

Anglican-Lutheran Society Annual Meeting 2019
St George's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Southwark, London
'Living in Diversity'

Reflections on Ecumenism from a L'Arche Perspective

By Dr Chris Asprey

Dr Asprey started by saying that he used to lecture in Systematic Theology in Paris where he had a 'lone-wolf' approach, but how much he had enjoyed preparing this presentation in collaboration with some of his colleagues in L'Arche, one of whom, Jim Cargin, is with us today.



Introduction

L'Arche is a network, a federation of communities all over the world, where people of differing abilities live together as brothers and sisters. All kinds of difference are found, not only of intellectual ability but of culture,

language, nationality, different faiths and none. So the ecumenical and inter-faith question has been with us from the start.

I. A “dialogue of life” – rather than a dialogue of concepts

Ecumenism in L'Arche does not primarily happen in the things we talk about – but as a human, incarnated journey of walking together. In other words, it happens through living life together as neighbours, as brothers and sisters in one human family, across all the differences that might divide us. You can speak of our place in the ecumenical scene in what is called a “dialogue of life” rather than a dialogue around theological ideas. (Cf. the statement in *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) written by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Interreligious Dialogue: “The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.” (para. 42)

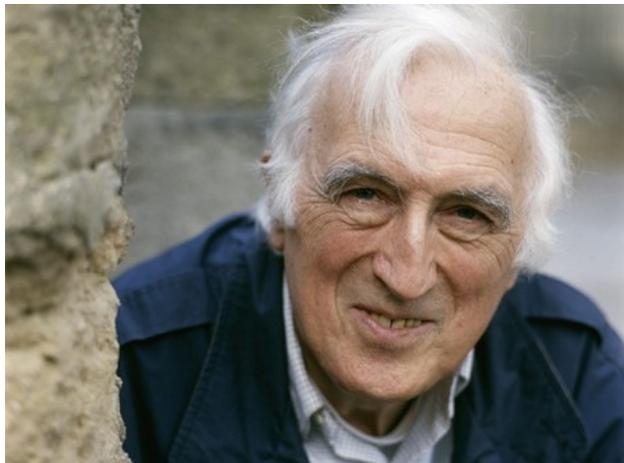
In this respect L'Arche is not unlike the Tibhirine monastery, the community of Trappist Cistercian monks in Algeria, many of whom were kidnapped and murdered in 1996, during the Algerian Civil War. Their story is told in the film “Gods and Men”.

“Dialogue is necessarily marked by the fact that Christians are a minority group in Algeria. It cannot happen on the level of ideas or grand theological concepts. Dialogue really occurs in work and everyday life. This is what I call a “dialogue of life” – which has all the essential richness of being mutual [...] who we are is revealed and exposed in everyday life.” (Jean-Marie Lassaussse, *Le jardinier de Tibhirine*, Bayard, Paris, 2010, p. 107)

So the first point to make is that, if L'Arche is significant for the question of ecumenism, it is more at the level of learning to live with people who are different from us, rather than of theological concepts. Many of the people we are involved with do not engage with the world through concepts. That said, more narrowly theological issues do also crop up in L'Arche – a point to which I shall return.

2. An ecumenical community – rather than an ecumenical project

Although ecumenism is part of L'Arche's history and indeed our identity, L'Arche is not an ecumenical project, but an ecumenical community. Ecumenism was not a conscious choice for L'Arche, it was something that happened to us by accident – and then it subsequently *became* a choice. This can be seen just from our history, how we started and grew:



Jean Vanier, pictured here, a Roman Catholic Canadian, founded l'Arche in Trosly (1964). He went to a psychiatric hospital at the suggestion of Père Thomas Phillippe and found about 80 men with learning disabilities and other problems being “warehoused” there in two dormitories. So he invited two men from that hospital to join him in community. Their common life was founded in Catholicism with a daily Eucharist, and they went to Mass in the village every day. However they soon rebelled against the daily Mass. So the question of diversity arose at a very early stage.

- Daybreak (1969) – Steve and Ann Newroth were members of the Anglican Church of Canada in Toronto who had experienced the community at Trosly. Roman Catholic assistants who also came to Daybreak from Trosly wanted daily Eucharist while others from the United Church of Canada as well as other Reformed denominations regarded this as “too Catholic and too foreign”.
- Asha Niketan Bangalore (1970) – This was an Interreligious community, mainly Hindu core members, with a RC founder, Gabrielle Einsler. On the first evening Vanier led the Lord's Prayer and Guru Nathan, the first member, lit incense.
- Bouaké Ivory Coast (1974) – core members there were mostly Muslim or Animist

These new foundations, and this growth, were not planned. They were a response to what was discerned as being a movement of the Spirit. Indeed, Père Thomas Philippe, who was Jean Vanier's mentor in founding L'Arche, objected: he wanted L'Arche to remain, if not Catholic, then at least Christian.

There was a question in the early years of whether the Pontifical Council for the Laity should grant L'Arche an official canonical status within the RC Church. However, it soon became apparent that L'Arche was crossing denominational and religious boundaries, which would make such a status inappropriate.

When the L'Arche Community was starting in Preston, in 1997, there was a committee member who wanted the Community to be explicitly interfaith from the very beginning – to take account of the large Muslim population in the area. In the end, they decided against this for a number of reasons. It would be complicated (Halal food, ensuring same-sex care, etc.) But the deeper point was that the ecumenical and interreligious identity has never been a *choice*, or a part of the story. They have been an accident.

This is apparent from the first L'Arche Community founded in the UK. L'Arche in the UK was founded by a Catholic (Therese Vanier) and an Anglican couple (Geoffrey and Anne Morgan). The first community was near Canterbury, in a house called Little Ewell in Barfrestone, which had a little chapel in it. It had been made available to L'Arche through a connection with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Soon after it was founded, a Canadian priest called Father Basil asked if he could come and spend a year in the community as an assistant, and whether he could celebrate mass each day in the chapel. Therese went to the Catholic priest in charge of ecumenical affairs in the diocese of Southwark, Fr Richard Stewart, to ask if L'Arche could have special permission for this priest to

celebrate mass, and for everyone who wanted to be given communion. Fr Richard said that this could be conceived as a Catholic take-over, and in any case the bishop would not be able to grant permission for Anglican members of the community to commune.

Various solutions were tried. Initially, they decided that Fr Basil should celebrate his Eucharist early in the morning, outside normal community hours as it were, so that it would not be regarded as a community mass.

But Fr Richard also recommended that, instead of celebrating a Catholic mass in which Anglicans (including Anglican core members) would be allowed communion, it would be far preferable to form a relationship with the local Anglican parish, so that L'Arche people would be welcomed and included there. Establishing connections with Catholic *and* Anglican parishes meant that church ministers would come and celebrate regular Eucharists in the community in the two different traditions. This still happens today in L'Arche, for example, in my community in London.

But things have been done differently in different places. Until recently, many in France or Belgium regarded it as essential to celebrate a daily RC Eucharist. In Germany, intercommunion (Eucharistic hospitality) was widely practised. In North America, by contrast, it was not. But because it would be scandalous to celebrate a Eucharist in which not everyone could receive communion, Eucharist was sometimes avoided and was not part of regular community life. In the UK, we have tended to alternate between Catholic and Anglican Eucharists – and to respect the Catholic discipline around Eucharistic hospitality. (Often it is necessary to point this out very explicitly at each celebration.) Fr David Stephenson, our Anglican chaplain, told me recently that this experience had helped him understand the seriousness of the RC position that the Eucharist is not just a means to unity but the end of the journey towards unity.

So my second point is this: that L'Arche became ecumenical as an accident, rather than by choice, by virtue of sharing life in community with people of difference (including religious difference). But taking our ecumenical (indeed, our interfaith) identity seriously has also led L'Arche to engage reflectively in ecumenism over the years.¹

¹ Looking at L'Arche's history of serious ecumenical reflection, it seems there was a highpoint between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. Thérèse Vanier says that the focus on ecumenism began to dwindle in the 1990s, because of the severe pressures the communities were under. There was a disconnection between the ecumenical vision and the lived reality on the ground – and this was only exacerbated by reports coming out of international commissions: “There is no doubt that the commissions were contributing to the widening gap between the vision and development of l'Arche on the one hand, and the reality of daily life within communities on the other. The communities, for example, had pressing priorities which were unrelated to ecumenism and the last thing they needed were papers upon which to reflect or guidelines which many found irritating.” (T. Vanier, *One Bread, One Body*, p. 45) Some significant dates:

- 1986-7: L'Arche International appoints three Commissions on Ecumenism covering the three geographic zones of the Federation: Europe/Africa/Middle East; North America; Asia/West Pacific. These continue until 1993. In 1993, the zones were expanded from 3-7, but because there were now not enough experienced assistants available to participate in commissions, only two zones now had ecumenical commissions.
- By 1995, ecumenical commissions had largely given way to Spirituality Commissions, which included questions around ecumenism within broader discussions around spirituality and L'Arche – although an Ecumenical Commission continued in the South Europe and North America zones.
- L'Arche International Document, “Report on the Place of Ecumenism in L'Arche” (1990, revised 1994)

Thérèse Vanier, Jean's sister, and founder of L'Arche in the UK, was perhaps the person who reflected most deeply and extensively on L'Arche's ecumenical journey – though she was not the only one. Some significant documents include:

- L'Arche Internationale, *Report on the Place of Ecumenism in L'Arche* (1990, rev. 1994)
- L'Arche Internationale, *Ecumenism in L'Arche* (1994) – Fr. Tom Ryan, Thérèse Vanier, Maggie Smith, Fr. Thomas Cullinan OSB, Canon Martin Reardon
- Thérèse Vanier, *One Bread, One Body. The Ecumenical Experience of L'Arche* (Gracewing, 1997)

3. A question of belonging – not just of beliefs

But the question of ecumenism takes us deeper than simply a matter of beliefs, into the question of belonging. From Herodotus onward (5th century BCE), the *οἰκουμένη* in Greek was not just a geographic term but a political term, referring to the civilised part of the earth, as opposed to that part of the earth that was inhabited by peoples thought of as Barbarians by the Greeks. In other words, the question of who belongs, who is one of us.

And this, in a sense, takes us to the heart of what L'Arche is about: belonging across all kinds of differences (and most of all differences of ability). Father Tom Ryan, who used to accompany L'Arche in the USA, used to speak of the “voluntary displacement” undertaken by assistants who arrived at L'Arche: a young Anglican woman would find herself having to accompany someone with a learning disability to mass; or a Catholic man, would have to accompany an Anglican to Holy Communion. L'Arche is a place of religious and ecumenical diversity that displaces us from our zones of comfort, and places us in the disturbing presence of the other.

But then, one of the challenges – particularly in the UK – was what symbols would celebrate our communion (our belonging to one human family) when the Christian symbol of communion was also a symbol of division and separation. This was sometimes a scandal – or simply incomprehensible – to people with disabilities. There are some well-known examples of this in L'Arche folklore:

- Nick Ellerker: a man with Down's syndrome in our London Community. He could not bear disunity and division. On Sundays, everyone in the community would head off to different churches. When someone once raised the question, why everyone went to so many different churches, Nick responded, “To make them one”. He was someone who was deeply distressed by disunity. On one occasion, he came back on a Sunday evening after everyone had been at their different churches. And at the meal, he lifted up the bread and did a kind of blessing, and then he lifted up the jug of water and did the same thing, and he passed around the plate and the jug, and said, “There. Now we're one!”
- Robert McWilliam: on an ecumenical retreat given by Jean Vanier in 1983, after a Catholic Cardinal had presided over a celebration the day before, it was Archbishop Robert Runcie's turn to celebrate an Anglican Holy Communion. When Robert McWilliam took the host from Runcie, he broke it in two and gave one half back to him. Runcie described how moving that was for him: two men from Liverpool, both named Robert, sharing in this way. They walked out together at the end of the service.





So finding a symbol of togetherness that was not divisive became important. Because of the difficulty of communion, ever since the 1980s, at a gathering in Liverpool, L'Arche has often preferred to use the symbol of the washing of the feet as our most characteristic ritual of communion, rather than the Eucharist. This practice, of course, takes the place of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. Maundy Thursday has become the biggest day in L'Arche, and at every retreat Jean Vanier conducts he washes people's feet.

4. Our ecumenical situation: becoming an open community

One of the key contributions of the ecumenical officer from Southwark, Fr Richard, was to encourage L'Arche to establish a relationship with the local parishes. This is a crucial point.

L'Arche arose as a response to the humiliation and systematic exclusion of people with learning disabilities in our societies. Because the modern world is almost *designed* to push them to the margins, Jean Vanier felt that it was only by living intentionally in community that one could create an inclusive environment. But the danger that always lurks for L'Arche, is that we become inward-looking, monastic, even sectarian, and becoming a church in its own right.

This is more of a risk in France – where, for example, the Trosly community had until recently its own priest; and where L'Arche is so pre-eminently Catholic. But it is also increasingly a danger in a world where the churches do not succeed in engaging people spiritually. Many people come to L'Arche who have been raised in Christian backgrounds, but no longer find a home in the church. When they get to L'Arche, they find that the language and symbols and traditions of Christianity – many of which are rituals of L'Arche community life – take on a new meaning. It is as if they become real through everyday life in community. This was my experience too. But the risk is that L'Arche *becomes* a church for people in the community.

This was pointed out by the American Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas in his dialogue with Jean Vanier. Hauerwas speaks of how the church needs L'Arche in many ways – a point I shall make later. But he points out that L'Arche also needs the church – precisely because the rituals by which we are able to celebrate and understand community are the rituals and symbols of Christian faith:

“L'Arche is not the church. Because it is so compelling and gives us something worth doing in a world with so few examples of what's worth doing, L'Arche is almost overwhelming. Lives are so taken up in it that members can think they don't need to worship God with other Christians who are not at L'Arche. [...] L'Arche needs the wider church because its members need to leave L'Arche to worship God elsewhere, in another place, with all the time and bother that may require. This is not just for the sake of the people within L'Arche, but for the sake of the church. L'Arche must remain connected with other modes of Christian life that make L'Arche possible.” (in *Living Gently in a Violent World*, IVP, 2018, p. 57- 8)

So L'Arche and the church need to exist in a creative tension that is good for both. Indeed, for many years Jean Vanier and the International L'Arche Coordinator would meet regularly with the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches – and L'Arche has encouraged its community leaders all over the world to work with church leaders. The purpose of these meetings has been for L'Arche to challenge the church around inclusivity and the witness of people who are marginal – but also to be challenged and held accountable by the church for our faith life.

So for example, our London community has a faith leaders' group made up of ministers from local churches (and one Baptist minister who is also a L'Arche assistant); and there is also a national faith leaders' group.

In summary, the ecumenical situation in which L'Arche found itself by accident has been an opportunity for L'Arche to open itself up. Our internal confessional diversity has stopped L'Arche from becoming a church – or a surrogate church – and has challenged us to exist, as a community of faith, in a creative and challenging relationship *with* the church.

5. What might L'Arche offer the church?

I asked this question to David Stephenson recently, who was the minister of All Saints' Church, West Dulwich, where many members of my L'Arche Community go to church. David told me that, in the last PCC meeting before he left All Saints last year, a member of the PCC said to him, "Because of L'Arche's presence here, I feel I can bring the whole of me to church." David went on to say this:

"This is a *fundamental* inclusion. A lot of our divisions are about unreconciled parts of ourselves. Perhaps that is where ecumenism needs to begin, and to which L'Arche invites us. We are uncomfortable with fragmentation and brokenness. But in the gospel, it is through brokenness that wholeness and healing arrive. The broken host is the redemptive sign: "By his wounds you are healed". L'Arche is the invitation to become more comfortable with brokenness – including the fractured nature of our communions."



We saw an example of this in February this year, at the funeral of one of our community members, Carol Bell, who had been a member of All Saints for nearly 28 years. This learning disabled woman, who had spent about half her life in a long-stay psychiatric hospital, died suddenly, at the age of 68. Her funeral was attended by about 220 people, including many parishioners from All Saints Church. For many years, Carol served in the church by taking up the collection each Sunday – toward the latter end of her life, in a wheelchair. On the Sunday after Carol died, the church decided to pass around the collection basket on an empty wheelchair. It was both the symbol of Carol's place in the Body of Christ – the symbol that all of us are welcome. But it was also the symbol of a vulnerability that each of us bears and often tries to hide – but which Carol bore quite visibly (the symbol that, in the Body of Christ, all of us *is* welcome).