The Experience of L’Arche, an Intentional Community, As a Provider of Support, Care and Housing: Hugh Nelson gives a view as someone who lives in an “intentional community”.

This article stems from an invitation to write “in defence of intentional communities”. Intentional Communities differ widely, and this article is about the nine L’Arche UK Communities. Other organisations do things differently, and must speak for themselves. L’Arche communities were founded to enable people with learning disabilities to live ordinary lives, supported by people who respected them and engaged with them as fully as possible. Over 40 years later, L’Arche continues to build communities based on these values.

The invitation to write this article arose from an online discussion as to whether intentional communities might be facing funding difficulties because they were perceived as being out of tune with preferred service models. That the invitation was to “defend” this type of service provision is indicative of the perception that intentional communities are out of touch with current thinking in the learning disability field. However, the stereotype of such groups as being isolated from normality, with a strong evangelistic faith, which deny people basic choices over their daily lives is crude and inaccurate.

When the debate on “ordinary living” versus “village communities” first surfaced, someone remarked that L’Arche managed to straddle the great divide between these two apparently polarised ways of addressing the accommodation and support needs of people with learning disabilities. Then as now (though now sometimes with supported living rather than residential care funding), those L’Arche supports live in ordinary houses in ordinary streets, use local resources, have local friends, often attend local churches, have independent local advocates. When they die (and the older first generation L’Arche UK residents who came to our Communities up to 30 years ago are dying), their funerals are supported by many neighbours and friends as well as by other Community members.

L’Arche in this country, and in over a hundred other countries, is an intentional community in the sense that:

- We provide opportunities for regularly coming together as a community – not instead of links
with the local neighbourhood and with family and friends but in addition to and alongside these external links. (Our Community celebrations are attended by friends and neighbours, are often based on local church communities, and are often made possible by local support.)

- L’Arche communities are built on a fundamental belief that all people, with and without learning disabilities, have the same fundamental needs and hopes. Amongst our most important needs is the opportunity to have a network of strong, engaged and respectful friendships. An attractive environment, choice over the basic aspects of day to day life and well trained paid support is important, but it is the quality of relationships that is most important to most people. By providing a context in which such relationships are encouraged and nurtured L’Arche communities enable people with learning disabilities to get to know a wide range of people and to make friendships with them. In this way, people with learning disabilities in L’Arche avoid the experience of isolation and loneliness that faces so many, and are able to meet and make friends with people other than those paid to support them.

- L’Arche assistants (staff) are recruited not just to work for and with people with learning disabilities, but to live alongside them in shared houses and flats.

- Both people with learning disabilities and assistants often come to L’Arche (and stay with L’Arche) because they want to be part of a faith community – though we cater for and welcome people from all faiths and none. (Some of those who have been with us for many years, and have contributed hugely, do not identify with any formal religion.)

- Being part of a worldwide movement is not just an organisational fact. Both people with learning disabilities and assistants treasure these wider links, and visit other Communities in the UK and overseas. Big assemblies, such as that in Italy last year, are attended by people with learning disabilities from all over the world. (Language does not seem to be a barrier, even for those without any formal spoken language.)
People with learning disabilities, on behalf of their own Community and on behalf of the wider L’Arche, are involved in choosing the leaders of L’Arche at local, national and international level.

It sometimes requires extra effort to explain ourselves in conventional community care terminology – because we have developed our own terminology. However, there is nothing inconsistent between living L’Arche and complying with current requirements and living up to “Valuing People” ideals. We have invested a lot of thought and energy into person-centred planning, and being person-centred includes the ability to opt into or opt out of Community activities. Looking back to earlier ways of measuring these things, I believe a L’Arche house achieved an almost uniquely high rating under the PASS standards for integration into the local community and ordinary/valued life.

Life for all of us, with and without learning disabilities, requires an ongoing dialogue between independence and dependence, the freedom to choose and areas in which choices are made for us. Life in L’Arche is no different; by choosing to be in L’Arche, community members choose the inevitable give and take that comes with living with and amongst other people. This can make life more difficult at times, and does mean giving up some of the things that you might otherwise choose. However it also means receiving all the benefits, expected and unexpected, that being with and amongst other people brings; Friendship, laughter, shared experiences, the chance to give and receive care, the things that make life really worthwhile for most of us, whether or not we have a learning disability.

We are still learning – not least from those we serve, including those now part of a L’Arche Community from a base in their own flat; and we see a bright future for our sort of intentional community that reflects the intentions and the values of all our rich diversity of members. A nurse in the major teaching hospital where one of our originating members spent some time before coming back to his L’Arche house to die commented “He’s really part of a family!” We like to think so. Families of course change; and not everybody chooses to live for ever with their family. We support those who wish to move on, as well as supporting new ways of living for those who wish to stay and who need more support or less support, or simply different support.

Building community with people with learning disabilities means just that.
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