constitutive. If as witnessed in Vanier's personal story and in the founding story of L'Arche, the origin of the foundation of L'Arche and the point of unity is God's promise of love, then the life of L'Arche would seem to be shaped by the language of covenant. The focus of L'Arche can then be seen not to reside in our relationships but in desire for the transformation of our desire, and the learning of how to love for Love's sake. The community becomes a privileged location for relationships that give opportunity for the transformation of desire.

The story of L'Arche witnesses to the way in which a community shaped by the language of covenant takes seriously our humanity, our cry for communion and friendship, and our limitation. For there to be the experience of communion there need to be structures. All structures limit, but offer the potential of freedom. It is

essential for L'Arche to struggle with the complex questions around commitment and membership if it is to fulfil its covenantal obligations with integrity. The limitation that now seems exclusive and limiting might then be recognised as life giving and enabling a greater expansion and inclusion.

Voices of the assistants

“Are you going to stay with me?”

The goal of this chapter is to listen to the voices of long term assistants in L'Arche and to hear from them their experience of covenant and covenantal living within the communities. The interviews which form the basis of this chapter provide insight into both personal and corporate self understanding and give direct access to the experience, questions, disappointments and hope of the people living within L'Arche today. It offers the possibility of hearing the current relationship between the underlying theological premises of L'Arche as articulated by Vanier, and their embodiment in the structures, documents and policies, and choices of L'Arche over the years. It also offers the possibility of identifying any anomalies and their origins, which in turn may enable a better understanding of the current “cry” of assistants concerning the integrity and future of L'Arche.

The chapter is divided in two parts. The first looks at the methodology used for gathering and analysing the interviews, and the second presents an analysis which is divided into three sections covering the assistants understanding of their motivations for choosing L'Arche; what they have discovered in L'Arche; and their experience of community as a place of belonging, commitment and covenant.

1. Methodology

As indicated in the Introduction I have drawn on the theory and methodology used in ethnographic research. In order to hear the experience and perspective of long term assistants I undertook nine individual interviews. This provided the basis for

the material in this chapter, and through the analysis of which I have been able to gather shared understandings and beliefs concerning their corporate and individual life in L'Arche.

a. Interviews

The interviews were informal and semi-structured in that I drafted a questionnaire composed of five topics, each with a series of related but open ended questions. As indicated in the introductory letter of invitation, which explained the purpose of the study and the interviews, the questions were intended to provide guidelines and none were obligatory. Each interviewee was invited to tell 'their story' in their way, the main purpose of the questions being orientation and limitation. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, checked, and amended and confirmed by the interviewee.

The interviews took the form of 'life history'³⁸⁸ and the questions covered the following topics:

- i. What we bring to L'Arche - personal back ground/family/ education/work/ faith/prior involvement with people with learning disabilities.
- ii. Beginnings in L'Arche – motives, first experiences, key experiences and people, L'Arche as it was then and today, turning points in understanding/awareness;
- iii. Community: when it has worked or not worked for the interviewee; negative experiences; ways of dealing with these experiences;
- iv. Commitment and Belonging: experience of this;
- v. L'Arche and God: looking at vocation – formation, shape, meaning, recognition, and nurture.

³⁸⁸ Fetterman, *Ethnography*, p. 61. Life histories “ capture an individual's perception of the past and provides a unique look at how the key actor thinks and how personal/cultural values shape his perception of the past.”

Although the research agenda was concerned with covenant and covenantal living, the questions did not directly incorporate this notion or language. The decision not to include any direct reference made room for the individual to choose their own 'language' and make meaning of their experience in their own way. Of the nine interviewees seven chose to specifically use the language of 'covenant', whilst all described and gave meaning to experiences which pointed to an underlying metaphor of covenant.

The fact that I as interviewer was familiar not only with the life of L'Arche, but was also a known contemporary of the interviewees had the double benefit of a readily given trust and a depth and quality of intimate revelation and sharing, as suited the subject matter. There was an assumed and real common knowledge and experience which enabled the interviewees to explore the questions honestly and with open affirmation and critique. A further consequence of both the open ended nature of the questions and the confidence in the interviewer was that the interviews, intended to last about one and a half hours, ranged between three and six hours (in several sittings). The flexibility and length of the interviews allowed an interviewee to return to earlier material and to expand on it. Whilst this made subsequent analysis of the interviews more complex, it was valued by the interviewees themselves. Several commented that they had not previously 'thought about it' in this way. They were in effect over the course of the interview wrestling with making sense of their experience and in the process developing new insights, and perhaps articulating them for the first time.

The disadvantage of such familiarity was the danger of over involvement, or wrongly assumed common understanding/knowledge. The fact that I too have a lived experience in L'Arche, my own interpretation of the founding story and my

own story, a particular involvement and knowledge of people and events, meant that there was a real risk of not hearing accurately or with fresh ears the information being shared. The sheer fact of sharing an intimate space (the depth and freedom of sharing was impressive) ran the risk of a 'new myth' being created between us. It was impossible to not be subjective, and interactive, and whilst as interviewer I attempted to assume a non-judgmental orientation, the interviewees at times sought dialogue. I tried to accommodate this need through posing further more nuanced questions related to their own desire to explore specific issues. They used the space to visit and revisit material that deeply affects their lives. This made subsequent analysis complex as at times there appeared to be contradictory information across the total interview. In fact the interviewee was moving from the simple narration of fact or early understanding of the experience to a more nuanced and reflected understanding of the deeper and often paradoxical meaning. The process of the interview and the correspondence I could give through my own person and life facilitated this deepening process, as well as revealing to me both the lack and need of such risk taking opportunities for sharing together. This in fact is a necessary element of covenant in L'Arche.

b. Criteria for interviewees

The initial criteria were that the interviewee be an assistant resident in a community house with people with learning disabilities for a minimum of ten years, and be committed to this way of life as her/his vocation. However due to limits of distance, time and finances it was further decided to limit the number of interviewees to 10 and for them to be accessible within the UK or Europe.³⁸⁹ These criteria obviously

³⁸⁹ In fact nine interviews only were completed, as the tenth interviewee withdrew at the last moment.

limited the study at the level of possible diversity and plurality, and adequate representation of a worldwide and interfaith Federation of communities.

In the event the criteria were enlarged to include not only celibate assistants resident in a community house but celibate and married assistants who had previously been resident in a community house but were now living in separate accommodation as members of a L'Arche community. This shift allowed for a more diverse and plural voice even if it did not overcome the cultural and social bias of Western communities. The advantage of the change of criteria was the breadth of experience and the possible comparison of the reasons for and consequences of choices made (to live in as celibate or to live out as single or married) and whether they informed a fuller understanding of the primary goal of the study concerning covenantal living as a long term live in assistant. Due to the limited availability and the restricted original criteria the first seven interviewees were female.³⁹⁰ The subsequent inclusion in the study group of two male married assistants meant that both genders were included in the selected group. The disadvantage of the expanded criteria was the risk that the voices might be understood as idiosyncratic and that there was a lack of comparative study material within the precise same criteria. In my opinion this risk was not only necessary but also fortuitous as it revealed the similarity of experience and meaning-making between people living the charism of L'Arche with different lifestyles, as well as highlighting the particularities of the main focus of the study – the meaning and experience of covenantal living for long term assistants 'living with' people with disabilities.

³⁹⁰ Interviewees were chosen from people known to me and people recommended to me by National Coordinators of L'Arche in the UK, France and Belgium.

c. Composition and back ground of the study group

The study group consisted of 7 celibate females and 2 married males. 8 were between 45 and 54 years old, and 1 was 63. The majority of the group grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. The 9 interviewees came from 6 different countries of origin (Iraq, Canada, USA, Poland, Ireland, UK), and currently are members of communities in 6 different countries (Canada, Ireland, UK, France, Poland and Switzerland). 8 of the 9 lived in more than 1 community and in a different country. 5 of the interviewees spent their first years in the founding community of L'Arche Trosly, in France and personally knew the Founder Jean Vanier. 3 are still members of L'Arche Trosly. 5 are currently members of communities in countries other than their country of origin. The number of years lived in L'Arche ranged between 18 to 35 years. 8 of the 7 had undertaken further education in a wide range of subjects – economics, law, theology, English literature and philosophy, genetics, occupational therapy, commerce and business administration, medicine and special education. All of the study group came to L'Arche as practising Christians (Roman Catholic and Syrian Christian).

2. Analysis of the interviews

a. Searching for God: the invitation

The main motivating factor for all the participants in the study group was a quest for God.³⁹¹ This quest for God was articulated in various ways: a way to “follow Jesus”;³⁹² looking for “meaning”;³⁹³ “unity of being”;³⁹⁴ “it was very important that I live my faith and my values in my work and my home life. I did not want to live the

³⁹¹ Interview 1, para. 16.

³⁹² Interview 3: para. 3.

³⁹³ Interview 9: para. 6.

³⁹⁴ Interview 8: para. 6.

split.”;³⁹⁵ “a way of life that unified my desires [...] I can live out my faith and act in the world in a way that corresponds with my need for justice and solidarity in the world - to pay attention to people who are more vulnerable”;³⁹⁶ “to live something deeply with Jesus and to see how he is calling you deeply into God's love and humanity”;³⁹⁷ a place “to be there” for the particular other.³⁹⁸ Whilst all had had some incidental contact with people with disabilities in their earlier life, only three had had any direct involvement with people with physical disabilities, two through a family member and the other through volunteer work as a teenager which led to studies in the field of disabilities. Care for people with learning disabilities was not the primary motivating factor in their original choice to come to L'Arche. They came because of a prior relationship with God and desire to deepen this relationship.³⁹⁹

In reviewing their own life story prior to L'Arche most of the participants recognised that the seeds of what they all called their vocation had been sown in earlier experiences, whether of social injustice,⁴⁰⁰ a family member with disabilities,⁴⁰¹ or family patterns and structures,⁴⁰² and in their childhood religious experiences.⁴⁰³ One participant who grew up in a context where the “Church was our

³⁹⁵ Interview 2: para. 6

³⁹⁶ Interview 7. para. 6.

³⁹⁷ Interview 3, para. 4.

³⁹⁸ Interview 9, para 5.

³⁹⁹ “I did not come to L'Arche because of people with a disability. I came because I was responding to a call from God. That is very clear for me. It was there (in L'Arche) that I could live out my faith[...]it was here that God was waiting for me. What motivated me was desire to follow Jesus and that it was in this place that I would follow him. This was given in that first visit. During my first visit it was clear that this was the place, and over the years this has been confirmed. At the beginning there were no great signs save one feels good about being there and there are no other reasons to go else where. But with time it is confirmed. I came to L'Arche because of Jesus.” Interview 7, para. 7.

⁴⁰⁰ For example: whilst volunteering in a State institution for the destitute and witnessing abuse of patients as well as having positive experiences of both relationship with and witnessing the gifts of the marginalised: Interview 4. para. 4.

⁴⁰¹ For example: the impact of and awareness of having a sibling with physical disability: Interview 8, para. 1.

⁴⁰² For example: Hospitality in family home of neighbours with disability: Interview 9, para. 2; Interview 7, para.2. Shared prayer life of parents and family: “They prayed with us and they prayed together. It is incredible to think about it today. It was a part of our daily life. I am sure it shaped us strongly. There was no separation between the faith life and daily life even if in the time of communism it was something you often had to deny – your values.”: Interview 2, para. 1.

⁴⁰³ For example: “When I was 6 at my first communion I met Jesus, and here (L'Arche) was the

mother” recognised that the strong Christian shaping of her family and social life put her “story in a particular context.”⁴⁰⁴ Later speaking about commitment she referred back to these childhood experiences:

I am committed with a commitment already made. I am speaking of covenant. God made a covenant with my parents (my ancestors) and with my country, and I am born of my parents and so of this covenant, and a covenant is made with me. And today I recognise very simply this covenant and I understand my commitment in this way. My commitment in L'Arche is simply a reaffirmation of this covenant.⁴⁰⁵

This re-reading of their earlier life experiences was significant and pointed to a continuity of God's presence and the action of God in their lives.⁴⁰⁶ They felt that God was calling them, inviting them into a particular relationship with Him and a particular way of life: “I was sure Jesus was calling me. It was something I could not refuse. I had to do it.”⁴⁰⁷ This invitation was made to them through the lives of other long term assistants⁴⁰⁸ and people with learning disabilities⁴⁰⁹ in L'Arche.

place that I could live this intimate relationship with Jesus. This was the earth for that.” Interview 6, para. 10.

⁴⁰⁴ Interview 5, para. 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Interview 5, para. 8.

⁴⁰⁶ “No doubt that I am being led.” Interview 2, para. 13.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview 3, para. 3.

⁴⁰⁸ For example: Through the founder, Jean Vanier: “I was a seeker of truth. I was someone who had discovered a personal relationship with God thanks to my first retreat with Jean Vanier, where I said I heard a voice I had been waiting to hear all my life. And it was not the voice of Jean but of God using Jean as his instrument. That changed my life [...] I discovered friendship, a fundamental relationship which grew little by little [...] and has given a centre to my life, a meaning to my life, an inner connection with God. (I came to L'Arche because) It was a call from God embodied in a person called Jean Vanier who said, 'Come for a year' [...] as he has said to many others before and to many others since.”: Interview 8, paras.3 and 5;
Through a long term assistant: “[...] there was something about the covenant between her and X [...] like by osmosis I lived in it[...] her way of being with , her way of talking about people, her way of talking about L'Arche, her way of passing it on and transmitting. Her way of listening to me [...] There was something a about mutuality[...] And as a result because her relationship with me was the same as with the people with disabilities, I got the sense we were all in this together.”: Interview 3, para.7.

⁴⁰⁹ For example: “When you came to E. she would spit and people would go away[...] When her anguish began everybody would get it - me too. I saw them all leave. We had two chairs sitting there together. I was holding her hand so she would not beat the heck out of herself. She turned and looked at me [...] and the only thing I wanted - that was screaming inside me – was to go out. [...] But here eyes were like that and she was looking deeply into me and it was as if she was saying to me , 'Are you going to stay?'.[...] Edith was just like Jesus saying, 'Are you going to stay with me? Are you going to follow? Are you going to come? ”: Interview 6, para. 6.

b. An invitation to what?

i. An invitation “ to be in God”⁴¹⁰.

Whilst for some this invitation to be in God, to have a personal relationship with God was revealed through an assistant,⁴¹¹ for most the experience was through the life and witness of the person with a disability,⁴¹² and through their offer of a friendship that opened the other to Jesus/God.⁴¹³ This invitation was to the awareness of God's faithful and loving presence in their lives.⁴¹⁴

ii. “Relationships that become mutual are transformative. That is the journey with God.”⁴¹⁵: to love for Love's sake

On a practical level each assistant was asked by L'Arche to come and make home with men and woman with learning disabilities, an experience which initially for many was mixed, arousing feelings of fear, repulsion, and distress,⁴¹⁶ as well as

⁴¹⁰ Interview 2, para.13.

⁴¹¹ “Jean called me. He showed me the face of God. He revealed to me that God is a person who loves, who invites me into relationship ”: Interview 8, para. 8.

⁴¹² “I would say I have learned what it is to have a personal relationship with God whilst in L'Arche[...] that is to speak with God, to let the Word of God echo through my life. That image of a vulnerable God who is close to us – that was formed within me in L'Arche [...] that image of God incarnate, God who is present in our daily life, who suffers, God as brother, someone who is close and with whom we can speak [...] having been witness to the relationship of certain people with disabilities with God, that has really marked me [...] there were people who were very very handicapped yet when they went into the chapel you knew something happened. For example, F who did not speak, had a strength of presence...there is something that happens and you are just the witness. It is overwhelming and it forces you to find your own relationship with God [...] it is something to do with (their) closeness with God, heart to heart.” : Interview 7, para 17.

⁴¹³ “There has been something about Jesus leading me to to people and people leading me back to Jesus. How do you speak of the presence of God in all of that.? God is; He is there.”: Interview 3, para. 9.

“It has taught me so much about living relationships and opened me up to different realities of human existence, and God. For sure God. Discovering Jesus in the poor.” : Interview 3, para.9.

⁴¹⁴ “My life here is filled with the presence of God, of Jesus and Mary whom they (people with disabilities) love very much. God is presence. Jesus is presence. I have been shaped by that in my life here.”: Interview 6, para.10.

⁴¹⁵ Interview 8, para. 21.

⁴¹⁶ “I came and saw and I was deeply deeply touched by what I saw. I was deeply challenged and disturbed by what I saw.”: Interview 8, para.5; “When her anguish began everybody would get it – me too. [...] The only thing I wanted - that was screaming inside me – was to get out.”: Interview 6, para. 6;

“In the beginning I was helping someone have their bath and I found it awful. There was nothing beautiful about this person in terms of his body.” : Interview 5, para. 7.

compassion and gentleness.⁴¹⁷ There was nothing obvious about entering into a mutual relationship with a person with learning disabilities, nor were their gifts necessarily apparent. Whilst the interviewees had not come for a job,⁴¹⁸ nonetheless there was a disparity of life experience and expectation that did not make mutual relationship evident.⁴¹⁹ All recounted moments of encounter,⁴²⁰ of recognition⁴²¹ that not only changed their perceived status as care giver to one of friend,⁴²² but were life changing, and brought about transformation.⁴²³ The status of friend was an acknowledgement of a commonality of fundamental life experiences and a readiness to share that with the other. It entailed an openness to share at the level of the heart despite the disparity of life opportunities and the circumstances and choices of life.

iii. Anguish as a meeting place with God. The presence of God in suffering

The experience of being in front of and learning to stay with the suffering of the

⁴¹⁷ “When I came to Trosly I was very happy. The atmosphere of the community suited me – it was familial, at home. [...] I received so much at a human, spiritual and emotional level. I formed very strong relationships with the members with a disability. There were experiences early on of tenderness [...]” : Interview 7, para. 6.

⁴¹⁸ “In the 1980s you did not come for work!...No then we came because we had heard of Jean Vanier, because of what he said, because we were looking for a spiritual way, a Christian life or community.” : Interview 7, para.8.

⁴¹⁹ “She was a friend. It went beyond being a care giver. No, she was a friend. I always said she had everything not to succeed in life. She had nothing going for her, when you looked at who she was, when you looked her body. Yet she was incredible.”: Interview 3, para. 7.

⁴²⁰ “[...] who have been formative for me and great friends. [...] with each one you have to go beyond the appearance. And once you have found the kernel it is as if you are touching the Source, and it is incredibly rich. Sometimes however it is a struggle to get there.”: Interview 7, para. 11. (cf: Suffering Servant Isaiah: 53)

⁴²¹ “For me I was touched that he was able to be with me in a way that I needed at that moment and to share something that was precious to him (his freedom/his bicycle). This was a very powerful moment for me and for our friendship. You can spend a lot of time with someone and not reach that place – he was present to me in my need. We speak a lot of reciprocity. It is at these moments when someone is really present to you that you know this solidarity, this mutual recognition.” : Interview 7, para. 6.

⁴²² “I had helped B with a bath every morning. During the prayer on my birthday, one of the assistants read from John's Gospel and B crawled across the floor with a bowl and jug of water and proceeded to wash my feet in a very intentional way. That blew me away, and if I am in L'Arche today it is because he did that; because at that point I discovered we were brothers. I gave him a bath every day and here he was very consciously and intentionally washing my feet...that discovery of mutuality which was very very profound.”: Interview 9, para. 8.

⁴²³ Interview 8, para. 6.

other⁴²⁴ was key to the spiritual conversion of heart of the assistants.⁴²⁵ It enabled them to face into their own anguish,⁴²⁶ and to come to an awareness that Jesus was present at the heart of suffering.⁴²⁷

iv. Incarnation: Communion and the Body

In the experience of the assistants the body as the place of communion and covenant with God was of considerable significance. Invited to care for the broken bodies and hearts of the people with a disability they narrated experiences where they felt they were 'touching' Jesus, and were in the presence of God.⁴²⁸ The daily life “filled out the liturgy. The Word of God would take flesh.”⁴²⁹ The assistants spoke of the relationship between the Eucharist and the intimate and physical relationship they had with people who were suffering, and of the sense of both holding the other and holding/receiving the Body of Christ. Just as they had been very intimate with the person with disabilities because of their need for personal care and presence, and because of the shared life together, so too they were called into intimacy with Jesus through the person with a disability.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁴ “You were in front of raw anguish, not anguish you could do something about - raw anguish.” Interview 6, para 6.

⁴²⁵ “I had such a profound sense of communion with God[...] I said to myself, 'I have found my home, my spiritual home' [...] I had found meaning [...] unity of being [...] this treasure [...] and I had experienced it in partnership with, in company with a very anguished man called E.” Interview 8, para. 6.

⁴²⁶ “Living with A who drove me crazy, but at the same time her suffering and her anguish, especially after all I had been going through – discovering my own anguish and ambiguities and problems that I had to work on, it really sort of brought me to a kind of communion with A, that finally in the end we really are not different.”: Interview 3, para. 8.

⁴²⁷ “I found living in La Forestière was like living Good Friday. [...] there is no place that he has not been. So there is no place that he is not there with us. I learned that here in the daily life.”: Interview 6, para. 10.

⁴²⁸ “Jesus was in the touching. E could not talk but there was physical contact.. [...] I had to go out of myself like I had never done [...] I remember living moments of literally discovering something of the sacredness of the human body.”: Interview 3, para. 7.

⁴²⁹ Interview 6, para. 10.

⁴³⁰ “We both received the Body of Christ [...] I remember the transformation. [...] He curled up on my lap like a little child, and with this most peaceful and serene expression he fell asleep. It was such a contrast to this anguished all over the place person he had been before...I had such a profound sense of communion with God [...] I said to myself, 'I have found my home, my spiritual home' [...] I had found meaning [...] unity of being [...] treasure [...] and I had experienced it in partnership, in company with a very anguished man called E.”: Interview 8,

v. Difference and unity

Each assistant related the process of arriving in the community and being confronted by people who were very different from them, other than them.⁴³¹ Their task was to take care of these people, and to 'be with'.⁴³² This experience of difference (for example, self mutilation, incapacity to swallow without regurgitating food, spontaneous hugging, destructive behaviour towards others, katatonic behaviour) took them way beyond their “comfort zone”. In the process of being with the person with disability a relationship develops, partly because of the necessity of physical intimacy and time spent together,⁴³³ and there are positive experiences of “being welcomed just as we are”.⁴³⁴ However “when you enter into relationship sooner or later you come up against difference and difference is challenging and at some level frightening and you experience fear,”⁴³⁵ The response to fear is to protect oneself and to “build a wall”.⁴³⁶ The “invitation of L'Arche and I would say marriage, because the dynamic is exactly the same, is to not protect or to build a wall but to build a bridge.”⁴³⁷ This choice of openness towards the other⁴³⁸ creates an opportunity “to recognise that within that difference there is similarity,”⁴³⁹ and that both have need,

para.6.;

“[s]he was in a very bad mood [...] at the moment of consecration [she] turned her head and looked at me and looked at the altar [...] at the end of the mass she was putting her arms around my neck and putting her mouth up to give me a kiss [...] something I lived around the Eucharist and forgiveness and E's body held by mine [...] 'This was a covenant moment' [...] and literally living it. Like physically...there is something when you are called in your whole person.” :

Interview 3, para 7

⁴³¹ “But when I was arriving a week later, moving in and seeing F this guy with Downs Syndrome, I thought, 'O my God what am I doing here? I have to live with this person.' It was a shock.”:

Interview 3, para. 4.

⁴³² Interview 9, para. 21.

⁴³³ Interview 7, para. 15.

⁴³⁴ Interview 7, para. 15.

⁴³⁵ Interview 9, para. 21. Other examples of fear experienced being confronted with another's self violence and not knowing how to stop it or take away the obvious suffering in the other, can make one feel powerless and give rise to surprising feelings of anger and violence within oneself. There can be a feeling of being out of control of oneself and the fear of hurting the other. In an attempt to eliminate the pain.

⁴³⁶ Interview 9, para. 21.

⁴³⁷ Interview 9, para. 21.

⁴³⁸ “I want to live with that openness and to be able to welcome the unexpected, the stranger, what we had not planned.”: Interview 2, para 14.

⁴³⁹ Interview 9, para.21.

desire, and capacity to be in relationship. This similarity is referred to in the interviews as the experience of mutuality, and that this mutuality is at the heart of “what it is to be human.”⁴⁴⁰ Therefore being in the community with people with disabilities is not so much about “taking care” or ensuring their “development” but “to work at the level of their identity,”⁴⁴¹ that is their fundamental identity as someone who has the potential to be in relationship with God and with others.

The interviewees understood that to work at the level of identity is both to recognise the “beauty” of the other and to reveal this fact to this other through one's own life choices and their relationship.⁴⁴² It is also to acknowledge that the people with learning disabilities are bearers of God's presence for us,⁴⁴³ and “someone whom we want to live fully and with whom [we] have pleasure to be,”⁴⁴⁴ and who is God's Beloved.⁴⁴⁵ This process of being hospitable to the difference of the other was described as “the journey of life, the journey with God.” It is through the welcome of difference⁴⁴⁶ that we are each led to discover that we have all been “created in the image of God”, and that we are one in this image.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁰ Interview 7, para. 15.

⁴⁴¹ Interview 7, para. 15.

⁴⁴² Interview 8, para. 5.

⁴⁴³ “[...] being open to finding God's presence in the other person.” : Interview 4, para 11.

⁴⁴⁴ Interview 7, para. 11. This description of the interviewee's “vision of the person” echoes Jesus' desire for his followers that they might have joy (John: 15, 11.) and the baptism of Jesus, “This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3, 17.)

⁴⁴⁵ Interview 6, para. 7. Here the interviewee describes the death of a woman with disabilities by referring to the Song of Solomon: 8, 5, “See him comes from the desert leaning on his Beloved” and adding “That's it. You are there. You have accomplished it. That she had accomplished her life [...] made such a path of maturity. And for us our role ,if we can say that, is to reveal the beauty because they will still be handicapped.”

⁴⁴⁶ For example, difference of gender, of cultural and social behaviour, difference of personality and ways of functioning in the world, the differences brought about in how we relate and what we expect of each other in terms of presence and intimacy due to both positive and negative early childhood experiences.

⁴⁴⁷ “[I] discover that I am created in the image of God and that you are created in the image of God and that we are equal. That we are all unique manifestations of God and that in that one 'Godness' we are united as One. That is what the spiritual journey is about[...] and L'Arche is a way which enables an experience of that because the experience of living with difference, primarily in this case people with learning disabilities, but also other differences, forces you to confront that. That is what the experience of living in has been such an essential crucible for that experience because it makes it happen very quickly.[...] That is the paradox – the difference does not go away, the otherness does not go away yet at the same time it is all one. [...] In that sense it is a path to discovering God within yourself and within the other which is a way of discovering God in

However all the interviewees recognised that this process of welcoming the different other, and of entering into friendship and mutuality is more complex with other assistants than with people with disabilities, but that it is essential to work for the same kind of mutuality if L'Arche is to be true to what it says: “that mutual relationships are the foundation of our life, and that people with disabilities show us the way of living this.”⁴⁴⁸ The reasons given for the difficulty of establishing mutual relationships with other assistants included the fact that they meet more at the level of function, they “collaborate”, and in one community use the language of colleagues to describe their relationship, thereby indicating a tacit distancing,⁴⁴⁹ that the assistants do not have the same necessary 'intimacy' between them as occurs through the physical care with the person with disabilities; and that often intimacy between the assistants arises because of conflict.⁴⁵⁰ The power imbalance with the person with a disability is explicit and is necessarily accommodated and regulated in the life together if the limitation and vulnerability of the person with a disability is not to be exploited. The rivalry between assistants is, however, less easily acknowledged and named. If the impact of the 'different other' is not owned, it manifests itself in obstructive and even destructive behaviours within the team and risks being deflected onto weakest person, the person with disabilities. When there is self awareness, a facing into the difficulties, and honesty about the personal and group dynamics, there is also great possibility for growth and new life.

everything. That is the paradox – the difference does not go away, the otherness does not go away yet at the same time it is all one. If you go one way or the other it is heresy. You have to hold them together. Jesus is God and man. You have to hold them together I am divine and I am human; I have to hold the two together. I am not God but I am, and in being I share in God's existence, so participate in but am not the totality of the divinity, but I share in it and am adopted into it not because of anything I do. It is gift. I participate in a bigger story. [...] This is the revelation - not only Jesus is God and man but everyone. Now you are both God and man. You share in both now.” Interview 9, para. 21.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview 7, para. 7.; “ E had a strong relationship with each of us. She had different relationships and around her we (the assistants) became united. E and L brought unity.”: Interview 6, para. 7.

⁴⁴⁹ Interview 7, para. 16.

⁴⁵⁰ Interview 7, para. 7; “You have conflicts, but those conflicts are about growth.”: Interview 6, para. 7.

In the relationships between the assistants and the people with disabilities whilst there is a recognition of shared needs and responses in terms of human relationships, there is nonetheless a difference that always remains as with a child, so the identification is never complete. Therefore the first “labour of the heart” for the assistant in their meeting with the person with a learning disability is not so much the acknowledgement of difference (that in terms of managing life is self evident) but to recognise what they both have in common - the capacity and qualities necessary for relationship. However when faced with another assistant the primary difference is less evident, and the labour of the heart is to see the difference of the other and to welcome it rather than being threatened at the level of identity.⁴⁵¹

vi. New life out of death: the gift of vulnerability

Loss, death and grief figured extensively in the interviews. These experiences came about for many and different reasons, such as the consequence of natural death, the fact of living with a disability, community processes of discernment, change of leadership roles,⁴⁵² structural failures and injustice,⁴⁵³ the consequence of life choices, and failed relationship.⁴⁵⁴ Such experiences need to be owned for what they are, that is experiences of being diminished, pain and vulnerability, and yet also be recognised as opportunities for new life and growth, as moments of truth and

⁴⁵¹ “[...] these are relationships (of conflict with other assistants) that also transform us because they are often more painful. Yes, you can have conflicts with the people with disabilities but you often have ways of working with that conflict. The most difficult conflicts are with other assistants. The conflict with the person with a disability somehow does not touch my identity whereas with assistants it does and that is more threatening. It questions my identity, my place in the world, where I am most ill at ease with myself. And it is here that I need to live mutuality Is it that the person with a disability teaches us something that we then have to learn with other assistants? But we seem not very able to do this or perhaps we do not have the right structures in place to enable this?”: Interview 7 , para. 7.

⁴⁵² “But this was our mode of government, our ideal and we believed in it. The reality was stripping.” Interview 6, para. 7.;

⁴⁵³ “There were tensions and fear, and there comes a moment when something has to be done – a head has to roll -and it was mine. It did not resolve the issues. We are just like any other human group [...] the international structures were not there for me [...] we dot speak about it. It is as if it never existed.”: Interview 7, para.8.

⁴⁵⁴ Interview 6, para. 7.

maturation.⁴⁵⁵ This recognition did not come easily to the assistants and involved sometimes a painful and extended period of struggle in order to become honest with oneself as well as the other, or the institution. Accompaniment, whether psychological, spiritual or community was seen as invaluable, as the conversation with a non-judgemental other enabled the assistant to name and own the experience and feelings and to discover through the gift of God's Spirit a new relationship with God, him/herself and the other. If this “work of the heart” was completed then they experienced a sense of freedom and new life.

Reflecting on the nature of the invitation in L'Arche and the choice made to follow Christ, and to share life with people with learning disabilities there was a recognition that when you put your life in the hands of God then there are unexpected consequences and a need to “see from God's point of view”.

There is something about taking the downward path. And when in your flesh you experience rejection and exclusion, then is some small way you are sharing in the choice you have chosen. [...] I would not choose to be handicapped, nor rejected, nor excluded and so when it happens it is so terribly difficult to live. Nevertheless once we made the choices we never expected that it would be fulfilled in this way.⁴⁵⁶

The interviewees recognised that experiences of injustice and rejection, whilst difficult and not to be sought or justified, had become living examples of the

⁴⁵⁵ Interview 7, para. 7.

⁴⁵⁶ “There is something about taking the downward path. And when in your flesh you experience rejection and exclusion, then is some small way you are sharing in the choice you have chosen. [...] I would not choose to be handicapped, nor rejected, nor excluded and so when it happens it is so terribly difficult to live. Nevertheless once we made the choices we never expected that it would be fulfilled in this way. [...] there are two readings we can make of the same events: one is about the dysfunction of the community, the injustice, things that need to be changed, worked on; and there is the other where you ask yourself what you are going to do with the experience. And in fact you become aware that if you welcome what has happened and you face in to it, then you grow and you are set free. I do not want to spiritualise this because what has happened is outrageous and unjust and we would have expected it to be otherwise and at the same time [...] When I am talking about community discernment this is what I am talking about – this deep conversation as a body.” Interview 7, para. 8.

presence of God in their lives as known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the bringing of new life out of death.⁴⁵⁷

c. A way of life: living with the person with disability in community

The particular experience of the long term assistant living with people with a learning disability

The study group acknowledged that it was possible to follow Jesus⁴⁵⁸ and to make a commitment to long term mutual relationships with people with learning disabilities outside of the context of 'living with' in a L'Arche house, and that there are multiple ways of living out the 'spirit of L'Arche'.⁴⁵⁹ At the same time it was equally recognised that there was something specific that this particular way of living L'Arche (i.e. in a community house) brought to the whole body of L'Arche.⁴⁶⁰ It is the same and it is different.⁴⁶¹ It is a radical and specific reality, in that it affects the whole of your life and has a particular shape and consequence.⁴⁶² It was also recognised that the choices and circumstances of L'Arche today demand that the model of community as 'living with' be reviewed. Nonetheless there was a sense that something would be lost if this particular way of living in L'Arche was no longer possible. What would be lost was described as “ something of the soul or spirit [...] the relationship oasis”.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁷ “[...] and so to believe in life, life that is stronger than death. And this is something that we live so strongly in L'Arche. You are there in front of people with a disability who are so wounded; you are in front of the forces of death and life; in front of people who have everything going against them, who face death, yet who have such capacities to receive life and to bring life to others – this can happen to and in the assistants. [...] All seems dead and then there is new life. [...] For me that is something to do with my life as a Christian – to do with the Incarnation and Resurrection.” Interview 7, para. 7.

⁴⁵⁸ Living in a house “is not a condition to following Jesus, but following Jesus has led me there. Is it a vocation? Yes, because Jesus called me there. And if Jesus calls me to that vocation then it is a possible vocation.”: Interview 3, para 10.

⁴⁵⁹ Interview 9, para. 21.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview 9, para. 21. This interviewee described the 'living with' as the crucible of L'Arche.

⁴⁶¹ Interview 3, para.10.

⁴⁶² Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁶³ “If you take away all the assistants who are really committing themselves to life in the house, and really wanting to live that call, as a vocation, as a person living long term in the house, if you take

This way of life is a conscious choice⁴⁶⁴ in which they are confirmed by others,⁴⁶⁵ and that brings with it its own askesis (discipline).⁴⁶⁶ There is a sense of losing a certain external and social identity (the loss of independence, of a certain privacy and intimacy, and of personal hospitality, etc.) but of gaining a new inner identity.⁴⁶⁷

In describing the experience of 'living with' and the choice to commit themselves to this way of life the assistants talked of intimacy, and the recognition that this shared daily life gave time⁴⁶⁸ and space⁴⁶⁹ for a particular kind of intimacy with the people with a disability⁴⁷⁰ that enabled them to live a core intimacy with Jesus⁴⁷¹. The home⁴⁷² and the life together⁴⁷³ became the context, the earth for this intimacy with Jesus. It is important to note that in the interviews given by the married assistants (who had originally come to live in a community house) they

that away, you take away something of the soul or spirit of what we are living [...] It is still going to function but you take away something [...] the relationship oasis [...] It is not that it is perfect. It is something about being able to witness to the depth, the possibility of depth relationship.”

Interview 3, para. 10.;

“Are we going to lose something essential to L'Arche on my watch?”: Interview 9, para. 26.

⁴⁶⁴ “It is the way I can live L'Arche best, most fully according to my understanding of what is most important in L'Arche and the way I am able.”: Interview 4, para 11.

⁴⁶⁵ Interview 3, para. 10. The assistant recognises that this calling needs to be confirmed in community and spiritual accompaniment and believed in by the community leader.

⁴⁶⁶ “In our reality I am accepting to say , 'I put on the habit of L'Arche' and there is something depersonalising in that, in that I am just one of all these people who live here; but there is an inner journey which is a real treasure, a real gift. It comes with a price to pay – I am losing something. A giving up – touching on certain limits, a giving up of things.”: Interview 3 para. 10.

⁴⁶⁷ “The life I am living has enabled me to go deeper in myself as far as a deeper identity, knowing who I am and being called to an inner spiritual journey.”: Interview 3, para 10.

⁴⁶⁸ Time has allowed for the development of a “kind of partnership” and “real fraternity and mutuality”: Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁶⁹ “Gift of time, presence, persevering, being there and knowing it makes a difference in my life and in someone else's life that we continue to live together.”: Interview 4, para.11.

⁴⁷⁰ “[...] there is a certain knowing between people (with disabilities) in the house, a deep acceptance of each other and their condition, that they share and we will never touch on [...] a certain intimacy [...] their secret [...] but living in the house today I think I enter into that little bit of knowing that they have between themselves that you cannot enter if you do not live in the house.”: Interview 3, para 10.

⁴⁷¹ “When I was 6 at my first communion I met Jesus, and here was the place that I could live this intimate relationship with Jesus. This was the earth for that [...] I do not know if he called me to L'Arche but he called me to live an intimate relationship with him and the earth was L'Arche.” :Interview 6, para. 10.

⁴⁷² Interview 9, para. 11.

⁴⁷³ Interview 2, para. 7. speaks of the simple daily life of shared meals, shared living space, prayer together. Another describes this as 'the life of Nazareth': Interview 9, para. 8.

identified a clear choice that they had made between the intimacy of 'home' in the context of living in a community house with people with disability and intimacy with a specific other in marriage, which was subsequently seen as the location of the living out of their covenant.

The analogy of the intimacy of married life was referred to in several of the interviews when describing the depth of relationship between the long term live in assistant and the person with disabilities.⁴⁷⁴ However it was also noted that the “*fecundity*” of this life was not found in the relationship with a particular person with disability, nor with particular friends, although the quality of these relationships was important, but through accepting the “loneliness” of the life of a celibate and both dwelling in this loneliness and allowing it to be indwelt by God.⁴⁷⁵ In this way this loneliness can become a solitude that is humble, without glory but abundant, surprising, joyful, peaceful, and free.⁴⁷⁶

The intense relationships of the community home were the place of encounter and of discovering a more fundamental understanding of a life lived in the presence of God. The gospel came alive in the daily life and in people. God was 'there' in the simple but shared joys and suffering.⁴⁷⁷ The life together was an invitation 'to be with' and to be present to the Presence of God:

So there is no place that He is not there with us. I learned that in a very deep way in the daily life. I witnessed in daily life [...] Each time it has touched me very deeply. [...] It has stripped away the extra things and my relationship with God and Jesus has become much more simple. [...] God is

⁴⁷⁴ Interview 3, para. 7.

⁴⁷⁵ Interview 6, para. 7. Fecundity as a celibate was identified as “living with serenity, with surrender about who I am.”

⁴⁷⁶ “Jesus calls me to that (freedom, abundance, joy) and the cherry on the cake, if you like, the gift and the surprise of it is that I am living it with people with disabilities. Who would have imagined ? When I was growing up as a kid I would never even have imagined that I could live something beautiful, fulfilling, and rich and yet such a precarious, vulnerable, humble, little, nothing kind of way, and the only people who live the same kind of thing are people with disabilities. Who would have imagined? It is like a complete waste when I think of what I could have become in life. It is like everything is turned upside down.”: Interview 3, para. 9.

⁴⁷⁷ Interview 6, para. 10.

presence; that Jesus is presence. I have been shaped by that in my life here.⁴⁷⁸

The relationship with the person with a disability long term was described in trinitarian terms – of being led by Jesus to the person with disability and by the person with disability to Jesus;⁴⁷⁹ and also of being led into bonds of friendship, “becoming brother and sister” with other assistants.⁴⁸⁰ They acknowledged that they were being taught by and led by the person with the disability, and that in order today to regain something of the “original vision” they needed to be faithful to this listening to and being influenced and led by the person with disabilities.⁴⁸¹

Vulnerability was identified as a defining characteristic of people living with disabilities. And likewise vulnerability was seen to be at the heart of this way of life together. The assistant is invited to discover an inner vulnerability which brings, as noted above, intimacy with Jesus, abundance, joy and freedom. “And in some unspoken way we [the assistant and person with disability] are carrying this vulnerability and unknowness together.”⁴⁸² In addition this choice and way of life together entails a certain precariousness - a constant insecurity about accommodation, role, relationships,⁴⁸³ and a certain intensity, constancy of responsibility and loss of autonomy.⁴⁸⁴ The fact that there are fewer and fewer people choosing this life style intensifies the sense of vulnerability.

In response to the question why they kept on choosing this way of life and this vulnerability, the answer unanimously given was the relationship with Jesus.⁴⁸⁵ Jesus was both the cause and the sustenance of their choice. They nourished this

⁴⁷⁸ Interview 6, para .10.

⁴⁷⁹ Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁸⁰ Interview 6, para. 7.

⁴⁸¹ Interview 7, para. 8.

⁴⁸² Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁸³ “I have to live day to day knowing that nothing belongs to me.” : Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁸⁴ Interview 4, para. 11.

⁴⁸⁵ Interview 3, para.10.

relationship through participation in the Eucharist, prayer (that is “crying out to God to be with me”), and reading.⁴⁸⁶ Equally important for making and sustaining this way of life were particular friendships, spiritual and community accompaniment and the sense of belonging to the body of the community and to a story/ tradition greater than the individual.

The interviewees understood the particular mission of 'living with' to be :

- an opportunity to share in the mission of the person with a disability,⁴⁸⁷ that is to pass on the gifts and discoveries they have been granted through living together,⁴⁸⁸ namely the possibility of an intimate relationship with Jesus,⁴⁸⁹ and a new understanding of what it is to be human;⁴⁹⁰
- to be witness to the beauty⁴⁹¹ and the journey of maturation⁴⁹² of the person

⁴⁸⁶ Interview 3, para. 10.

⁴⁸⁷ “I came to learn that people could live out a mission in a place like that [...] someone who was in a very difficult situation himself who was encouraging and trying to give hope to this other who was in a place of hopelessness.[...] (they had) no idea of the beauty of this man, the beauty he had inside him.” :Interview 4, para.4.

⁴⁸⁸ “[...] even if it was a unique relationship with J, I knew that it must never be just for us. We had to be open to the others so that they too might know J. Not to be possessive. It was a beautiful relationship but he could not be mine. I had to be disciplined. I know at the level of the heart he loved me, but I wanted others to be a part of our relationship. It is like the treasure in the gospel [...] we find it and want to keep it for ourself. No it has to be shared.” :Interview 2, para. 15.

⁴⁸⁹ “I think because of my relationship with people, and because of the way we live together the other assistants coming in can move into something in a different way - because there are these long term relationships are being lived.” : Interview 3, para.10. All the interviewees noted how important the witness of 'lives lived together' had been in their own entry into covenantal relationships. The process of learning was described by some as 'osmosis'.

⁴⁹⁰ “I think what is different is our vision of the person; that the person is not simply someone whom we help to gain skills for living autonomously, but someone whom we want to live fully and with whom I have pleasure to be.”: Interview 7, para. 8;

“ Do we who have lived L'Arche in early days, at the time of the foundation, in the days of enthusiasm, need to be there and to acknowledge in what is lived today something of that original enthusiasm, and to name it for others as that – to help them see what they are living in that light?” : Interview 7, para. 16.

⁴⁹¹ “That she had accomplished her life and I felt so in awe and respect that I think it was something about – this is what we are there for. That is truly the sense – we have seen that with L, with others ...they are very severely handicapped, without speaking, talking, and yet who have made such a path of maturity. And for us our role , if we can say that, in our relationship is to reveal the beauty because they would still be handicapped.... for me it is to understand that they have such a beauty and how we can be beside them so that their beauty is revealed to the world.” : Interview 6, para.7.

⁴⁹² “[...] the centre of L'Arche is the relationship of the people with disabilities and the assistants that share their lives. Like E without sharing life here she would not have become the woman she became – so unified at the end of her life and so life giving – they reveal something because of their vulnerability. I thought at the beginning I was there to help them but I ended being helped. [...] without them we assistants could not have become brothers and sisters.”: Interview 6, para 7.

with learning disabilities and in so witnessing to reveal this to others;

- to be “a presence with the poor as someone who is poor”;⁴⁹³ to be with the other, and in particular the person with a learning disability,⁴⁹⁴ and through this attentiveness discover the fecundity of divine love;⁴⁹⁵
- to be open to finding God's presence in the other;⁴⁹⁶
- to let oneself be shaped by the person with a learning disability,⁴⁹⁷ to learn from them,⁴⁹⁸ and to be drawn into the presence of God; to be faithful to their relationship with Jesus/God and with people with disabilities.⁴⁹⁹

d. Belonging to a Community, Commitment and Covenant

i. Belonging to a Community

Throughout the interviews 'community' was identified as the place of belonging in which the particular vocation of L'Arche was lived out. It was compared to a body with many parts, all of which were necessary to the whole, all of which deserved honour.⁵⁰⁰ The shared link and bond was to be found in the “common commitment to the core members,”⁵⁰¹ who in their turn enabled the assistants to discover mutuality with and commitment to one another.⁵⁰² This making of one body, of community,

⁴⁹³ Interview 5, para. 8.

⁴⁹⁴ “She was a beautiful woman. Just being with her [...] I knew the importance of being with people who had a gift others did not see.”: Interview 4, para. 4.

⁴⁹⁵ Brian Brock, 'Supererogation and the Riskiness of Human Vulnerability' in Ed. Hans S. Reinders, *The paradox of Disability*, (Cambridge, UK, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010) p.137 ;

⁴⁹⁶ Interview 4, para. 11.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview 6, para.10.

⁴⁹⁸ Interview 6, para.30; “I think this is a chance to recover something of the original vision which is no longer in the living with, but the person with a disability has something to say about our lives and our life together in community.” Interview 7, para. 8.

⁴⁹⁹ “[...] to be faithful to this call, to be faithful to the relationship with Jesus and to be at peace even when I do not know where it is going.”: Interview 6, para. 11;

“The focus of my fidelity is in making a place for Jesus in my life and sharing my life with people with a disability and in being available to people whomsoever they are who are in difficulty.”: Interview 7, para 13.

⁵⁰⁰ Interview 3, para.10.

⁵⁰¹ Interview 1, para.8.

⁵⁰² “I think the becoming of brotherhood, sisterhood – the becoming brothers and sisters because at the beginning we had not chosen one another [...] something you cannot take away ,even if they

was something that they as assistants learned from the people with disabilities.⁵⁰³

One of the purposes of community living is to enable the growth in respect and love of people for whom there is no natural empathy through the witness of the lives and relationships of others.⁵⁰⁴ One of the purposes of community living is to enable the growth in respect and love of people for whom there is no natural empathy through the witness of the lives and relationships of others.⁵⁰⁵

However whilst the dimension of being a partner with the person with disabilities was key, it was stressed that the particular story, that is the relationships between individuals in a community, needed to be “centred in that bigger story, God's bigger story,” and to lose that dimension would be to risk losing the core identity of a L'Arche community.⁵⁰⁶

Community is not a fixed reality, but something “to which we tend,

go away [...] we do not live in the same house [...] but the links remained [...] she was always in me. [...] all made possible because we were sharing life with people with learning disabilities.” : Interview 6, para.7.;

“B (an assistant) was someone that became an absolute anchor for me right from the beginning of my time in T [...] And she was great. Absolutely wonderful. I do not think I would have survived all my years without her. That is why it was such a privilege for me to be with her in her last years and to be the person who was accompanying her physically and daily in all of the things. She had so held me, carried me and accompanied me in her way.”: Interview 3, para.7.

⁵⁰³ Recognising that conflicts arise when assistants do not accept their differences but see them as threatening, the interviewee continues, “ And it is here that we most need to live that mutuality! Is it that the person with a disability teaches us something that we then have to learn to live with other assistants? But we do not seem very bale to do this or perhaps we do not have the right structures in place to enable this? ”: Interview 7, para. 15.

⁵⁰⁴ “It became apparent to me that one of the reasons for community is that there are some relationships that are going to be natural and some you are going to have to work at because you are together with lots of different people, and I believe that part of being community is that we help each other fall in love or acceptance [...] A real gift of community is that there are people who really grow in that respect of the other and help others grow in respect of each other and see the other as gift and that comes with time.”: Interview 4, para.10.

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⁵⁰⁶ “What defines a community in L'Arche – forming a body with a common purpose, grounded in faith, in God, the experience of Christ. That dimension is essential and in partner with a relationship with people with intellectual disabilities. Forming a body with D, and A; they are a part of the body, with you and so on, but centred in that bigger story, God;s bigger story. If that dimension goes or gets lost then we risk losing our identity as a L'Arche community.”: Interview 8, para. 10.

something that is in the making”, and that “we only begin to live as community when the desire to be in communion or to work together takes priority over my needs.” However the task of being community is never achieved as the group is always changing, and is not “something we can have [...] it is something into which we grow . It is given.”⁵⁰⁷

The study group recognised that the original model of community provided a context in which everybody lived together in one house, and where the life together was, “familial”,⁵⁰⁸ “intentional”, a “way of life”, “all encompassing”, and “a place of full immersion and not a job”;⁵⁰⁹ where “the faith life was lived together”, “present in all our lives”, a “community affair.”⁵¹⁰ This way of life was seen as unifying⁵¹¹ and authentic.⁵¹² It offered both structure and something radical.⁵¹³ It was a place of formation,⁵¹⁴ and the 'earth' for living out a life of intimacy with Jesus.⁵¹⁵ There was a sense in which it mirrored a “monastic” and contemplative community.⁵¹⁶ It was a place of belonging, commitment and fidelity.

The interviewees noted that in order for community to be sustained there is a need for a “shared language” that gives meaning to what is being lived.⁵¹⁷ Such making of meaning requires places of sharing, prayer, Eucharist, celebrations, and community gatherings.⁵¹⁸ These rituals provide opportunities for people to speak “from the level of the heart” and to open up “that space where the heart can be

⁵⁰⁷ Interview 7, para.15.

⁵⁰⁸ Interview 7, para. 6.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview 9, para. 9.

⁵¹⁰ Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵¹¹ “It was a catholic community and I felt at home. I found an echo of my desires. I found a way of living my faith, of working, of being engaged in social service and of working for justice in our world. There was unity.”: Interview 7, para. 6.

⁵¹² Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵¹³ Interview 3, para. 7.

⁵¹⁴ “I was well and deeply 'formed' in the ways of L'Arche and in my person.”: Interview 7, para. 6..

⁵¹⁵ Interview 6, para. 10.

⁵¹⁶ Interview 7, para. 7.

⁵¹⁷ Interview 9, para. 24.

⁵¹⁸ Interview 8, para. 8. The interviewee continues, “It is one of the moments when we come together as a body, and when we form one body where the core members have their place and are radiant in their spontaneity and they are just themselves....meeting as a body around the Word. ”

visible, and where things of the heart can be said.”⁵¹⁹ These opportunities for meeting at depth together were likened to “the ark of the covenant”,⁵²⁰ and were moments when they had had experiences of “communion”,⁵²¹ of “eternity”,⁵²² of “being in this together.”⁵²³ Gathering at the celebration of the Eucharist was noted as a particularly important signifier of “who we are as community. We are not just a service provider.” The experiences of daily life in the community houses with the people with a disability found expression and meaning in the celebration of the Eucharist.⁵²⁴

For all the interviewees it was also very important that the community was both particular and international. In their own community they were opened up to people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, faith traditions, and intellectual capacities, and as a part of the Federation of L'Arche to a sense of belonging to a world wide family. They experienced this as an “opening up to the universal – the Eternal Universal. All this opened me up to God.”⁵²⁵

The interviewees also recognised that the original model of community had changed,⁵²⁶ and was increasingly being put in question.⁵²⁷ Today the ways of belonging to the community are diverse – single, married, living in shared

⁵¹⁹ Interview 8, para. 8.

⁵²⁰ Interview 9, para. 24.

⁵²¹ Interview 8, para. 6.

⁵²² “[...] touched me was the poverty of people and the richness of relationship. We had Y's birthday ... We were about 30 people at the table and all at one moment everyone came together. It was like communion, like a moment of eternity.”: Interview 6, para 6.

⁵²³ Interview 3, para. 8.

⁵²⁴ Interview 3, para. 7.

⁵²⁵ Interview 7, para. 6.; “God has made a covenant with everybody. The universality of God invites us to live a similar universality. Therein lies the specificity of L'Arche. The experience of God inviting me to an awareness of my identity as universal. Arising out of my life in L'Arche there is a clear invitation to live the universality of life. There is an opportunity before me to live out this [...] in prayer, in reflection, in my relationships, in all that I live.. [...] We are of the one humanity.”: Interview 5, para. 13.

⁵²⁶ “[A] chance to recover something of the original vision which is no longer in the living with, but the person with a disability has something to tell us about our lives and our life together in community.” : Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵²⁷ “ Let us disentangle the mission from the model and recognise that the mission can be lived in new ways and other ways. ”: Interview 8, para. 9.

accommodation, living independently, engagement in day time work/therapeutic activities, involvement in administrative and leadership role, the provision of a network of friendships but not employed or full time engaged with a L'Arche. Furthermore within the community , and even within a community house, people exercise different missions within the overall mission of L'Arche, e.g. missions that were “prophetic, evangelising, missionary.....mystical.”⁵²⁸ This diversity was seen as coherent with the fact that the Founder's own vocation was perceived to be wider than the community itself and an “overflowing” of the gifts of L'Arche.⁵²⁹ Yet it was not clear to what extent L'Arche itself recognises the diversity of missions and is ready and able to support them.⁵³⁰ This diversity of ways of belonging and of mission was seen as beneficial and necessary for both assistants and people with disabilities,⁵³¹ but also complex and a source of tension between people.⁵³² It was also noted that whilst in theory there were ways of addressing conflict and this was seen as an essential aspect of life in community,⁵³³ this was not necessarily the case in practice.⁵³⁴ This lack of dealing with real issues was a cause of suffering and injustice for some of the interviewees.

⁵²⁸ Interview 7, para. 19.

⁵²⁹ Interview 7, para. 19.

⁵³⁰ “We say a vocation in L'Arche is to live with a person with a handicap, but I do not think it is as simple as that. There needs to be a conversation. It is this tension that is clearly creative and at the same time painful – how to enable our institutions to function and the dimension which is more prophetic, evangelising, missionary ...to go out and speak. Mystical, that too.”: Interview 7, para. 19.

⁵³¹ Interview 8, para. 13.

⁵³² “Such different ways of belonging surely create tensions, that is part of human nature. We compare and we are not collectively just in our relationships; we favour some more than others. We compare commitments when in truth we have other difficulties with one another. There is injustice. Our commitment to one another is never enough, and so is a cause of dissatisfaction and source of tension.”: Interview 5, para. 12.

⁵³³ “A lot of my work in community has been trying to help assistants understand how to deal with difficulties and conflict, and for me that is central to community. [...] But the problem is that it is very difficult to communicate. It takes a lot of work, hard work, and risk taking.[...] You have to risk being vulnerable to the other and there is something in our culture that is anti being vulnerable and anti taking risks. To have the courage and to take the risks [...] I do not believe we are born with that ability.”: Interview 1, paras.11 & 12.

⁵³⁴ “Formally institutionalised I would say not very much. The theory is there but not the practice. Because the theory is there, there are moments when in a particular situations there have been opportunities[...].”: Interview 9, para. 14.

It was also noted that maybe the changing model had hidden consequences which demand a review of whether something essential about community and commitment is being lost.⁵³⁵ In trying to understand why the model has shifted and why there is a feeling of “something being lost” the interviewees identified a variety of contributory causes:

- changing patterns of belief and reasons for coming to community⁵³⁶ – a shift from choosing Christian community to coming for an experience or work;⁵³⁷
- the impact of a change in social care policies and regulations;⁵³⁸ the choice to prioritise the professional skills needed for taking care of people with disabilities;⁵³⁹ the sense of obligation due to legislation concerning welfare of people with disabilities, issues of finances and employment,⁵⁴⁰ the

⁵³⁵ “[L’Arche] does value different forms [of commitment] but there is something around balance. There is a difference when there is a majority of live-in, where you have a clear sense that the primary way of living L’Arche is in a community house and then there is a group of people around who support that. That is one reality. But it is a very different reality when the majority are living out and ‘living in’ in a shared house is the minority and that is the reality we have now. And I do not think we have grasped the consequences of that for any of us. How do we understand primary, secondary, tertiary commitments? Where is the place of meeting? It is all very well to say we value different kinds of commitment but where do we meet together? Where do we share and what is my commitment to you?” : Interview 9, para. 18.

⁵³⁶ Interview 7, para. 8. Here the interviewee identified that whereas in the past i.e. 1980s, people came to L’Arche looking for a spiritual way, a Christian life, or community, today they come for different reasons such as an experience or work;

“ I was concerned about the death of L’Arche, the death of community.....the spirit seemed to have gone....(because) people were coming for different motives, staying for wrong motives...(she had) the feeling that people did not want to be there and that it was work. And it was work and felt like it.”: Interview 4, para. 9. The same interviewee continued to state that it was important that there were assistants who choose L’Arche and who are committed to the vision, and that it was difficult when there were constant changes of teams and leadership, when the long term assistant had no recognised or valued place in the house and no voice.

⁵³⁷ Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵³⁸ The impact of social policies etc. was also seen to have brought benefits to the communities. As one interviewee observed “It is not going to be paper work and regulations that stop you from being L’Arche, because L’Arche is the spirit.”: Interview 4, para. 9. The danger is that people might hide behind the ‘structures’ / professional care.

⁵³⁹ Interview, 7, para. 8.

⁵⁴⁰ “Do we accept that we are a service provider organisation receiving...government money and that we have to operate as the most efficient organisation as we can, be the best service provider as we can in order to keep money? Or are we an alternative radical intentional faith community that believes in a vision of humanity and relationships, and welcome and then out of the welcome of people with learning disabilities a certain amount of care and support results, but fundamentally we are a group of people sharing life together and if being an organisation receiving money puts our relationships and beliefs at risk then we discard the organisation. Is that where we should go?”:

- growth of service provision as the predominant model;
- the shift away from a model of vocation to employment, and the incongruities that produces in community life;⁵⁴¹
 - the diversity of ways of making meaning ⁵⁴² and the loss of a common religious language, and the shift to faith as an individual and private matter rather than something shared and talked about, something that shaped the life together;⁵⁴³
 - a shift to philosophical/social patterns that are individualist and fragmented⁵⁴⁴
 - a changed understanding about the nature and relationship of commitment and community (see Section 2. d. ii. Below);
 - the lack of clarity about the mission of L'Arche, and the membership of L'Arche (see Section 2. d. iii. below).

Interview 9, para. 26.

⁵⁴¹ “L'Arche as an organisation is interested in me in employment terms[...] When I came to the end of my second mandate as community leader.[...] I was very clear from an early stage that I was not open to a third mandate because I did not think it was right for me nor for the community. [...] (The chair) wrote a letter to me in her role as chair formally acknowledging my resignation. Well, I had not resigned I had just come to the end of my mandate. And it was this - from a legal point of view she was absolutely right; she was simply describing the employment process and she was right, but on a very deep level it did not describe my reality. My reality was that I had come to the end of my mandate and I knew it was not right to continue and I was throwing up myself into the hands of God, trusting that something would come up and here she was writing to me about me resigning. And we her we are supposedly belonging to the same community.”: Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁴² “[t]here is with an increasing number of people coming who are from different Christian and spiritual backgrounds or even with no faith at all, a need to look together not only at issues of ecumenism or even what it means to be a Christian community but at the whole spiritual dimension of what it is to be human.”: Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵⁴³ “Today what would I say? This dimension of faith , now it is more personal. When I arrived it was you might say a 'community affair'. It was Christian community and that dimension was talked about, lived [...] no we are still a Christian community , but today I have the impression that it is more of a personal affair how I live my faith and what is my way with Jesus [...] Each one takes his own path [...] In effect the dimension of faith is more hidden.”: Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵⁴⁴ “[...] whether we go for the old fragmented field of diverse commitments and belongings, which is a sort of post modern approach – there is no absolute.”: Interview 8, para. 13.

ii. Commitment and Community

Living faithfully and being committed were highly valued by the study group.⁵⁴⁵ They stressed the importance of being committed to their relationship with Jesus/God, and to the relationships with the people with disabilities and other assistants. They also stressed their commitment to L'Arche both their specific community and L'Arche International. There was both an experience of belonging to a body, to a community, and an understanding that this belonging was a necessary outcome of the mutuality and fidelity of relationship that was identified as central to life in L'Arche. Yet there also seemed to be insecurity and doubt about whether in fact there was a tangible body of people to whom they belonged and a lack of clarity as to what the commitment to one another entailed.⁵⁴⁶ This lack of clarity and insecurity evoked different responses – sadness and grief,⁵⁴⁷ feelings of vulnerability,⁵⁴⁸ the experience of being challenged to be creative and to find new meanings and new ways for L'Arche and for themselves,⁵⁴⁹ disappointment and betrayal, a reassessment of self and community,⁵⁵⁰ the recognition of the need and desire to yield to the unexpected ways of God in their lives⁵⁵¹ and to welcome new

⁵⁴⁵ “I am very committed to L'Arche and that means specifically in C and generally in L'Arche – I do believe that in living faithfully where I am called to be today is also being faithful to L'Arche.” : Interview 4, para. 11.

⁵⁴⁶ “So what does it mean for L'Arche to be committed to me – well it is not committed to me in employment terms and rightly so, if L'Arche is only an employer. In terms of intentional community and belonging to this group, I do not know who they are. I do not know what it means. What does it mean that they are committed to me?”: Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁴⁷ Interview 9, para.9.

⁵⁴⁸ Interview 3, para. 10.

⁵⁴⁹ “What that has done ,has kept L'Arche alive at a certain level. There is a creativity and vitality that is still there today – that L'Arche is still changing and evolving and there is energy in that. There is creative a energy that something is being given [...] I do believe it is Spirit led. [...] At the same time somehow or other it creates a space of insecurity...”: Interview 9, para. 9.

⁵⁵⁰ “[...] during which which all my questions concerning commitment came up -.who is committed to me, what is this life in L'Arche, where is the community, - and an escape out of the world of ideals.[...] It is more a matter of working out how I am going to be faithful to who I am, and to live with what is given to me today, and also with the weaknesses of L'Arche. We have always said L'Arche cannot fulfil all our expectations but nonetheless my life was there 100% even 150%, so you do expect your desires to be met in some way. Today , I have found ways to make sure that I do not wait for all my desires to be met by L'Arche. How to be faithful to who I am and that in which I believe, in the face of what is given to me. In the main I am peaceful with that ; sometimes I get angry when I think about my retirement.: Interview 7, para. 10.

⁵⁵¹ “During that time it was hard for me to be faithful to this call, to stay knowing it would change

life out of loss.⁵⁵²

The interviews revealed a real struggle to make sense of the meaning and actual implementation of commitment, the intersection of personally committed relationships and fidelity to and by the body of community – by L'Arche; the relationship between covenant and between commitment, and employment and commitment; and the felt need to identify to what and to whom one is committed. It was recognised that diversity of belonging is not the real issue. Commitment itself is being put in question,⁵⁵³ and therefore for the future of L'Arche there is a real need to address this issue L'Arche.⁵⁵⁴

A. What is commitment?

For the interviewees commitment was understood to be related to their sense of vocation, their relationship with God. L'Arche was the earth in which they were planted in order to live out their particular relationship with God, an earth that gives them meaning, is creative, and “ is my place whether I like it or not.”⁵⁵⁵ Whilst they recognised that they had the choice to leave or stay, the most important thing was to be faithful and to stay however hard it seemed and in the face of the failings of the institution or relationship. This choice to stay was seen in retrospect as life giving, and as having enabled greater truth in their lives.⁵⁵⁶

around me [...] I could even say today I am thankful for those years because a lot of life has come out of that for me.”: Interview 6 , para. 10.

⁵⁵² “How many times will the community help me? If I am sick again? In a way this experience has opened me to something larger. For me it was clear the community could not be counted on. Of course I am disappointed, but in a way it is normal. The community cannot respond to every need, but at least it could think about this; they can try.” Interview 1, para. 10.

⁵⁵³ “[...] commitment itself is in question.”: Interview 7, para. 11.

⁵⁵⁴ Interview 8, para. 13.

⁵⁵⁵ Interview 9, para. 12.

⁵⁵⁶ Interview 6, para. 11.

One interviewee described commitment in the following way:

Instinctively to be committed to something is to be given to it, to belong to it, I am going to be here come what may, I am going to be here when it does not feel right to be here.[...] Staying out when it does not feel right to stay put.⁵⁵⁷

However this same interviewee further articulated the difficulty he had in making a long term commitment when he did not know “what is this L'Arche I am committed to? - am I committed to an ideal, to a person, to a group of people?”⁵⁵⁸ There was a shared feeling amongst that interviewees that commitment was unclear.⁵⁵⁹ The interviewees said, and wanted to say, that they were committed to L'Arche, and yet whilst experiencing mutual commitment with particular individuals, felt that corporate commitment was lacking,⁵⁶⁰ and that there was no “guarantee that people are always going to be there in the same way as today.”⁵⁶¹ There was a difficulty of identifying the identity and composition of L'Arche. It was variously described as an institution, an employer, and a body of people committed to one another through their relationship and sense of shared mission.⁵⁶²

B. Commitment and mutuality

For all the interviewees there was a shared assumption that being a part of L'Arche meant belonging to a community, and that the model they encountered in their early years implied mutual⁵⁶³ and long term commitment.⁵⁶⁴ The model was likened to a

⁵⁵⁷ Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁵⁸ Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁵⁹ “To what am I making a commitment? What is the concrete choice put before me? What I want is to be committed to people with whom I share something. But when I [...] ask who are these people, I do not know who they are.” Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁶⁰ Interview 8, para 13.

⁵⁶¹ Interview 3, para. 8.

⁵⁶² “[...] a body with others and having a sense of covenant.” : Interview 8, para. 19; “[...] that sense of belonging at the level of the heart with others to accomplish a common goal.”: Interview 8, para. 20. “[...] a mutual commitment to one another, a promise to be faithful.”: Interview 8, para. 13.

⁵⁶³ “I assumed it was a mutual, two way conversation.”: Interview 8, para.9.

⁵⁶⁴ “There is a whole way of speaking about L'Arche that uses the language of commitment,

religious community in that people gave themselves completely to the community and “assumed that it would be reciprocated as it would in a religious community.”⁵⁶⁵ However in the early 1990s it was “declared somewhere that we are responsible for ourselves and that L'Arche cannot take responsibility.”⁵⁶⁶ This decision caused anger and disillusionment,⁵⁶⁷ and was experienced as “devastating” and a “shock”. The study group experienced this as a failure of community and of social justice.⁵⁶⁸ They recorded how they felt insecure and vulnerable concerning retirement, old age and sickness, accommodation, ongoing economic support and employment, and the expression and honouring of their particular vocation to 'live with' people with disabilities in the community houses. They felt that L'Arche no longer offered a “*way of life*”, and that for L'Arche, the employer, they were only valuable in employment terms,⁵⁶⁹ and if they stayed within the 'structures'.⁵⁷⁰ Once they were no longer on the “*pay roll*” they did not know what their belonging would mean, and in fact witnessed the lack of respect being shown to elders of the community at the time of retirement,⁵⁷¹ noting the double message it gave to new assistants.⁵⁷² They desired for it to be otherwise, but did not know what could be done.

investing oneself, gratuity and being faithful to the people with disability yet what is L'Arche offering in return from its side?": Interview 7, para. 11.

⁵⁶⁵ Interview 8, para. 9.

⁵⁶⁶ Interview 8, para. 9.

⁵⁶⁷ “When I think of the thirty years I have been in L'Arche I realise I have given the best years of my life, years when I had most energy, creativity, the best of my youth. And I have surely given more than my contract of employment, and whilst I have greatly received in terms of relationships, if I had given the same elsewhere I would have had some kind of come back, some kind of security.” :Interview 7, para. 11.

⁵⁶⁸ Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵⁶⁹ Interview 7, para. 11; Interview 9, para. 15.

⁵⁷⁰ Interview 4, para. 11.

⁵⁷¹ Interview 6, para. 8.

⁵⁷² Interview 7, para. 11.

C. Trying to make sense of commitment

In making sense of the changed understanding of commitment the interviewees offered different analyses for the change:

- that there never had been an institutional commitment akin to a religious community in that Vanier from the early days had consciously chosen not to have a “was two fold:rule of life [...] not to give L'Arche any kind of canonical status,” and that in doing so “he knew the risk that there would not be a hold of individuals in their membership in the same way.” One interviewee felt that the consequence of this on L'Arche i)it has obliged L'Arche to be open to the work of the Spirit, and kept it creative and vital; and ii) it has created a 'space of insecurity' and a vacuum at the centre, so that there is a lack of body to which individual people belong and within which they can live out their commitment;⁵⁷³
- that the recent (1990s) decision had been determined by finances, “because it had become apparent that the vocational could not be financially underwritten”;⁵⁷⁴and that at the same time as this had happened the communities had shifted focus and begun to emphasise the professional aspects of the community rather than the vocational.

The analysis of one interviewee concerning her experience of commitment in L'Arche, highlights the confusions and tensions present in the commentary of the study group about this subject, and the complex interplay between personal and corporate, gratuitous commitment and employment, secular commitment and covenant.⁵⁷⁵ For her the basis of commitment is a contractual arrangement, and in

⁵⁷³ Interview 8, para. 9.

⁵⁷⁴ Interview 7, para. 8.

⁵⁷⁵ Interview 7, para. 11.

fact in L'Arche today “belonging in L'Arche is to a large extent determined by our contract of employment – both rights and duties.” There is no real conversation within L'Arche about commitment and with whom one is committed. “It is something not spoken about.” She personally experiences a “moral commitment” to L'Arche because “this is a place that makes sense to me and has a vision about what it is to be human and which offers a way of living out the Gospels, living in relationship with God”. Her desire is to continue to deepen her relationship with God and the people with disabilities in this particular way (as a live in assistant) and to share what she has received with others. But in terms of the other aspect of commitment which is related to the practicalities of life she feels there is a “lot of illusion, of things unsaid.”

The interviews revealed an inequity between the commitment of the individual and the commitment of the community, in as much as the individual felt convinced of the radical nature of their commitment to L'Arche yet experienced the commitment of L'Arche as partial and that there was no clear framework for commitment.⁵⁷⁶ In the wake of the realisation that the institution was not making the same commitment, different rationales were construed as to why this would be so:

- that one could not expect commitment from any institution or structure because that was not possible and only God was dependable,⁵⁷⁷
- that it might not be right or mature to expect all one's needs to be met by L'Arche.⁵⁷⁸

Nonetheless the study group insisted that they were committed and that this

⁵⁷⁶ “L'Arche's commitment to me is partial. It is not complete. And it is within limits. It is not systemic commitment – in a religious order you make a commitment to you brothers and sisters in Christ and they reciprocate. In L'Arche we make a commitment but there is no clear framework within which that is worked out. So I would say there is partial commitment.” :Interview 8, para.11.

⁵⁷⁷ Interview 5. para. 9.

⁵⁷⁸ Interview 2, para.14.

commitment was different to commitment as defined by contract. It was a “commitment to the heart of L'Arche”, which was a commitment to being “a presence with the poor as someone who is poor.”⁵⁷⁹ This assertion was accompanied by a range of feelings: resigned acceptance based on the practical facts of the present situation,⁵⁸⁰ sadness, a reduction of their expectation, a desire to hope and trust and to try to see what gift this change might bring, a readiness to work with the challenge and insecurity and to identify what might restore something at the level of the “collective”, which they sensed was being lost.⁵⁸¹

iii. Commitment and Covenant

The interview questions did not include any specific reference to covenant, yet as seen in the preceding sections of this chapter the study group spoke of their life together and in particular with people with learning disabilities in ways that witness to a deep experience of God's covenant with them. This relationship with God is the underpinning motivation for their coming to L'Arche, the sustenance for their life in L'Arche and the basis of their commitment to L'Arche. God's choice and promise to love them faithfully, and to 'be with' them is the key to their own interpretation of their lives and their life with people with learning disabilities:⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁹ Interview 5, paras. 7.& 8.

⁵⁸⁰ Whilst the married interviewees said that they could not expect L'Arche to guarantee them work and so support for their families, it nonetheless made them insecure and challenged their ability to be committed. It furthermore highlighted their own ambivalences concerning a choice to return to the core of L'Arche, the 'living with' on a daily basis. Would it be creative enough for them? However the minimum they felt they could expect from L'Arche was “some sort of faithfulness to who I am and to what I have lived and to my relationships.”: Interview 8, para. 11.

⁵⁸¹ “I do believe there is a mutuality in the commitment but that is partial and that is on the level of individuals rather than on the level of the collectivity, on the level of the body.”: Interview 9, para. 11.

⁵⁸² “There is something on the level of loving and learning to love [...] (my call) is not something I invented myself, my idea. It is a call and Jesus has called me into this way of living L'Arche and this way of living out my vocation [...] in this way, in this context, in L'Arche is leading me into a loving relationship with people with disabilities, which is a certain way of living out this loving relationship that is saying to that person, 'I am choosing you,' and the person is saying, 'I am choosing you.' There is something of a mutual choice just to live this together even if this is never said.”: Interview 3, para. 10.

My first commitment, my first covenant is with Jesus. That is obvious to me. I am called to L'Arche and I am called to follow Jesus. I really live this covenant with Jesus and I live it with my brothers and sisters in L'Arche, and starting off with relationships like with E (a specific friend with learning disabilities), a fundamental relationship, but I also live it with B (a specific assistant friend) and different assistants or people with learning disabilities.”⁵⁸³

One interviewee spoke explicitly about how her commitment to L'Arche is for her a reaffirmation of the covenant which has already been made with her parents and her country and which she has inherited.⁵⁸⁴ Her being in L'Arche is the “active part” of this covenant, and is “something that pleases her”. The covenant with God as lived through her life in L'Arche connects with who she is, and “this recognition (of covenant with God) brings wholeness to my soul, my being”. Covenant implies choice on her part but it is not a choice for or of any thing because to consent to the covenantal relationship offered by God is about life itself. Her identity is bound up in the covenant and so covenant is about her life, and both identity and life are given to her by God. Her choice is to receive the gift offered.⁵⁸⁵

She then described how she understood her life in L'Arche :

Our life is a recognition of the gift of covenant, the Love of God [...]– no I would use the word covenant because there are relationships, links implied in that term. Of course love involves relationship too. Covenant is a word that is more concrete in relationship to God and the others [...] I think this is our vocation: the recognition in the facts of every day that God has and continues to reach out in relationship to us.⁵⁸⁶

Throughout the interviews the discovery of a relationship of mutuality with the person with a disability was narrated as being key in becoming intimately aware

⁵⁸³ Interview 3, para. 7.

⁵⁸⁴ Interview 5, para. 5.

⁵⁸⁵ “It is a gift I receive. It is life.”: Interview 5, para. 8.

⁵⁸⁶ Interview 5, para 13

of a fundamental friendship with Jesus/God.⁵⁸⁷ They spoke of “covenant moments”⁵⁸⁸ when they encountered the presence of God⁵⁸⁹ and experienced “communion” both with God and with the other.⁵⁹⁰ These moments occurred significantly with people who were suffering and at times of suffering,⁵⁹¹ loss and death, during the Eucharist and at celebrations of the Cross, and at times of joy during celebrations such as at a birthday celebration. The predominant characteristic of these moments was the sense of the presence of God, and their own attentiveness/presence to/ being with both God and the other.⁵⁹²

The very vulnerability of the people with disabilities drew the interviewees into relationships that invited them to “be in God”, and to deepen in an intimate relationship with God.⁵⁹³ It was as if the relationship with the person with a disability was the prism of the covenant – the experience of being loved for the sake of love. There was a triangle happening between God, the person with disability and the assistant:

⁵⁸⁷ “I discovered a friendship, a fundamental relationship [...] Jesus Christ is at the centre of my life [...] L’Arche deepened that.” *Interview 8*, para.4.

⁵⁸⁸ *Interview 3*, para. 7.

⁵⁸⁹ “This was a covenant moment. And literally living it. Like physically – there is something when you are called in your whole person.” : *Interview 3*, para. 7. It is interesting to note that this experience happened at the moment of consecration during the Eucharistic celebration. Another interviewee narrated how she had come to realise that she “could be consecration for others.”: *Interview 5*.

⁵⁹⁰ *Interview 8*, para. 6.

⁵⁹¹ When speaking of loneliness as a celibate woman the interviewee noted that in order for this loneliness to become solitude she had to “indwell” the loneliness, which nonetheless never goes away but is now life giving. Whilst not articulated by the interviewee the echo of John’s Gospel is evident - the promise of Jesus that He and the father will come and dwell in us. Loneliness is the refusal of relationship, and in this witness it is also the very location of encounter with Jesus. cf: *Interview 6*, para 7.

⁵⁹² “The Cross is life not death [...] and there is no place that He has not been. So there is no place that he is not there with us. I learned that here in a very deep way in the daily life [...] My life here is filled with the presence of God.”: *Interview 6*, para. 10.

⁵⁹³ “I have learned in L’Arche what it is to have a relationship with God, that is to speak to God, to let the Word of God echo through my life. That image of a vulnerable God who is close to us – that was formed in me within L’Arche.” : *Interview 7*, para. 17. In order to live this intimacy with God/Jesus several assistants made a choice to live a celibate life because, “It was a relationship with Him. That was it and that was how I would follow Him and be with Him. It was a choice of love.”: *Interview 6*, para. 3.

It was always three ways – there was God, the other and me. There was this triangle, trinity if you like [...] If it deepened with God, it deepened with people; if it deepened with people, it deepened with God.⁵⁹⁴

When the interviewees spoke about their covenant with God and their covenantal relationship with the person with a disability they appeared to identify the two as being the same experience, and at the same time to make a differentiation. Likewise it was not clear in the interviews whether different realities and expectations were being described by the two words – covenant and commitment.

As observed earlier in this section there appeared to be a deep and affirming experience and yet a malaise concerning commitment and covenant. There was little to no reference made to the announcing of covenant in L'Arche. One interviewee noted that the concrete expression of commitment was very complex because he did not know to whom or to what he was making a commitment. He argued that the weakness of the covenant in L'Arche was that the covenant document spoke of covenant not being made with an individual “but to a world - wide body,” adding “but you cannot talk to world-wide bodies.”⁵⁹⁵ He further felt that the lack of structure for commitment resulted in a lack of intentionality in the communities. The comments of several people intimated that the covenant in L'Arche and the understanding of vocation had been lost. This was recorded with sorrow but also considered to be a consequence of a lack of embodiment.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁴ Interview 6, para. 10.

⁵⁹⁵ It is appropriate that one interviewee said that this 'unknowness' seemed to be an element of the covenant, i.e. it involved risk and surrender to what was given by God: “It was significant for me that I was announcing covenant as god calling people together, calling me into these relationships and yet I had no idea who these people would be that I was to live with.” Interview 4, para. 10.

⁵⁹⁶ “But it does not surprise me in the least that something like the covenant which is a more spiritual expression goes by the board. Today we hardly hear anyone speak of covenant. I think it is because these practical questions about the future and with whom you are committed are not clear. You can announce spiritual commitment but nonetheless you need the practical too.” Interview 7, para.7.

One voice⁵⁹⁷ in response to his own concern that in not choosing to have a rule of life or canonical status a “space of insecurity” had been created, spoke strongly about the need to be intentional about community and to foster the dimension of “belonging to the body.”⁵⁹⁸ This intentional community is formed with the people with disabilities, but has as its core, as its identity, “God's story, the experience of Christ”. It was in this bigger story that he found his “understanding of covenant”. In searching to make this body concrete he referred to the need for a shared life of prayer, a sacramental life and the recognition and celebration of fidelity. He did not imagine that this body would be “fully spiritual” or “monastic” but it would mean that L'Arche remained a “vibrant faith community able to integrate service provision regulations.”

The same interviewee also turned to the question of whether or not there should be a “clear system of corporate membership which sustains a sense of belonging to the body, with confirmed members.”⁵⁹⁹ For him confirmed membership implied “mutual commitment to one another, a promise to be faithful.” He acknowledged that this issue of membership had not been addressed uniformly across the Federation, as it has been viewed as exclusive and elite-making.⁶⁰⁰ Where however it had been addressed there had been an increased sense of corporate responsibility.⁶⁰¹ He anxiously noted that the option for engaging with all these issues was diminishing, and that there was a conversation still waiting to happen. He felt that finding some resolution to this issue was important as it is about the “movement from 'I to We'.”

⁵⁹⁷ Interview 8, paras. 9 & 10.

⁵⁹⁸ “What defines a community in L'Arche ? – forming a body with a common purpose, grounded in faith, in God, the experience of Christ, (that dimension is essential) and in partner with people with intellectual disabilities.”: Interview 8, para. 10.

⁵⁹⁹ Interview 8, para. 13.

⁶⁰⁰ Interview 8, para. 13.

⁶⁰¹ Interview 8, para 13. L'Arche Canada has implemented a membership policy: *L'Arche Canada Membership Document* approved by the General Assembly, Montreal 2006.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has enabled us to hear certain voices of a second generation in L'Arche as they struggle to share and make sense of their experiences and in particular their experience of covenant and covenantal living. The interviews are stories about “conversion of heart”, of intimacy with Jesus/God and with one another, of the desire to be faithful in their relationships, and of their own struggle to embody with one another the experience of being loved by God for the sake of love, and always. They revealed lives founded in the experience of covenant with God, and lives together shaped by the metaphor of covenant as made known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and characterised by mutual relationship, vulnerability and risk, fidelity and the desire (even if not always fulfilled) to act in ways that are just, that is for the well being of the other.

The interviews tell us of a triangular movement that flows between Jesus, the person with a learning disability and the assistant. The interviewees sought God. Their relationship with Jesus and their desire to respond to the need of the other drew them into L'Arche and so into the lives of people living with learning disability. Their relationships with the people with learning disabilities in turn led them ever more deeply into the mystery of an intimate communion with Jesus, which was their deepest desire and the reason for which they were committed to L'Arche.

A similar triangulation was identified as happening between the person with learning disabilities and assistants, in that the need of and relationship with the person with a learning disability, opened the assistants to one another so that they too might become 'friends' / ' brothers and sisters', and so create a body together. This triangulation was seen as a particular gift of the person with learning

disabilities to enable unity. The basis of 'covenant in L'Arche' can be found in these two different and yet same triangular movements. This second movement between the people with learning disabilities and the assistants, which results in the formation of community, a body, is however “not enough” and opens the assistants once more to their deepest desire, the relationship with Jesus/God. There is an incompleteness in the horizontal relationships, a fallenness, which nonetheless is a doorway into the fundamental covenant with God. Yet it is at this point that the voices of the assistants seem to indicate that there is something missing, something to do with the “*bigger story*”.

As the parents of one of the interviewees expressed it, this calling has the double face of gift and reception:

This is a good thing and you will be really able to give and serve people. And if Jesus is calling you – well go [...] I can only give thanks to God that he has called one of my offspring to be living with suffering humanity and to be learning from the school of suffering humanity.⁶⁰²

The relationship with and the very life of the person with a learning disability can become an icon for the encounter with Jesus. Not only did the assistant learn to welcome the difference of the person with a disability, to be attentive to them in his/her suffering and joy, and to discover the mutuality of this friendship and the beauty of the other, they also tasted in these relationships a foretaste of communion with Jesus. They spoke of this as being in the presence of God. However this presence was not only known in the other, Through staying with their own brokenness, they also came to know the presence and love of God in their own flesh.

In their relationships with the people with learning disabilities they experienced being loved for who they were, and of being 'transformed' at a deep

⁶⁰² Interview 3, para. 5.

level. They learned from them how to love the other not as an exchange of goods but for the sake of love. In the lives of the person with a disability and their relationship with them, they were given a 'way of life' that was characterised by attentiveness in the events of every day, hospitality to and welcome of the different other as a source of life, fidelity, endurance, conversion of heart (transformation) and maturation, stripping and surrender, of being open to surprise, forgiveness and celebration – a life shaped by covenant.

This fundamental experience was equally true for both the married and the celibate interviewees. However they recognised that there was a difference between life lived with people in a community house and life as a married person. They found it hard to be precise about the difference but spoke of the difference in terms of 'gift of self to Jesus', of loss of identity, of entering to some degree into the life and mission of the person with a disability, of vulnerability, of intensity of experience, of a loneliness that was indwelt by God.

It was also noted that there were fewer and fewer people engaged as live in assistants long term. This was attributed to the changing form of community, and social /religious mores, and a lack of affirmation and recognition by community leaders. This lack of affirmation was highlighted by the lack of clarity about commitment to the long term material well being of assistants.

The interviews also evidenced a confusion around 'covenant in L'Arche' due to a lack of clarity about the community as an engaged body of specific people and therefore the embodiment of commitment in terms of collective process, corporate responsibility for one another's well being. Whilst reasons given for this ranged from economic, employment and social care policies, to a predominant cultural policy and religious patterns that are individualist, the interviewees were aware that something

was not right and that they risked losing something of value. Collectively the interviews suggested that L'Arche is in a period of transition and awakening that is paradoxically both anxiety making and hopeful, but does not easily propose a way forward. The interviewees commented that there is need for more “*deep conversation*”.

Overall the interviews revealed serious issues for L'Arche concerning its self identity as a community practising covenantal love. The language of covenant – enduring love and the desire for the well being of the other – has practical consequences and is not being adequately translated into the structures and practices of the corporate body of L'Arche.

Something being lost?

“Is there any body out there and how do I know that you love me?”

The voices of the assistants in the preceding chapter provide a moving and challenging witness to the current tensions within the Federation of L'Arche. In their testimonies they name the challenges, anxieties and hopes present at this crucial time of transition from the founder and founding generation. They returned to their motivations and first experiences. They traced the changes in their own life and in the corporate life of the community and in their diverse social, economic, religious and and political contexts. They sought to both question and make meaning of these experiences and to understand the source for and shape of their life in community and with people with learning disabilities. They expressed gratitude and wonder for all that they have been given and at times anger at what has not been addressed. They expressed a serious concern and sadness that perhaps something was being lost.

In the earlier chapters we saw how the desire for communion (and thereby unity) with God and one another has been the essential characteristic of the thought and practices of L'Arche. In this chapter we shall draw together the observations of the assistants and ask in what way a deeper understanding and ownership of covenant might clarify their concerns and provide a vibrant paradigm that will enable them to face into the questions before the communities of L'Arche today with integrity and hope, thus preparing them to receive and live from the surprising and unknown gifts of the Holy Spirit in the future.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first will look at the challenge

for L'Arche to rediscover its prophetic nature at a time of transition; the second will look at how anomalies can be a source of wisdom; the third will explore in more detail at what the anomalies are saying about L'Arche today; and the fourth section will look at the particular gift of assistants living with people with disabilities long term and the place of this particular vocation within the wider body of L'Arche.

1. Transition and growth

At the foundation of any community there is energy and challenge. The initial élan of the community is prophetic in that it is a new way of life set up in reaction to other ways or to fill a gap in society or the Church. In 1964 the founding of L'Arche certainly fulfilled these criteria in ways at the time were intuited yet also unknown. Vanier's first act of welcoming Raphael and Philippe into his home was 'foolish', and a risk, but one undertaken trusting that God is faithful in his love and and mercy. As the later witness of Vanier attests, this act was his own response to that first love of God, as fulfilled in Jesus. It was a covenantal act – a response to a love already given, and made possible by that same love. It was an act of grace. This first choice has borne fruit in unexpected ways including the birth of 137 communities throughout the world in many different contexts. Each community is unique and yet belongs to the one 'family' of L'Arche. L'Arche has expanded numerically, culturally, economically and religiously. In the forty years of its life it has changed shape and size, developed differing models of community life, includes celibate and married members, and has been challenged and shaped by changing social and religious values. This growth, change and institutionalisation has 'happened' sometimes with planning, often times as a necessary response to a given and unforeseen need or situation.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰³ See chapter 3 above.

Time, change and challenge from both without and within can dampen the ardour of the first years and the prophetic element of a community can disappear. The danger then is that the community can close in on itself and focus on management and maintenance. There is a danger of not looking at what is happening in the present and of not opening to the future, but instead of looking at the past to maintain the spirit and tradition. To stay alive and hope-filled the community needs however to retain the dynamism of the original prophetic spirit. There is a necessary “tension between the value of the past (spirit and tradition), the needs of the moment (a dialogue with society and its prevailing values) and the pull towards the future (prophecy)”.⁶⁰⁴ The spirit of a community is more than an idea. It provides a frame and measure for what is essential in the community . The spirit gives hope and shapes a way of life together, “an incarnation of love”.⁶⁰⁵ This way of life is made real in its practices, e.g. in the way leadership is understood and exercised, in the practices of sharing, listening, conversation and meeting, obedience, commitment, poverty, celebration and creativity, hospitality, prayer and forgiveness etc. Vanier speaks of this spirit as “the gift of God to the family, the treasure which he has entrusted [which] must always be at the heart of the community.”⁶⁰⁶ A community to be true to its origin should “always live in the spirit of its foundation. That does not mean living as it did in the founder's time. But it does mean having the same love, the same spirit and courage.”⁶⁰⁷ In fact the situation in the late 1990s revealed a chronic shortage of assistants and a serious confusion surrounding identity. The transition of generations called for a deepening and more reflective grasp and theological understanding of the founding story so that it might become a key for making sense of the challenges of the ongoing and changing reality of L'Arche, and

⁶⁰⁴ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 151.

⁶⁰⁵ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 151.

⁶⁰⁶ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.151.

⁶⁰⁷ Vanier , *Community and Growth*. p. 151.

enable the new generations to take full responsibility.⁶⁰⁸ This chapter aims to contribute to this reflection.

2. Anomalies and wisdom

The growth to human and spiritual maturity is an important part of Vanier's vision and life in L'Arche.⁶⁰⁹ For him this growth is about transformation of the heart, “the deepening transformation in God” so that “God is in [us]” and the “friends of Jesus” are “together, one in God”.⁶¹⁰ This is the communion to which humankind is invited by God, and for which L'Arche is a “school of the heart”.

It has been observed that growth in a community or in an individual often comes through 'anti-structure', and that what disturbs the 'normal and regular' can give greater insight into the normal and reveal a deeper structure.⁶¹¹ This is an underlying premise and experience at the heart of L'Arche in a life shared with people with learning disabilities. The person with a learning disability is often seen to be outside of what is normal, to be liminal, yet, as witnessed in Vanier's life and writings, and the interviews of this study, he/she can be revelatory of the deeper reality of what it is to be human, and in relation with God.⁶¹² It is very pertinent

⁶⁰⁸ See Chapter 4, Section 2.; David Ford notes that Vanier's reflections in *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* and in particular on John 13 -17, reveal that he like the writer of the Gospel is aware of the need to help the disciples make the transition beyond the founder. Ford comments that Vanier's commentary on John is the transmission of what he considers to be key to the future of L'Arche: “a fresh rereading of the Gospel of John that at the same time reflects on L'Arche. His commentary is distilled from this: it is a wisdom of love and friendship with Jesus and with those he loves, a communion of heart that is nothing less than indwelling in the Spirit the love that unites Jesus and his Father.” David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.375.

⁶⁰⁹ Perhaps his most widely read and influential book is entitled in English *Community and Growth*, and in a very earthed way talks about community as a place in which people can grow in their love, in the transformation of their desire. “But true growth comes from God, when we cry to him from the depths of the abyss to let his Spirit penetrate us. Growth in love is a growth in the Spirit. The stages through which we must pass in order to grow in love are the stages through which we must pass to become more totally united to God.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.133.

⁶¹⁰ Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 298.

⁶¹¹ cf. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, (London, Cornell University Press, 1974)

⁶¹² “They [people with learning disabilities] cry out to us and there is a vulnerability in their cry. [...] In listening to their cry and in responding to it by becoming their friends and companions on the journey, we discover that, in reality, we need them as much, if not more, than they need us. Just as

when looking at the expressed anxiety of the assistants about “something being lost” to return to the anomalies (the experiences, practices, and patterns that have prevented the realisation of communion) named in the interviews and the work of the Identity and Mission process and to see where they lead.

The Identity and Mission process identified six major obstacles that prevent L'Arche from living out the original vision with integrity.⁶¹³ The reality of these issues were made specific in the witness of the assistants, who identified the tension between being loyal to what gives meaning and the working out of this in the functional and practical life of the communities. They spoke of experiences where the structural failure to provide adequate process or consultation had resulted in injustice; where long term commitment was not honoured and individuals were left after long service without adequate economic resources, accommodation, meaningful employment or real ways of belonging to the community. They spoke of the ongoing tension and felt contradiction between the desire to live a radical gospel based life in community and the demands and accommodation demanded by service provision, current social patterns and modern notions of self. They noted how faith once a shared practice had become increasingly a personal and not corporate matter. They spoke with sadness and disappointment about the changing model of L'Arche

we call forth the adult in them and help them to assume greater independence, they call forth the child in us and awaken in us the qualities of the heart.” Tim Kearney, 'Introduction' to *A Prophetic Cry: Stories of Spirituality and Healing Inspired by L'Arche*, ed. Tim Kearney, (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2000), p.17.

⁶¹³ The six obstacles identified in the Identity and Mission Process 2005

- i) Difficulty in recognising and naming God as central to daily life together, and the tendency for faith to remain a private matter;
- ii) Insufficient understanding of the founding story of L'Arche, limiting the community's flexibility, creativity, vision and sense of identity, and hindering the story's potential to challenge and transform;
- iii) Structures and patterns that do not effectively develop or sustain commitment, vocation, and membership, and that do not sufficiently foster the inter-relationship of community life, faith life, and service provision;
- iv) Lack of clarity about authority and ambivalence about giving authority to leaders;
- v) Difficulty in recognising, admitting, and handling limits;
- vi) Many hurt and broken relationships, often because of the lack of loving and honest communication.

and the confusion about or refusal of covenant as a reality within L'Arche, and the lack of clarity about membership. There appeared to be an increasing split between a rich mystical theology and the sheer practicality of 'professional' care and a marginalisation of the long term vocation of life together with people with learning disabilities in a community house.⁶¹⁴ It was observed that there was a lack of “shared language” and a gap between word and practice, and that the fundamental issues were commitment, the need to rediscover the corporate dimension of L'Arche and a loss of the “bigger picture”.

When looking at the new articulation of the identity and mission of L'Arche and the ongoing work of the current process concerning commitment and belonging we noted a shift in language in which words like transformation, covenant, community and commitment are not given a place in the new 'speech' of L'Arche. In making this shift what might be lost in terms of narrative, symbolic language and tradition, all that gives shape to how we understand what it is to be human before God? The assistants interviewed called for “deep conversations” but what will be the common hinterland and language?

3. To what do the anomalies point?

During the forty years of its story the communities of L'Arche have remained in the 'market place', negotiating changing social policy regulation and models about care for people with learning disabilities, changing social mores, religious and economic patterns and expanding into new countries and contexts. The language of society has changed with an ever increasing predominance of economic and technical language being used to describe human life and relationships. L'Arche too has changed. This has brought new life and as noted in the previous section anomalies – that is

⁶¹⁴ Chapter 5.

responses and actions that seem to stand outside the original vision for L'Arche and the expectations of its long term members. These anomalies, in the wisdom of L'Arche if recognised and accepted may themselves become a source of new life.

a. Tendency towards secularisation

In any organisation that has amongst its basic tenets hospitality towards the different other and the desire for communion and unity, there will be a risk of losing specificity. This need to ensure 'inclusion' can lead to a flattening out of difference, the adoption of language, values and practices that are acceptable to all. In the context of societies that are increasingly secular as well as multi-faith, and where there is a notion of self that is self centred religious language and meaning can be the first to be set aside.⁶¹⁵ Communal practice and sharing of faith are relegated to personal choice. This can also result in a loss of the transcendental and an ontological collapse, leaving the relationships between people as the only referent.

This would be a radical shift from the original vision and understanding of L'Arche that all life is a gift from God, and that we are most truly human when we accept that we are loved by God for our own sake and as we love God and others for their own sake. It could also lead to a slow disavowal of the heart of L'Arche – the risk of faithful relationship with Jesus and with people with learning disabilities, and the belief that we can speak of the transcendent in the realities of our ordinary lives.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁵ I am understanding self centred to include a self sufficiency that believes that we can find the source and resources for our own well being from within, and that the self is the essential unit of meaning.

⁶¹⁶ “ If at L'Arche we no longer live with the poor and the broken and celebrate life with them, we as a community will die; we will be cut off from the source of life, from the presence of Jesus in them. They nourish us and heal our wounds daily. They call forth the light and the love within us. But of course if we cut ourselves off from the broken body of Christ in the Eucharist and prayer, we will not be able to see them as a source of life and as a presence of Christ. We would also die spiritually.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 188.

The Mission Statement (2005) refers to “mutually transforming relationships”. Whilst this statement is a reflection of lived reality in L'Arche, without reference to the transcendent dynamic it runs the risk of putting all the weight on human self realisation and becomes a contradiction, and a denial of our human reality. The good news of the gospels is that it is through our imperfect humanity we are redeemed, that God who in the beginning gratuitously gives us life, goes on creating and making surprising newness in our lives. To live fully is to accept his presence and action of love towards us. We control neither this gift of life and love nor our lives . The embodiment of the covenant in Jesus is about the transformation of desire amidst the contingencies and suffering of human life. Mutuality (as understood as love for the sake of love) does not come to us naturally is not possible without transforming grace, without the transcendent.⁶¹⁷

As witnessed in the interviews there needs to be a 'third angle' for human relationships to be possible, a prism through which these relationships pass. The extraordinary consequence of the Good News of Jesus is that He is faithfully and lovingly present at the heart of our lives including our failure to love, if we dare to recognise and receive him. There is hope in a love already given. The covenant as made known in Jesus, in his presence in the poor and our presence to the poor is such a prism and therefore an essential signifier for L'Arche.

There is a danger for L'Arche that the 'new language' of the Identity and Mission Statement, and the seeming discomfort with the language of covenant, community, membership and commitment leaves L'Arche without a shared originary story, and would be a big step away from the source of L'Arche as made known in Jean Vanier's personal story as well as the founding story of L'Arche – that is the

⁶¹⁷ cf: “[...] everything tells you that complete mutuality does not inhere in man's life with one another. It is a form of grace for which one must always be prepared but on which one can never count.” Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clarke, 1970) pp.177-178.

covenantal story of God with humankind as made known in Jesus.⁶¹⁸ The challenge for L'Arche is not only to own this story, but to dare to live it out fully and to let it inform and shape our lives together. This includes letting it enable a making sense of the difference between the community members of different religious faiths or none, and being open to being surprised by God's creativity and abundance. This is not about ideological closure and demands serious theological reflection and sharing.

b. The risk of co-opting current social practices and values

The challenges before L'Arche are not to be underestimated. The interviews witnessed to the complexity of the relationship with statutory authorities, and whilst acknowledging the benefits gained, the discomfort and even fear that L'Arche has let itself be co-opted into the dominant social practices and values.⁶¹⁹ This was poignantly spoken about in terms of the seeming tension between employment and covenantal relationships, between being a community living out of gospel values and a service provider.⁶²⁰ Again the challenge may be for us to seek to hear anew the covenantal story of L'Arche and how that story informs choices around the structures and practices of embodiment. Language is often a strong indicator of underlying shifts in values and models. This was noted by the assistants in the

⁶¹⁸ The Identity and Mission Statement approved in 2005 refers only to “trusting in God” and does not provide a frame for a communal imagination of who this God is and what difference he makes to the working out of our lives together.

⁶¹⁹ “Our focal point of fidelity at L'Arche is to live with people who have a handicap, in the spirit of the Gospel and the beatitudes. 'To live with' is different from 'to do for'. It doesn't simply mean eating at the same table and sleeping under the same roof. It means that we create relationships of gratuité, truth and interdependence, that we listen to our people, that we recognise and marvel at their gifts, and particularly their openness to God and their holiness. The day we become no more than professional workers and educational therapists is the day we stop being L'Arche – although of course 'living with' does not exclude this professional aspect.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.150.

⁶²⁰ “The danger is that we close in on our success, forgetting our first inspiration. The danger is that we become a professionally competent centre which has forgotten gratuité and community as a place of communion, that we put so much emphasis on structures and the rights of assistants that we forget that handicapped people need to be with brothers and sisters who give themselves to them and are committed to them. The danger is that we forget how to welcome and no longer see people with a handicap as a gift of God and a source of life.” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 160.

interviews. Their comments suggest that there is a need to examine the compatibility of two seeming opposing models, one of contract/employment/ client and employee rights/bargain etc. and the other of faithful relationship, endurance, self gift and availability, transformation, mutuality, and corporate responsibility.

c. Struggling to embody the gift of the covenant as made known through Jesus and the person with learning disabilities in L'Arche

i. Community

It is striking that today within L'Arche there is a struggle with the language of 'community',⁶²¹ and one might suspect the consequences of commitment, and loss.⁶²² The covenant returns us to the premise of corporate belonging and responsibility as fundamental to the way we are human before God. It does not prescribe the institutional form of community but demands we take seriously the nature of God's promise of love. L'Arche, as we saw in the preceding chapters, is a response to God's covenant and is shaped by participation in this love as embodied in Jesus. The covenant is an invitation to participation in the love of God, an invitation to communion with God and with one another through the dwelling of Jesus through the Spirit in our hearts. It is an invitation to community – to a life of prayer (a relation of communion with God), to a consciousness that we are bonded by Jesus into a single body (that in this belonging to one another, we are true to our identity), and to service of the poor (that is we are responsible for one another's well being).

⁶²¹ L'Arche International Reflecting Group Report, Atlanta, 2009

⁶²² “The sense of belonging to a people, the covenant, with the commitment that it implies, are at the heart of community life. [...] to make community with the poorest and identify with them is harder and demands a certain death to self. [...] For whom will they give their life?” Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 91

ii. Listening to the person with a learning disability

In the genuine search of the interviewees they frequently commented on the need to listen to the people with disabilities and to hear what they were saying about L'Arche and life together. As one interviewee suggested, such a listening might help us catch something of the “original vision”. I would like to suggest that to return to the witness of the person with a disability is to return to the covenant. The person with a disability invites us to own what it is to be human. They remind us of what is essential – the qualities of the heart, and the reality of our dependence on God and one another. The cry of their hearts and their need of the other can elicit compassion and open the other to the transformation of their own heart and so to human and spiritual maturity. They remind us in their flesh that limitation/lack can be the path to fullness, when recognised and accepted, or to death. They speak to us of difference and ask us to learn how to welcome this difference as gift and not as threat. They reveal that there is a real work of integration if the ways of the heart are suffering if they to become non violent, and respect the other. Relationships makes us vulnerable to the other and so are risky. They are based on our trust in the promise of the other to love faithfully. They invite us into community.⁶²³ They are covenant makers in our world. However this covenant making is possible because there is a prior covenant between God and humankind.⁶²⁴

iii. Commitment

Commitment was identified as a core issue in the interviews of the assistants – commitment to one another and the embodiment of this commitment in the life and

⁶²³ cf: Interview 6 where the assistant relates how E (a person with a disability) would not have come into her fullness without the assistants, and so too the assistants would not have experienced a transformation of the heart without E, nor would they become brothers and sisters. E enabled unity between them.

⁶²⁴ cf: Interview 5. The assistant recognises the covenant experience in L'Arche because of the prior covenant God has made with her country, her people, and so with her.

structures of the community. As spoken of in Chapter 2, community is a school of the heart. It is not something that can be fixed, or possessed, because it is about relationship. Therefore it is also about gift and a “dangerous freedom”. The inability to talk about this commitment, whether in terms of covenant or membership, was seen as the source of a lot of suffering, fear of exclusion, confusion and key to the future of L'Arche. It was the deep cry of the assistants – to whom am I bonded and who is bonded to me? How are we community/body together? It is perhaps important to L'Arche to look at the relationship between covenant and community. Every community is made up of the experience of communion (*communitas*) and the structures that enable communion (*societas* - the institution).⁶²⁵ Covenant is the field of *communitas*, the bond that unites people over and above any formal social bonds (*societas*). Covenant contains but is never contained by *societas*. Covenant is about God's faithful promise of love. Humankind is limited and fails in the fulfilling of its covenantal obligations (that is the desire to love the one who loves for the sake of love). It is God's unlimited fidelity and so forgiveness, perseverance and endurance that makes possible my fidelity.

We can also be 'for one another', bonded to one another, and responsible for the well being of the other as a body , i.e. as a community. We can make a covenant (promising fidelity of love) with one another but with limits.⁶²⁶ Commitment is an outward expression of our intention to be faithful in and because of God. This

⁶²⁵ For a fuller exploration of the relationship between *communitas* and *societas* see: Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*; & Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*.

⁶²⁶ The interviews and fifth and sixth obstacle identified in the Identity and Mission process speak about broken relationship and suffering and injustice. It is essential that we as assistant take seriously the notion of limit. We see it clearly in terms of the person with a disability (whether because of physical or intellectual disabilities, or psychological blocks and wounds of the heart) and try to understand, make sense of and room for in the daily life and structures of the community, and we acknowledge the gifts of the individual. However we are less able to recognise the others difference and own our own limitedness. It is essential that processes of communication are inbuilt into the institution of the community and members are given appropriate formation and accompaniment to enable human and spiritual maturation. This is a requirement of justice and truth but also a necessary protection for the people with disabilities/ the most vulnerable in the community. There must be intentional working through of difference.

commitment demands that we name the limitedness of our commitment to one another, i.e. we can only live with so much of 'x' behaviour; we can only offer this level of security. Only then can we talk of “*our covenant*” in L'Arche and our ultimate dependence on God (trust in his covenant with us). Just as God makes real his promise in Jesus through the Spirit, so we must seek to make real our promises to one another and God, and because we are 'fallen' we have to put in place partial means of ensuring our promises whilst knowing the true fulfilment is at the level of our hearts and made possible by God. Only when there is a clarity not only of mission but of the responsibilities of the community to its members will L'Arche be able to be true to its identity as intentional community and so invite long term commitment.⁶²⁷

iv. Fear of exclusion

Fear of exclusion was named as a stumbling block in both the development of covenant and membership (a formal recognition of commitment between the community and its members) in L'Arche. Throughout this study I have noted the intuitive assent to covenant as the determining reality for L'Arche yet at the same time an inability to overtly own this as a body.

I would like to offer two further comments. Firstly it is essential to acknowledge the multiple ways Vanier refers to covenant. He speaks of covenant with reference to God's covenant with individuals; God's covenant with Israel; God's covenant with the church; God's covenant with humankind; our covenant with Jesus and the weakest and poorest in L'Arche . Vanier invites us to be surprised by both the specificity and the universality of God's covenant. Secondly, it is clear that for

⁶²⁷ It is perhaps ironic that the lack of the covenantal living, i.e. the embodiment of covenant, is revealed by a practical issue – by failing to attend to the processes of the end of our working commitment and the ends of our lives.

Vanier Jesus is the embodiment of the covenant and it is through him we are enabled to live out our covenantal obligations both with God and with one another. He speaks of how covenant is known through a specific relationship but bears fruit in the community and overflows the community;⁶²⁸ and that commitment is made with the community.⁶²⁹

Covenantal love is not about either ideological (religious or secular) or emotional closure (as mentioned above (c.i)).⁶³⁰ The love of God is abundant and creative, and desires new life. God also takes seriously the reality of our humanity.⁶³¹ However our communities are like our individual selves limited and contingent. In order for the Spirit to live within us we need a defined human body, so too a community needs 'boundaries' within which it can become. The failure to take on board membership and covenantal commitment and so to define and to make choices concerning the embodiment of commitment within the communities of L'Arche could be seen as a refusal of limitedness, of our humanity and the source of a vulnerability that is not life giving and works against faithful relationships.

In revisiting the corporate and personal founding stories of L'Arche a great

⁶²⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.91.

⁶²⁹ "A new capacity to give life is born, not by myself, but in the body of the community." (as mentioned above (c.i)) Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 83.

⁶³⁰ Commitment seems to me to be something to do with 'borders' (i.e. bodies whether singularly or corporately) that are life giving, containing and identifying and enabling relationship between us but not excluding. This then depends on how we understand relationship. If we understand our relationships to be in the 'image and likeness' of God as Trinity, then they would need to be always opening out onto another, non possessive, differentiated yet united. They would need to be 'non- gratifying' (so not closing in on self) but opening out into the Other (unknown Other?). Rowan Williams writes about this in terms of the deflection of love which is both darkness and joy. So we think wrongly if we think of committed relationship as satisfying, completeness, or closed unity. By definition they would not be exclusive, save because of our limited capacity to love in this way. (cf: Rowan Williams, "The deflections of desire: negative theology in trinitarian disclosure", *Silence and The Word*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner.)

⁶³¹ "The Gospel of John reveals that the body of Jesus, his incarnated person, is at the heart of the mystical life and of a new knowledge of god. This life is not a *flight from* the world of pain and of matter but a *mission into* it, to love people as Jesus loves them." Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 13.

work has been done, but the anomalies point to a need to deepen our understanding and ownership of the primary story of L'Arche within which Vanier and L'Arche have been shaped – the story of God's relationship with humankind as revealed in the person of Jesus and through the ongoing work and presence of the Spirit in the world. This story reveals God to be faithful over time and transcends any individual story. It enables L'Arche to honour its lived history through the prism of the original story – the “bigger story” of God's covenant, and sets it free to imagine the communal future.

4. The particular gift of lives committed to life in the community houses with people with learning disabilities.

The particular lens used for this study has been the experience of covenant in the lives of assistants committed long term to living with people with learning disabilities in a community house. I would like to suggest that in fact the particular vocation of these assistants within L'Arche is to be a lens of the essential life in L'Arche which is about communion with God.⁶³² Their testimony set along side that of single and married assistants no longer living in a community house has revealed a shared story and shared concerns. Covenant has been the shape of their stories and is also the concern of their lives. God's covenant has led them to share their lives with the people with a disability in L'Arche, and this life together has led them into a deeper experience of communion with God. The desire of their hearts is to be enabled to continue to live covenantal relationships not only with the members with

⁶³² It is difficult to speak on behalf of the members with disabilities, who were not directly included in this research and therefore I recognise that in making this point concerning the particular vocation of a life lived in long term in a L'Arche house, I am only referring to half of the equation. The witness of the assistants however as to the role played by the members with disabilities in the transformation of their desire, might suggest that there is a rich mystical life already lived if not articulated by many of the members with learning disabilities. My own experience of relationship with particular people with learning disabilities has been of knowing that our friendship was an icon for the deeper relationship with God.

disabilities but also with other assistant members of the community. Their lives are profoundly effected by the anomalies identified in section (b) above. In this transition period within L'Arche they are very vulnerable.

The current changes and developing patterns within L'Arche could lead to a marginalisation and even negation of the particular gift they bring to the body of L'Arche. The interviews however affirmed that there is 'something' about the experience of the house assistant long term that is important for the whole of L'Arche. This was described as “something of the soul or spirit of what we are living”, “a relationship oasis”, “[a] witness to the depth, the possibility of depth relationship.” Life in a community house was described as a “crucible experience”. When the assistants spoke of losing something that is essential to L'Arche, I understand them to be referring to this intense experience of God's love as made known through their relationship with Jesus and the people with a disability.

The Charter of L'Arche, Section II.2. speaks of home life as the heart of L'Arche, a context for the working out of God's covenant and 'our covenant' in L'Arche. The assistants described the inner journey they are invited to live in this context of dwelling with people with disabilities. They spoke of the way the outer life with its particular askesis (discipline) of life shared together with people who are suffering, of losses and experiences of vulnerability, precariousness ,and loneliness, as well as the solidarity, gifts and celebration,invites them “to discover an inner vulnerability which brings about intimacy with Jesus, abundance, joy, freedom”. They speak of being shaped by their life in the community house with people with disabilities. The peculiar intimacy of the L'Arche house makes it possible for them to say yes to the promise of Jesus that he and his Father will come and make their home in our hearts.

They discover that their 'role' in this context is to live a life in the presence of God. Through the acts of every day, in good times as well as bad, they are asked to be present and attentive to the covenantal love of God. They are asked to be a particular witness to the beauty and maturation of the people with learning disabilities and to share this with others. They are asked to be faithful and to be drawn into communion with God. They are asked to become a contemplative eye for L'Arche.

Just as the covenant of L'Arche is only possible when set within the “bigger story” of God's covenant, so the life of the long term house assistant is only possible if there is a bigger community in which their life is affirmed and given meaning, and which commits itself to the long term well being inclusive of the material needs of the assistants. This way of life lived needs to be a conscious choice by the whole community. Just as the Word was made flesh and embodied God's covenant , so the life and particular vocation of the community households is a making flesh of covenant in L'Arche. The challenge for L'Arche today is to recognise its need of the particular witness of the life of long term assistants living with people with learning disabilities, and to find ways of nurturing this life at the heart of each community.

Conclusion

The quotation used for the title of this chapter is the voice of a person with learning disabilities. One Good Friday night this suffering woman, who was deeply afraid of death, cried out into the dark, “Is there any body out there and how do I know that you love me?” I witnessed her cry, and heard both the cry of Jesus on the cross and my own unspoken voice. We tried to be that “any body” for one another in a L'Arche house called the Vine. Our love was perhaps never enough to answer that deep cry,

but it was enough to enable each of us to seek the One who could respond and dare to begin to learn what it might mean to be home to God's promised love.⁶³³

Our love for one another is incomplete and is never satisfied but is made complete in Jesus, who in his relationship with Father and the Spirit reveals a love that does not return upon itself and is never closed. L'Arche is founded upon the cry of the person with learning disabilities for love, a cry that unmask the cry deep within the heart of the assistants. Community is born from these cries, and the recognition that God is at the heart of our cry for love. God's covenant witnesses to the fact that we are loved first and that we are loved for the sake of love, for no return. Through Jesus we are invited to participate in this love for no return. The difference between the person with a learning disability and an assistant is irreducible, just as the difference between God and man is irreducible, and yet in Jesus there is the possibility of the transformation of desire through attentive presence to the other who remains always unknown and other to us but whose word we are invited trust.

Throughout these chapters we have been examining the theology and practice of covenantal living in L'Arche and in particular through the lens of the long term assistant living with people with learning disabilities. We have affirmed that covenant is the promise underlying the risk of L'Arche. The reality of God's covenant speaks to the facts of our experience within L'Arche and shapes it from within, and maybe particularly at this time of transition, it speaks to the named anxieties. The reality of covenant reflects the truth of who we are, that we are given

⁶³³ “[...] to be presence in the world where there is an absence of God.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 257.
“Loneliness is the total emptiness of a human heart, the final and absolute purification in order to become the place where God resides. But even in this loneliness Jesus is with us in agony and anguish, just as the Father is always with him.” Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, p. 289.

our life by God, we are different from God, and we are limited in our capacity to love as we are loved. It provides L'Arche with hope, that we are a part of a story that is bigger, that we are loved first and without condition, and that our humanity is not bound by death and contingency. The frame of God's covenant is abundance, the promise of new life. Covenant provides us with the experience and language of fidelity, of desire, and the possibility of our desire being transformed, and of joy. Covenant gives us the language of freedom of choice, difference and disparity, maturity and responsibility. It encompasses and works with our human experiences of victim-hood, exclusion, suffering and loneliness. It unites the mystical with the embodied.

The challenges before L'Arche are real and serious. I would like to suggest that in order to respond it is important that L'Arche return not only to its historical but also theological roots. This is an invitation to the people of L'Arche to own anew rather than discard the language of covenant, to deepen and make sense of the story of God's covenant as revealed in Jesus and in the lives of people with learning disabilities, to recognise it as “radical in thought and subversive in practice” and to let it question, shape and inform the character and practices of the communities and in particular the real ways in which we work out our commitment to one another, 'our covenant'. A second important choice before L'Arche is to recognise in the life lived with people with learning disabilities in the communities as an intense working out of what lies at the heart of the mystical L'Arche, a life of communion, love for the sake of Love. This is an invitation to L'Arche to understand the life in the community houses as an prism for the particular way L'Arche understands and lives its life in the presence of God, and a vocation, that is “hidden” but lived out for the whole body of L'Arche.⁶³⁴

⁶³⁴ “My life is hid with Christ in God.” Colossians 3: 3.

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