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Nathan Goldbloom
Seattle Pacific Seminary

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APPROPRIATING THE PRINCIPLES OF L'ARCHE

Appropriating the Principles of L'Arche for the Transformation of Church Curricula

Nathan Goldbloom
Seattle Pacific Seminary
July 13, 2014

Appropriating the Principles of L'Arche
for the Transformation of Church Curricula

By Nathan Goldbloom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts (Christian Studies)
Seattle Pacific Seminary at Seattle Pacific University
Seattle, WA 98119
2014

Approved by:

Richard B. Steele

Richard B. Steele, PhD, Thesis Advisor,
Seattle Pacific Seminary at Seattle Pacific University

Date:

Aug. 14, 2014

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
Seattle Pacific Seminary at Seattle Pacific University

Authorized by:

Douglas M. Strong

Douglas M. Strong, PhD, Dean
School of Theology, Seattle Pacific University

Date:

August 14, 2014

Introduction

L'Arche Internationale is a network of communities in which persons with cognitive disabilities live and work with non-disabled 'assistants'. Founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier, a Christian philosopher and theologian, L'Arche has become a sign of God's kingdom for the world. In this thesis I shall investigate several of the principles on which L'Arche is based, which are articulated in Vanier's writings: belonging, vulnerability, peace, spirituality, communion, and celebration. These six principles will be analyzed with the objective of ascertaining their relevance for the Church as a whole and how they might be used to enrich and enhance programs of Christian education and spiritual formation in local congregations.

Each principle from L'Arche is a biblical theme that persons with cognitive disabilities help illuminate in a unique and profound way. By exploring these six principles in depth through the lens of the L'Arche and Jean Vanier, we will emerge with better faith formation curriculum that develop children, youth, and adults into disciples of Jesus Christ.

Contemplating the question of what persons with disabilities have to teach the body of Christ has revealed the gap between theology and its application in the local church. It is that gap which this thesis seeks to fill by surveying Vanier's writings in order to discover the

principles that God is revealing through his experiences in L'Arche and with persons with disabilities. By learning the L'Arche principles of belonging, vulnerability, peace, spirituality, communion, and celebration, we will teach leaders how to apply the truths and revelations of God's kingdom that have come through persons with cognitive disabilities. This revelation can serve to transform the Church's faith formation curriculum. The goal of the thesis is to provide an example of how to adapt and transform curriculum to better witness to the kingdom of God which L'Arche has helped reveal.

The first question to consider is why this community is worth studying? What is it about those with cognitive disabilities and specifically the L'Arche community that makes their guiding principles so transformative and crucial to the broader Church? We will begin to answer this question by delving into the story and vision of L'Arche. As we explore L'Arche we will also establish the importance of the marginalized, specifically persons with cognitive disabilities, to the body of Christ.

Once we have established a foundation and rationale for L'Arche as an influencer and guide for our churches and their faith formation programs and curricula, we will explore the six principles one by one, showing how they all are essential to our relationship with God and

one another. The next step will be to assess current church school curriculum and how it succeeds or fails in expressing the prophetic witness of the six principles of L'Arche. Two national Sunday school curricula "Grow. Proclaim. Serve." and "Godly Play", will be used to provide a varied look at what the overall Church and local churches are emphasizing in their children's faith formation. By using national curricula, this project will apply to a broad number of local churches. For churches not using the sample curricula, this section will serve as an example of how to evaluate their programs and curricula. Ideally churches will adopt curricula that correspond to the essential principles found in L'Arche and marginalized communities, such as persons with disabilities.

Finally, we will offer suggestions to churches of approaches to implement these principles in their faith formation and how each can change the local church into a more vibrant community. By adopting these principles the community can become a sign of God's kingdom for those in their church body and the broader community. With L'Arche as our hermeneutical lens, we begin by exploring its story and vision.

L'Arche as a Sign

The way in which L'Arche reveals God to the world is interwoven into its history, Jean Vanier's story, and his personal revelations. The truth that the community has to offer is most tangible to those who have served and spent time within its communities. Vanier and Henri Nouwen, another well-regarded theologian, have communicated these revelations born in the L'Arche community through their writings. To fully understand the purpose, witness, and sign that L'Arche is we must understand its story as well as Vanier's.

L'Arche and Vanier's Story:

Jean Vanier was born in Geneva, Switzerland in 1928 to a prominent family (Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche). In his youth he prepared to become a naval officer. During World War II, he accompanied his mother to aid concentration camp survivors through Red Cross. Those he met were afraid and in anguish, giving them what Vanier would later say was a "wounded humanity" (Early Years). This glimpse of suffering and anguish began a transformation in him that would take many years.

In 1950, Vanier left the Navy to do "something else". He was trained as a theologian and philosopher and completed a doctorate on

Aristotle. After becoming a professor at the University of Toronto, a priest friend, Father Thomas Philippe, invited him to meet his new friends who had disabilities. Upon meeting Father Philippe's friends, Vanier noticed their craving for relationship. It was as if they were asking, "Will you be my friend?" To Vanier there was also an expression of pain and the question, "Why am I like this?" Vanier began visiting institutions and hospitals. It was in one of the institutions, Val Fleury, that he met Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux. Vanier later asked these two men if they wanted to live with him. He named their house L'Arche, which is the French word for Noah's Ark (Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche). Vanier was inspired by how God gave the Ark to rescue humanity and have them live in community (Everyman: Science Friction).

The community quickly grew in France at Trosly-Breuil and around the world. As Vanier began to speak at conferences and retreats, L'Arche attracted young people from diverse backgrounds to ministry with persons with cognitive disabilities. This led to a great deal of interest and the establishment of other L'Arche communities in Ontario in 1969, and India the following year. In 1972 the first L'Arche community in the United States began in Erie, Pennsylvania. By 1975

there were 30 L'Arche communities around the world on many continents and in many countries, including Africa and Haiti.

As L'Arche grew, it began to overtake Vanier's city of Trosly-Breuil. Tensions arose as L'Arche and Vanier had never attempted to work with the local community. At first Vanier had been seen as an outlier who was doing strange things by having disabled men live with him. Then, as L'Arche flourished, it bought up house after house. Vanier began to realize the issue when members of the community came together and signed a petition against L'Arche (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 116). L'Arche had become the rich and was not truly a part of the town community. Vanier realized the mistake and began to work with the town's people. This was an important lesson to learn and Vanier passed this insight on to all L'Arche communities through his visits and writings.

The explosion of L'Arche communities all across the world brought up other challenges. The quick expansion meant that many communities did not adhere to the vision and purpose set up for L'Arche (Scully). It was clear that a governing structure was needed to support and ensure the vision was followed. Thus the "Federation" was born to help "foster solidarity among Communities, unify their diversity, establish the conditions for membership, develop new communi-

ties, and create conditions for trust, service dialogue, and mutual support" (Constitution of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities). To bring established communities up to speed, expansion ceased for several years. With the guidelines of the L'Arche constitution, establishing a new community takes many years to become fully accepted into L'Arche.

Another tension that arose in L'Arche communities revolved around spiritual practice. When L'Arche began, it had been as a part of the Roman Catholic Church. After working through the vision, it was clear that to live with those in community L'Arche would need to be ecumenical and even interfaith. If it was limited to one faith, the assistants and persons with disabilities would not be encouraged to live into their freedom. However, allowing for diversity in faith expression created a divide. One example is the sacrament of Communion. Catholics and Protestants do not take Communion from the same table, which resulted in each member of the community going to separate churches. The core members (persons with disabilities) did not understand why and expressed their sadness that their friends did not join them on Sundays. Vanier himself laments this reality, but has expressed how this example is a reminder and sign for the Church of the importance of unity and reconciliation.

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One of the major concerns with setting up a Federation was how the core of the community, persons with disabilities, would be able to participate and lead L'Arche. To achieve balance and keep its priorities straight the General Assembly became the ultimate authority in the Federation. This group is made up of all the members and meets at least every three years. The General Assembly consists of at least one core member representative of each member community, coordinator and president of member zones and individual members (Constitution of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities). The international board is what governs the Federation between the assemblies.

The local L'Arche structure is made up of individuals with cognitive disabilities (core members) and those that live in community with them (assistants). Those with disabilities are the core of the community, or the heart, as Jesus reveals himself through relationship with them (Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche* 47). Assistants typically live in the community and support core members with daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene (A L'Arche Community is...). Assistants do not need to have prior experience or be of any specific background or religion, but a commitment of a year is usually required from the assistants to ensure that relationships established (Becoming an Assistant).

The Vision of L'Arche

While Jean Vanier is considered the founder of L'Arche, he is not the foundation. The foundation is the core members, persons with disabilities who have been marginalized and persecuted. Rejected and exiled by society and the world, they have become the foundation for this organization and community. Vanier makes the case that God is revealed when we live with the marginalized and poor. Vanier notes Paul's insight that God chooses the weak and marginalized to teach the wise and humble the strong (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Knowing God comes through relationship with the poor. Vanier drives home this point when he quotes the Second Vatican Council, which speaks to those who suffer and are marginalized. "You are the preferred children of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of hope, happiness and life. You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with Him, if you wish, you are saving the world" (Meouchi). As Christ explains in Matthew 25:31-45, he is with and in the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

Persons with disabilities are greatly persecuted in the world. They are killed through abortion because they would be a "challenge," in pain, or would not have the quality of life that is expected by society. They are abandoned to the streets or to institutions that can degrade and abuse them. They are not seen

as human by a world that bases our worth on strength, intelligence, independence, and physical beauty. They are the least of these and as such Christ is in them and with them.

By recognizing Christ's presence in persons with disabilities, L'Arche then becomes a sign for the world, a sign of God's love. A reminder that when we are in relationship with the poor, we are living what Jesus commanded us. We are entering into relationship with not just the poor, but with God. L'Arche is a sign of God's love manifest not because of a charismatic leader, a great vision, a unique structure, but because of the weak and marginalized that are there. This is why persons with disabilities who make up the L'Arche community are called core members. They make up the core, the heart, of the community. They are the ones who reveal Christ. It is the core members who are the sign for the world and the Church. "A sign a great event which is visible and reveals a presence of God" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 73). Vanier and L'Arche as a whole simply direct our attention to the prophetic love and the witness of God's love revealed in persons with disabilities.

For this reason the Church must listen to the prophetic witness that comes from the L'Arche community through Vanier. The community has a great deal to say to the church, but for our purpose we will

focus on the six principles already identified: communion, belonging, vulnerability, peace, spirituality, and celebration. Beginning with vulnerability we will continue to hear Vanier's witness of God's revelation.

Belonging

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is often used as a baseline for human needs. In 1943, Maslow presented his findings of what he thought humanity really needs, which is typically summarized in a pyramid diagram (Maslow). The pyramid begins with our physiological needs such as air, food, water, sex, sleep, etc. It progresses then to the need for safety where health, resources, body, family, and property are desired to keep safe. Then after these needs are met, we seek to fulfill our need to belong in friendship, family, and sexual intimacy. The pyramid continues with esteem needs, such as respect. The top of the pyramid is self-actualization, which is characterized by acceptance of facts, creativity, and problem solving. For Maslow and his followers, the needs of the underlying level of the pyramid must be met to move on to the next level of the pyramid. This understanding of humanity's basic needs is widely accepted (McLeod).

Maslow's understanding is one that Vanier, and the work of L'Arche, challenges because of the founding premise. The pyramid, as

constructed by Maslow, is based on the individual whereas Vanier begins with the community. As a result, Vanier places belonging as our primary need, he considers all people instead of just a self-sufficient "normal" person. To him the person is unable to ever meet their basic physiological needs until they belong. "The first and primary belonging is in family" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 67). When a child is brought into the family, through birth or adoption, the child belongs to and with the family. Without belonging to a family the infant will have no one to feed it, provide warmth, or security. The same can be said for persons with cognitive disabilities. Without belonging to a community that will care for them they end up homeless or forgotten and are unable to get the rest of their basic needs met. This reality is echoed at the end of life when the elderly lose their ability to care for themselves and rely on others to care for them. Vanier stresses that we must first belong to a community if we are to have our other basic needs met.

What does it mean to belong according to Vanier and L'Arche? To understand belonging we will first establish a definition of belonging. Then we will explore to whom and to what we belong. Finally, we will examine how belonging is lived out.

Belonging is the basic need to be oneself and share your life with others. Each person has the desire to be a part of and united with oth-

ers through family, friendship, and culture. A sense of belonging helps us to grow in independence as we grow in maturity and inner freedom by breaking down self-centered and individualistic tendencies to unite with others in a common humanity (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 35). Belonging together in community helps one another grow in inner freedom. Entering into community brings death to our ego and makes us part of something more than just ourselves. When in relationship with others we become one body and belong to one another. This does not eliminate our individuality. Rather a belonging that helps each person grow and become more of who they are while united to the community (Vanier, *From Brokenness and Community* 32). Inner freedom allows us to unite in communion.

There are two communities to which we fundamentally belong. We first belong to God, our creator. As God's, we are shaped in God's image. In Genesis, humanity receives its image and purpose from God. Our belonging to God is further established through the covenant God makes with us. Belonging did not depend on humanity, but on God. Humanity was called to respond to God's love with obedience. We had sinned and become separated, yet God renewed us in God's image through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Reconciliation offered

through Christ allows us to have communion with God. It is for this reason that we belong to God, as creation and beloved.

The second place we belong to is a common humanity. We are all unique, yet we all belong to God and were created in God's image. The image of God and our identity as beloved child makes humanity united with one another. "But my vision is that belonging should be at the heart of a fundamental discovery: that we all belong to a common humanity, the human race" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 36). We may have different skin color, abilities, sexual orientation, or nationality but we are all of still one because we share a common gift from our Creator. Our unique cultures and attributes do not eliminate this gift, but are part of our belonging to a common humanity made in God's image.

While we are united in a common humanity and we also belong to smaller communities. These communities can distort the understanding of belonging in many ways, or they can bring about the ideal goal of a belonging that helps us to grow in freedom and as God created us to be. Due to the powerful influence communities and identifying groups have we must examine how to establish a healthy community.

There are two types of groups, those that are open and those that are closed. Closed groups do not allow newcomers, whereas an open group welcomes in and seeks to build relationships with outsid-

ers. There are times where a group might need to be closed to protect the vulnerable that it has in its midst. The issue is when a group stays either closed and fails to welcome, or stays open and fails to discern and protect the vulnerable. L'Arche has a unique approach to balancing the tension between being open – welcoming new members - and closed – protecting the members in community. L'Arche is open to welcoming new volunteers, assistants, and core members. New members are given a trial period before being fully entrusted to the community. “When we have welcomed people who are weak and without inner stability and have made a commitment to them, we cannot then welcome people who seriously threaten their growth” (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 269). The L'Arche community has vulnerable members and must help them to grow as children of God. As a matter of principle, welcoming new members is secondary to the care of the vulnerable already in the community. “It is so much better to refuse someone at the outset because the community is conscious of its limitations, than to welcome him or her naively and then ask them to leave” (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 275). The key to discernment in welcoming new members is recognizing the limitations and weaknesses of the community. The community, as a sign, is not called to

save everyone. God is already working in our lives and we humbly participate in the healing and reconciliation to which God has called us.

Once a new person enters into the community there is usually a period of uncertainty for the individual and other members of the community, especially when the person is vulnerable. Drawing upon his time in the Navy, Vanier used structure, like routine and behavioral standards, to clarify expectations and address issues before they arise. "If they refuse this (community expectations), that is their way of saying that they do not want to stay" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 275). This not only protects the community and makes discernment simpler, but helps to provide the needed structure and facilitate relationships. For example, at a church I worked in, a member with a cognitive disability would always rock back and forth when he did not know what to do during the service. When a person would hold his hand and let him know that he was welcome, giving him structure and affirmation, he would become calm and enter into worship. When the marginalized or suffering "gradually discover that they are wanted and loved as they are and that they have a place, then we witness a real transformation- I would even say 'resurrection'" (Vanier, *From Brokenness and Community* 15). This transformation and resurrection is what the church community noticed in our friend, and as a result of

his presence, we experienced a resurrection in the entire Church. The Holy Spirit's presence was revealed through the love that we experienced in him. Too often, though, there is no structure and expectations when new members join a church.

One big challenge that communities face in belonging is continuing to welcome those in the community. Sometimes a community becomes enchanted with welcoming strangers, discovering who they are, and growing the church. When strangers become familiar, they become boring. "We can get bored with each other's company and so become aggressive; visitors then become a distraction. That can be valuable and even lead to better welcoming of each other. But it is not true welcome. It is sometimes easier to welcome a visitor than to welcome someone with whom we live all the time" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 272). We have all seen this in our families, whom we have known a long time, and in churches, where we no longer give the grace, forgiveness, and welcome we once did. A church might display this when numbers of conversions and new members are touted but not faith stories of transformation in longstanding members. Others might vilify committee members who disagree while giving grace and forgiveness to others because they are new. Welcome and hospitality

must continue beyond membership or conversion to ensure a healthy community in which all can belong.

Leadership in the community is also important to building a healthy belonging. Authority in a community can fall into many traps. These traps come from our vulnerability as we seek to protect ourselves from humiliation and act out of our fears, such as the Catholic Church's leadership during the sex abuse scandal (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 21). Authority in a healthy community always seeks to help others become who they are (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 23). When those in authority help others become who God created them to be then they recognize the true person and that person is God's beloved. "Belonging should allow each person to become themselves, and to grow in freedom and human maturity" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 107). When belonging is for becoming, leadership then honors everyone's true humanity as they support all members in the community, embrace their unique gifts, and become free. This takes mature leadership and recognition of our weaknesses. The role of the leader is to bridge people to God, as Christ has done for us, not bridge people to ourselves.

Another characteristic of a healthy community is a covenant grounded in love. A covenant is not a contract where one person must

do something to get something in return, *quid pro quo*, but a relationship built on love. God demonstrates what a covenant should look like through the Book of Genesis where he makes covenants with Noah and Abraham. These covenants are made out of unconditional love. In them God states what God will not do, such as destroy the earth through flood, or actively do, such as make Abraham's descendants as great as the stars in the sky. Neither action is predicated on a specific action from Noah nor Abraham, as a contract would have been. In turn Noah and Abraham were invited to respond to the act of unconditional love from God. Covenant "love is neither sentimental nor a passing emotion. It is the recognition of a covenant, of a mutual belonging...It is to see their beauty and to reveal it to them" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 56). God offers God's self to us in love and becomes vulnerable in this covenantal promise. Through God's vulnerability we are able to belong to one another and to God in communion. L'Arche embraces this understanding of covenant as assistants seek to communicate love and care for core members regardless of their response. However it is usually the core members who display the unconditional love that breaks others' barriers and helps them to respond with love.

Israel's covenant relationship was to be a sign to the entire world that humanity belongs to God as beloved children. This covenant

relationship is what the church is called to in order to be a sign of hope and resurrection (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 66). We are invited then to respond to the hope found in God by daily carrying our cross. This demonstrates that we belong to God and are a part of the community in covenant (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 82). The cross invites us into a deeper relationship with God and one another. This relationship is characterized by our knowledge of who we belong to and the desire for communion with God and others.

Vanier notes that all communities face crises. There are four specific crises that rise up in community that must be addressed in order to live in covenant and help one another to becoming. The first crisis is encountering new values in a community that challenge our firmly held values (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 136). The process of re-evaluating and reshaping our beliefs and values is often a painful and turbulent journey. Vanier experienced this crisis when serving the poor in a society that values prestige, power, and material. The second crisis is when the reality of the community is never as good as the ideal we have envisioned (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 136). Each person has a vision of the ideal community which the real community cannot meet. Struggle follows as the members seek to reconcile their various ideals to the reality of the community. People may experience

this in church when they become active on committees and in the business of the church. Their ideal of what the church is now is broken and they must come to grips with the reality of the community. The difficulty found in communication leads to the third crisis. "The third is when we feel misunderstood and even rejected by the community" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 136). Living and sharing life together will expose our weaknesses and fears that come through miscommunication. To address this crisis, safety and forgiveness must be practiced constantly. Jean Vanier describes the fourth crisis, disappointment in ourselves, as the most difficult to overcome (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 136). The pains of guilt and shame can strike at a moment's notice and break into times of peace. These spiritual attacks play off of our fear, shame, guilt, and are meant to keep the community from its purpose of communion (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 100).

To combat these crises forgiveness is needed. "To forgive is to offer this love that liberates people from the powers of moral and psychological guilt" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 139). While forgiveness of others is difficult, forgiving ourselves is something often neglected. Forgiving ourselves is the best way to overcome the fourth crisis and to accept our failings and weaknesses, thus becoming more human.

When we forgive we are able to see others, and ourselves, as God does, allowing us to belong in a community.

The final danger to belonging is that of becoming a sect. Vanier highlights the sect often as a place where belonging is no longer for becoming. "When religion closes people up in their own particular group, it puts belonging to the group, and its success and growth, above love and vulnerability towards others; it no longer nourishes and opens the heart" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 63). There are many ways in which the church becomes a sect, focusing on belonging without becoming. A college ministry at University of Washington recruited members, particularly freshmen, with the promise of community, but when individuals question the theology or engage in discernment they are kicked out and cut off from contact with all members of the ministry. Youth groups and para-church organizations that play games that humiliate and haze students to create a "fun" environment and grow numbers are another example. These are a few ways in which churches and communities act like a sect today and value belonging over becoming.

Other communities and groups, such as a businesses, sports teams, or clubs, also face the danger of becoming a sect when belonging in the group is no longer for becoming. This can be seen in busi-

ness when it demands that its members prioritize work over the family and personal life. Doing so focuses on only belonging rather than becoming and growing in inner freedom. "Belonging should always be for becoming. If in some way belonging means death to the primacy of personal consciousness, then there is something wrong" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 47). For example, this is seen in business when people lose their personal convictions and become 'yes' people in order to fit in and belong. Instead, a community must be centered in God's love to become a covenant community that empowers its members to become who they are created to be.

Vulnerability

Let me tell you about Antonio, who has brought many people into the way of the heart. Antonio came to our community in Trolsy when he was twenty years old, after many years in hospital. He could not walk, speak, or use his hands; he needed extra oxygen to breathe. He was a weak and fragile man in many ways but he had an incredible smile and beautiful shining eyes. There was no anger or depression in him. That is not to say that he didn't get annoyed from time to time, especially if his bathwater was too hot or too cold or if the assistants forgot about him! What is important is that he had accepted his limits and disabilities; he had accepted himself just as he was. Antonio could not love by being generous, by giving things to people or by doing things for them; he himself was too needy. He lived a love of trust. In this way, he touched many people's hearts. When one loves with trust,

one does not give things, one gives oneself and, so, calls forth a communion of hearts.

Antonio touched and awakened the hearts of many assistants who came to live in his house. He led them into the way of the heart. Often, they would tell me so, in words to this effect: "Antonio has changed my life. He led me out of a society of competition where one has to be strong and aggressive into a world of tenderness and mutuality, where each person, strong or weak, can exercise their gifts." (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 91)

Jean Vanier uses personal stories such as this to illuminate how the vulnerable are able to break down barriers. These are the barriers we erect to hide our weakness and protect us from fears and pain. The reality is that who we are, our identity, is found in weakness. Until we come to grips with our own limits, weakness, and death we will not be able to belong to God and humanity. Weakness is where our personhood and value are found.

Most barriers are the result of our pain and rejection in childhood. "When children are wounded in their hearts, they learn to protect themselves by hiding behind barriers" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 19). Vanier posits that we all experience rejection, which can cause many children to lose their trust in others. As barriers and pain build, the child cannot identify the pain and turns to self-accusation (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 19). In L'Arche, Vanier has seen this anguish become manifest as one member tries to possess another and climb on

them, or smears excrement on walls, or grows depressed. The greatest danger is that this pain leads to what Vanier calls madness. "Madness is an immense cry, a sickness. It is a way of escaping when the stress of being in a world of pain is too great" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 21). We separate from reality into a world of illusion and dream with the goal of protecting ourselves from more pain, rejection, and humiliation.

All people have the same cry as the weak and vulnerable: the cry to satisfy our loneliness and anguish. "We are frightened of not being: not being loved, not being a success, not being appreciated or seen as worthy, not having a place if we leave the security of our group. We can be frightened of loneliness and anguish" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 22). To alleviate our loneliness we seek out success in the forms of material goods, admiration, prestige, and winning. The problem with this success is that when we achieve it we create losers and victims. Competition has value but there are also dangers as there are few winners, many losers, and even victims (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 22). The more money, resources, and possessions we take, the less that is left to care for the weak. While competition has some positive aspects, such as new innovative solutions to problems, it also brings several negative consequences. One such consequence can be dehu-

manizing an opponent so that we can fight and win. When compete with one another instead of celebrating what God is doing they run the risk of dehumanizing other congregations and ignoring what the Holy Spirit is doing there. We then justify winning and domination of another by devaluing them. To justify winning and domination we deny others their value and personhood. The weak become suppressed and oppressed.

One reaction to the oppression of the poor and vulnerable is a twisted version of compassion or charity. The vulnerable become a cause to rally behind and something to do. "These people may be generous and want to 'do good' for others, but they want to give according to their terms and policies, from their positions of superiority and power" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 17). This form of compassion is another way to oppress wherein the vulnerable are denied their identity and personhood. We care *for* them instead of working *with* them. Too often the response from the Church is to do something for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. We donate money, go on short term missions, or send the youth to serve at a food bank. While these are all nice, they do not change the systems that oppress nor respect the desires of the vulnerable. Those privileged enough to do good for others can return to their lives feeling comfortable with no transformation of

society. Vanier calls us to not be satisfied with simply doing good for others, but to *encounter* them and enter into relationship with them. Loving someone does not simply mean doing things for them, rather it is much more profound.

To love and enter into a relationship with the marginalized and vulnerable, personhood must be recognized. When we see the person in front of us, we see their value and their true humanity. Unfortunately, what it means to be a person has become limited. The world tells us that to be a person we must become powerful and strong. We need to become self-sufficient and have the freedom of choice. Vanier shares his own struggles with power and success through the Navy and Academia. The temptations he faced are ones we can relate to. The world understands personhood to mean that the vulnerable are not persons. The elderly grandparent with dementia becomes a shell and is no longer seen as a person. Persons with disabilities either never were or no longer are people since they will never become self-sufficient. Personhood is denied in our medical system as fetuses with known complications and disabilities are aborted because they cannot be cured (Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier. *Living Gently in a Violent World* 52). The result is that we deny personhood to large groups of people. To be vulnerable and weak becomes feared since we think

those who are lose their value and cease to be persons. To avoid dehumanizing others a new understanding of what it means to be a person must be established in our society and in the church.

Vanier teaches a different understanding of personhood, one that has been taught by persons with disabilities. Vanier believes that personhood rests not in our achievements, legacy, or admiration, but in God. Vanier adapts Etty Hillesum's insights to establish where we derive our personhood.¹ "What makes a human person the sacred reality that the person is? Her deepest belief was that each person is a 'house' where God resides...she felt that each one was carrying the mystery of God in a capacity to be, to love and to be loved" (Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'* 29). It is an immense gift when we find our personhood in God. Nothing can take away our belonging and personhood when it is found in God. Vanier sees the outward sign of our personhood in the ability of all to give and receive love. The elderly person with Alzheimer's is not simply a shell, but is a person capable of receiving and giving love. An unborn child who has Down syndrome is a person who is beloved by God and shows love.

¹ Etty Hillesum was a Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in November 1943. Her letters and diaries from were saved and later published (Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'* 29).

For Vanier, personhood is not even limited by death. Those who have died are still valuable to God. They too are reconciled and promised the resurrection. As such, death does not deny personhood. When we fully come to terms and accept death, knowing our value is still with and in God, then we can begin to truly live. "Let us choose life in truth and freedom, which also means accepting and welcoming death when it comes. If we do, we begin to accept the many little deaths of life" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 25). When we accept death, then the little deaths of life are no longer insurmountable, but steps to great inner freedom. "Allowing Jesus to live in me implies a true death to myself" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 145). This death of our ego brings new life and freedom in Christ to be for God.

Christ demonstrates how to accept our vulnerability and death while giving and receiving love. Revelation 3:20, where Jesus is knocking at the door, waiting for the door to open so he can live with and in us is one example. When he lives in us, we can truly welcome the different and rejected of society (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 71). Vanier notes the weakness of Jesus in this passage. "This is not just the fragility of his body, but the vulnerability of the one who knocks at the door and runs the risk that it will remain closed to him. This is his cry of love" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 114). Our pain and rejection caus-

es our barriers and fears, yet Jesus not only risks rejection but does so with a steadfast love that waits. Christ waits at the door and as a result faces constant rejection from His beloved. Jesus demonstrates how to love one another, not to possess, and to seek inner growth in all. Vanier denies the critique that God cannot suffer because of being perfect. Instead, it is because of perfect love that Christ suffers rejection and accepts vulnerability. Following Christ's example, we too must die to self and accept our vulnerability.

The gift of the vulnerable is how through relationships they help all people to follow Christ and accept their own vulnerability. This process is painful and can bring out anger and pain as they transform the "strong" - helping them to face their weakness and mortality. "How difficult it is to accept our limits and our handicaps as well as our gifts and capacities. We feel that if others see us as we really are they might reject us. So we cover our weaknesses" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 100). Though painful and full of chaos, this difficult process is one that is necessary for us to become human. The weak reveal that it is not strength that makes someone human. Strength is fleeting as those who are strong have been weak as infants and will again be weak in old age or infirmity. The strong have hidden behind the illusions of power in order to cover up their weakness. There are all sorts of barri-

ers and fears that we can use to hide, but the vulnerable person brings a gift. "The weaker people awaken tenderness in the hearts of the stronger; they transform them into 'real' people, capable of true compassion" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 112). The strong are transformed and led to God. That is the great gift that the weak give to the world, awakening hearts to love and compassion.

Peace

In the last section we explored the importance of knowing and accepting our vulnerability. Doing so leads us to becoming human and recognizing one another's personhood in God. The next principle of L'Arche is in many ways deeply connected to vulnerability, but on a large scale. Our discussion of vulnerability has focused on the individual. Dealing with vulnerability and fears in community leads to tension that requires us to be workers for peace. Working for peace in a community encourages inner growth and all people to become human.

September 11th, 2001 left a deep impact on the United States of America. It also impacted others around the world, including Jean Vanier. "The events of September 11 called me to become personally committed to peacemaking, to continue to reflect on peace and on the sources of violence in our world, in me, and in each one of us" (Vanier,

Finding Peace 4). Vanier could not bring himself to watch the violence and suffering that the media deluged on the public. He recognized that the hatred that spawned the attacks would be met with hatred and vengeance. This cycle has been repeated over and over again across generations. Once the U.S. had killed, dominated, and imposed its will upon its foes, they would proclaim peace (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 5).

This version of peace has been achieved many times, but it is not peace. It is one group dominating another, the strong oppressing the weak. "True peace can rarely be imposed from the outside; it must be born within and between communities through meetings and dialogue and then carried outward" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 16). A forced peace does not lead to understanding or recognizing the other's personhood. Instead, groups demonize the other. When the weak rise to power they repeat the cycle of violence that was once perpetrated on them. Colonizers, as an example, would give power to a select few, who would then use this power to oppress weaker people in their country (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 14). Vanier is clear: this is not peace but domination.

In response to domination, tolerance is preached. We have erected museums dedicated to being tolerant of differences. While tolerance is a sign of maturity and conscience, it falls drastically short of

Vanier's vision of peace. "Even though there is a certain respect for difference among neighbours, there is rarely any desire to enter into personal relationships. People close themselves off, ignoring and avoiding others" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 18).² Ultimately, the vulnerable can be tolerated, but still denied personhood. Tolerance does not recognize the other as a gift. It does not pursue the best for another. Tolerance only allows for difference instead of celebrating, understanding, and uniting in and with God.

The L'Arche vision of peace is lived in relationships between people, groups, communities, or nations. "Real peace is a communion of hearts which demands encounter and genuine work on oneself" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 101). To truly have peace we have to work on ourselves. Peace takes trust and forgiveness of others and ourselves. To develop trust, and practice forgiveness, vulnerability must be accepted and practiced by entering into relationship with others.

Vanier urges all to be workers for peace and not just lovers of it. Many assistants have come to L'Arche communities and noted the peace in the community. Then as they live within the community and experience the struggles, chaos, and have their vulnerabilities exposed, they no longer see peace (Vanier, *From Brokenness to*

² Jean Vanier uses the British spellings for many words. To keep true to his writings I have preserved his quotes as they were written.

Community 40). In some of these cases Vanier believes the person has become a lover of peace, but not a worker for peace (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 77). To become a worker for peace means that they must participate in the daily struggle and hard work that peace requires. Peace in any setting is not a static thing, but dynamic. It requires us to daily accept our weaknesses, vulnerability, and to constantly forgive ourselves and others.

Forgiveness is at the crux of Vanier's vision of peace. Forgiveness must first start with forgiving ourselves. Vanier cites Athenagoras, Patriarch of Constantinople, to summarize the challenge of forgiveness: "The hardest war is the war against oneself" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 133). We cannot become fully human and accept our vulnerabilities without being able to forgive ourselves for our failings and struggles. To deny ourselves this forgiveness is to deny weakness and continue to live in the illusion that we are God. "To descend into the insecurity of humility in order to open ourselves to peace implies forgiveness" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 132). Following Christ's example in accepting weakness and forgiving ourselves, we are able to accept God's love and have Christ abide within. Once we are able to forgive ourselves and accept our own failings, acceptance of others can begin. Forgiveness of others can be given and humbly

accepted. To live in peace we must be able to give and receive forgiveness and love.

Peace in community does not mean the absence of conflict. On the contrary, living in community will bring tensions and conflict. Nor does peace preclude conflict. Issues and tensions become exposed as we live with others. Peace requires that when we experience pain and hurt, we practice forgiveness that is grounded in trust, commitment, and humility. Forgiveness allows us to heal, reconcile, and become makers of peace.

The other key to peace through forgiveness is trust. Vulnerability is required to forgive and ask forgiveness of others. Trust that the other will hear us, value us, and love us as we are allows for forgiveness. "So for me the whole question of peace-making is centered on trust. Trust that you are important, that you are precious, that you have something important to give to the world, to give to me" (Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'* 11). Trust is vital in a community for the group to be able to share their truth. If the space is not safe then the barriers and hurts remain hidden until there is an outburst, or people flee. Sharing one's story, which is their truth, requires safety and trust in the other to hear and respond in love. When we hear another's story we hold their vulnerability.

To forgive and to accept forgiveness takes commitment. Commitment allows for us to know that if pain and hurts are shared then the other will hear them and walk with us. This is not a short walk, but a long road that changes all involved to remain with the other, committed to them. Open dialogue is only an option when all involved are committed to work through problems and conflicts. This allows everyone to truly listen to one another, and have peace. Unfortunately, today's church lacks this commitment as Christians go church shopping and move churches the second tension arises. The church becomes a place where forgiveness and peace is foreign because there is no commitment and trust.

One also needs humility if one is to ask others for forgiveness and to accept it. True humility means that we recognize our vulnerability and limitations. We see that we urgently need forgiveness and grace. We must humbly ask and accept forgiveness as a blessing and a gift. In turn we are able to offer forgiveness. This daily process requires humility and patience in order to continue. "We must learn to forgive and forgive and forgive every day, day after day. We need the power of the Holy Spirit in order to open up like that" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 38). To persevere, humbly forgiving and being forgiven, we require the Holy Spirit. This necessity is another reminder

that we cannot do this on our own, but are vulnerable creatures who need God.

To reconcile with the other and have peace we must also understand relocation. To have relationship and enter into community, lives must be shared together. The issues and problems of others must become our issues and problems (Gordon). L'Arche itself is a great example of relocation. The assistants live with the core members so that their struggles are shared. The core member's issues and challenges, experienced through daily hygiene needs, doctors' appointments, specialized diets, and limited mobility, all become the assistant's issues too. To have peace we must begin to share lives, forgive, and enter into relationship. The "path to peace is to serve Jesus in the poor, to live among them" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 133). This opens our hearts to see the vulnerability and daily struggles of the other. Living together challenges the desire to be above one another as the weaknesses and joys become shared (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 135). As a result, Vanier urges the church to reclaim the poor as its center. He asserts that the Church must once again live with the poor. Doing so will bring not just individual healing to the weak and strong, but begin to heal communities and bring about God's justice and peace. "Living together with people who have been devalued helps them and us to

discover their, and our, human value and dignity" (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 76). In the Church, congregations travel more now, meaning that church members often live outside of the neighboring community and do not share the same problems and issues. When we see one another as persons and live with others, their issues become our own. Reconciliation and peace then begin to become manifest.

If this is how we are to work for peace, then what are the challenges? Busyness is an enemy of peace for Vanier. He shares how powerful business people he has known have fallen for the illusion of success and strength, allowing it to dictate their values. Their world comes crashing down when a loved one become ill or born with a disability. This forces these "strong" individuals to slow down and face the reality of their weakness. Their transformation is one that Vanier calls becoming human. Persons with disabilities have the unique ability to live more in the present. They slow down and experience the moment. Living with those who experience life in this way changes all of those around them. By slowing down, they are able to notice more of the beauty in the world around them. Barriers and anger are healed, allowing them to embrace weakness. Slowing down and being present is crucial to peace. Working in conjunction with Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas explains what is meant here, "Peace creates time by its

steadfast refusal to force the other to submit in the name of order. Peace is not a static state but an activity which requires constant attention and care" (Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* 46). Peace takes time and is only achieved through relationships and communities who come to know, trust, forgive, and enter into communion with one another.

Another challenge to peace can be certain types of authority and culture. A healthy community and peace require authority that is not built upon power, control, and fears, but one that empowers. Vanier has demonstrated this principle of peace through his life and founding of L'Arche, which gave him a great deal of responsibility over the community. When a problem arose, people sought out Vanier to render a verdict and support their side. This was tempting for him to do as he had learned how to be efficient and direct when in the Navy. Instead of dictating, he realized that he needed to respect others and empower them to be a part of solutions and decisions. As a result, Vanier sought to ensure that all the communities include core members in all the decisions. Contrary to this leadership and inclusion, many churches have youth as congregational members but do not let them sit on important boards or councils. When the vulnerable of the com-

munity are excluded from decisions, belonging is no longer about empowering, which makes exploitation and forced peace more likely.

To be a peacemaker is a long and difficult journey. It is one that we can only accomplish through and with the power of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit allows us humbly to forgive and be forgiven. This journey is one we must practice and live out daily as tensions do not disappear, but are able to be healed. This true peace is essential to the health of all communities.

Spirituality

Spirituality has become a common term in recent years, resulting in a plethora of interpretations and uses of the term. The reason to use Spirituality here comes from L'Arche's own history. L'Arche has become an ecumenical community where many faiths and belief systems co-exist with one another. God though is still at the center of this community, revealing God's self through the core members. The spiritual principle for L'Arche is its core beliefs about faith and the life we find in God balanced with an openness to dialogue and relationship with other faith traditions and communities. This section will explore the core faith beliefs of L'Arche and why ecumenism is crucial to the spirituality of the community. Spirituality is central to who we are for

our personhood rests in God. "A community's solid foundation is in the heart of God" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 155). Our community must be grounded in God and find its meaning there. This is not a limited or close-minded spirituality but one that is secure enough in its foundation to allow for difference. The community then becomes a sign of peace and reconciliation in the world. "A community must be a sign of the resurrection" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 196). As a sign of the resurrection the community guides people to new life that is truly free and finds purpose in Jesus Christ. The community must experience the cross for it to know the hope and freedom of the resurrection.

The community must find its life in God. To fail to do so denies its source and the life therein. "The first sin of a community is to turn its eyes from the One who called it to life, to look at itself instead" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 159). Hope is lost and despair takes over when we try to remain in control. This attempt to control all we can should alert us to the fact that we are trying to be God. Instead of trying to be God, we need to die to our own egos and become free as vulnerable creatures of God. To remedy this we need to listen to the call of the Spirit in our life.

God has called each and every one of us to community, in which all live in communion with one another and with our Creator. This call

is evident as Jesus calls his disciples to follow him. Without this call, there is no community (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 45). Entering community may be a choice, but we only stay if we know God has called and chosen us for that community (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 44). This call is what sustains us and gives us purpose within the community. Recognizing and responding to God's call helps to strengthen others in their faith and humanity. This call sustains us through times of trial. Without a call we lack commitment to the community which helps all to persevere and forgive in times of struggle.

The spiritual principle of L'Arche helps us to see that God has not only given us a call, but a mission as a community and Church. "The true mission is the opposite: to recognise our faults, and encounter the other with humility, respect and love, as Jesus did" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 21). We are called to the mission of witnessing to God's love through and in our vulnerability. Recognition of vulnerability reminds us of our need for Christ. We can respond to God's call by dying to ourselves and growing in freedom and communion with God and humanity. While suffering is a sign of the cross, a community also must be a sign of resurrection where hope and love are revealed. This is the mission of the church and community (Vanier, *Community and Growth*

85). When we embrace God's mission and become a sign of the resurrection, we begin to aid others in experiencing God's love.

An element of this mission is evangelization. Mistakenly, the Church often submits to the cultural understanding of evangelization by trying to convince and bring others to faith through power, force, and money. While not definitive, a church's budget can hint of this view of evangelism by spending more money in marketing than in missions work. Force and power are not the ways of L'Arche. "A Christian community should do as Jesus did: propose and not impose. Its attraction must lie in the radiance cast by the love of brothers and sisters" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 144). Vanier proposes evangelization through weakness and vulnerability. Vanier explains that through the poor and vulnerable others are transformed (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 120). They are able to see their own weakness and deal with the fears, loneliness, and vulnerability that are usually hidden. Through the poor, barriers are broken down and hearts open up to God's love. Essentially, Vanier is proposing evangelization "not by telling each person: 'God loves you.' It is by saying 'I love you in the name of Jesus'" (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 62). By centering evangelization in vulnerability and humility, the Church would emulate Jesus. When we change our perspective to draw near to the poor and

acknowledge our vulnerability we will have a healthy community.

“When a community is healthy, it acts like a magnet” (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 143). A healthy community, founded in the cross and practicing reconciliation, is the best form of evangelization and achieves its mission to testify to God’s love.

Another component of spirituality is for our mission to be ecumenical. Vanier did not begin L’Arche with the intent of being ecumenical; instead it was grounded in the Catholic Church. As people came from all over the world to see this healthy community and try to establish one in their own country, he realized that L’Arche could not exist in the same way everywhere. The community would become oppressive if it forced persons with cognitive disabilities to become Catholic in order to be in the community. Vanier found their commonality in vulnerability and embraced the other, which has established peace where others did not think it was possible. In L’Arche communities they have Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Atheists living together. “True ecumenism is not the suppression of difference; on the contrary, it is learning to respect and love what is different. The members of the community must then be grounded in their own tradition and love it” (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 203). The community then respects this difference, but is still rooted in its own faith. There are things that

the people in L'Arche cannot do together, such as take the Eucharist together. This pain has helped the community realize the need for inner reconciliation and the deep desire they have for full communion with one another as with God. This pain of separation has become a gift as it has brought forth great healing and encouraged the universal Church in reconciliation.

Spiritual growth is a constant journey for Vanier. It is a journey of inner growth and freedom by the work of the Holy Spirit that abides in us. "It is always either growing towards greater love or else regressing, as people accept or refuse to descend into the tunnel of pain to be reborn in the Spirit" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 33). This is not an easy process, but one that must be undertaken each and every day. Vanier draws upon Jesus' instructions to carry our cross daily through forgiveness. We work daily with the Spirit in us, so that we become holy, sanctified. Many think that once we have become born anew, our journey is complete. This is not how Vanier understands our growth in the Holy Spirit. "Love can never be static. A human heart is either progressing or regressing. If it is not becoming more open, it is closing and withering spiritually" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 267). Growth in and through the Holy Spirit is a dynamic process in which we are always either moving close to God and communion or we

are moving away and creating more barriers. With L'Arche as his frame of reference, this understanding makes sense. No community is ever static. It must be worked at, forgiven, celebrated, and engaged with daily. A static community is a dying one. This is the same for our own communion with God and our brethren.

Vanier departs at this point from many American Protestants by incorporating the individual and communal into one understanding of sanctification. He views the journey of sanctification as simply saving our own individual soul, but growing communally with God. The journey is not just about saving our own soul, but growing communally with God. "It is when the members of a community realize that they are not there simply for themselves or their own sanctification, but to welcome the gift of God, to hasten his Kingdom and to quench the thirst in parched hearts through their prayer and sacrifice, love and acts of service, that they will truly live community" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 89). Sanctification and true community are intertwined. The community, through the work of the Spirit in sanctification, becomes a sign of hope. Hope of transformation that leads us from the ego of the individual to a communal love that can be lived every day as disciples (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 312).

The final key to our spirituality is prayer. Prayer is where we engage with God and begin to know and commune with our God. "Prayer is resting in the quiet, gentle presence of God" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 32). Vanier notes that the purpose of prayer is not to talk God into giving us what we want. Rather the purpose of prayer is to enter into the presence of God. Ritual prayers become a gateway to move beyond distractions and to enter into communion with God.³ "To pray then, is more about listening than about talking" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 32). To be in God's presence we must silence ourselves. Constantly talking in prayer can be a form of control and a barrier to communion. To break through, we must become open to listening to God. When we become quiet and gentle, we are able to rest in God's presence.

The importance of rest and peace in prayer is found in Sabbath. L'Arche can be a demanding place on all those that live there. Living constantly "in community" and supporting the needs of others can become a stressor. "When we feel strung up, tense and incapable of praying or listening, then we should take some rest- or even get away for a few days" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 180). This quiet peace brings about renewal as we find our joy again in God. The Spirit is able

³ One great resource to further explore prayer and how we can rest in the presence of God is called the *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* by Igumen Chariton.

to refresh us through intentional time with God. "This solitude does not separate me from others; it helps me love them more tenderly, realistically and attentively" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 189). While solitude can be an escape for many, prayer can help to draw us closer to others by deepening our relationship with God. It builds trust and forms us to God's will so that our relationships with others are seen through our relationship with God (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 189). We are able to hear from the Spirit and see situations and tensions as God does when we worship, slow down, and pray. Doing so helps us to forgive and have peace.

Another outlet for Sabbath can be safe and reassuring relationships. "Our bodies need to relax, but so do our hearts, in secure and unthreatening relationships" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 178). These relationships are ones that calm our bodies and souls. Vanier has countless stories of persons with cognitive disabilities offering unthreatening relationship. They do not bring ulterior motives and baggage. Their gift of vulnerability allows anyone to lower their own barriers and receive God's love. This reception of love can be the greatest Sabbath and the most heartfelt prayer as it is the experience of the Spirit being born in us.

Communion

The foundation for the principle of communion is the Trinity. Vanier sees our God as a communion in and of God's self. God is three persons in one. The three persons are in perfect relationship with one another. Each has its own unique and distinct identity, yet perfectly united with the other persons of the Trinity. "Our God is three persons in love with each other; our God is communion" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 35). No one person in the Trinity, Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, dominates and overtakes the others.⁴ This can be seen in scripture as each one participates in all of the actions of the others. Our triune God then becomes the foundation for our understanding and practice of communion.

To have communion with God, the barriers that arise from our vulnerability must be addressed. Vanier points out what these barriers truly are when he asks, "Do you know what sin is? It's when there is a barrier between you and me. Between me and God, between me and myself" (Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'* 33). Vanier reminds us that the weakest and most vulnerable were embraced and recognized to be

⁴ Some examples are: how God the Father created the world, yet does so through the Word. The Son becomes man and brings us salvation through the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary. The Son sends the Spirit. The persons of the Trinity work in communion and are not limited to a singular work, but participate in the work and activity of the others persons of the Trinity.

at the center of communion. We are designed to be in relationship, or communion, with God. When we place, or reinforce, barriers to inhibit that relationship, we become separated from God. God allows for us to be completely free and our own person, just as each person of the Trinity is. We are not forced to be in relationship with God, but invited into relationship. "And this beautiful and loving God is calling us humans into this life of love" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 35). Our sins are those barriers that hold us back from embracing this relationship and entering into communion with God.

God has given us the gift to break down the barriers holding us back from relationship. "We are all handicapped before God, prisoners of our own egoism. But Jesus has come to heal us, save us and set us free by the gift of his Spirit" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 280). God's only Son came down and through his life, death, and resurrection, he broke those barriers that have held us back from communion. We are invited to open up the free gift that is offered by God. When we die to ourselves and our ego, we become new. With the separation from God gone, the Holy Spirit is able to enter into us and dwell within our being. "The heart of the message of Christ, its fundamental newness, is the promise of an inner strength which comes with the gift of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the family of God living

inside of us, so that we can forgive and be forgiven" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 39). By faith in Christ we join in communion with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work moves us forward and we begin to become truly free. Our communion with God empowers us to become more human. The perichoretic union⁵ of the three divine Persons is the standard by which all attempts at human community are judged.

Our first experiences in our families shape our understanding of what communion is. As children we enter into relationship with our parents. This relationship colors how we view communion, creating barriers, pain, and hurts. For example, a mother might try to possess a child which can lead the child to equate possession with communion. Other times both might fuse and lose their identity. "Fusion leads to confusion. In a relationship of communion, you are you and I am I; I have my identity and you have yours" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 17). In communion we become more fully ourselves. With God as our example, we see how the persons of the Trinity do not fuse, but stay three unique persons. Christ, in becoming human did

⁵ The term perichoresis is used to describe the triune relationship between each person of the Godhead. This relationship can be defined as co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration (Perichoresis). Alister McGrath explains that it "allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being,' in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them." (McGrath 325)

not give up divinity, but entered into communion with all humanity. We too are called to communion with others, yet are empowered to remain free to be who God created us to be.

Entering into communion begins with an encounter. We are to encounter the other as God sees them, not as a possession or through fear. When we are able to see others as whole persons, with all their weaknesses, gifts, and graces, then we begin to encounter them as they truly are and recognize Christ in them. Jesus even noted how this is true of the poor (Matthew 25:45). Fellowship with the poor is subtly discouraged in churches because they remind us of our vulnerability and bring out our fears, fail to help the churches bottom line, or leave us feeling out of control and lost. Communion with and centered on the poor is devalued. In contrast, encounters with the marginalized transform us, though, and lead us to what it means to be a person (Vanier, *Signs of the Times* 50). The "other" is also a beloved child of God and must be recognized as a person.

When we recognize God dwelling in another we are compelled to engage, listen, and value them in a new way. A relationship with another person means encountering them and embracing their vulnerability, as well as our own. Listening means hearing the other's truth without judgment or attempting to fix any problems. Listening is not

limited to the words of the other, but includes their non-verbal communication also. The words will confirm and give significance to what their body language and tone have already said (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 99). Often it is through the body that we are able to receive and give the love of God. Listening is not just hearing what is said, but also listening to the other's deep needs, prayers, hurts, and longings.

This brings us to the essence of communion with another person, which Vanier calls "the communion of hearts". The heart for him is the core of the person's being. "To speak of the heart is not to speak of vaguely defined emotions but to speak of the very core of our being" (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 87). This communion is not a superficial connection but union at the core of our being. We often are drawn to those that compliment us and flatter us because they make us feel good. True communion, however, goes deeper as we are able to disagree and work through conflict and tension by loving one another. This unity is a call from God to the person and the community, not simply a feeling but a commitment *to the other*.

To be in communion with another person means that we will accompany them as they grow in inner freedom.

The word "accompaniment," like the word "companion," comes from the Latin words *cum pane*, which means "with bread." It implies sharing together, eating together, nourishing each other, walking together. The one who accompanies is like a midwife,

helping us to come to life, to live more fully. But the accompanier receives life also (Vanier, *Becoming Human* 130).

An accompanier acts to help the other be who God created them to be. This means struggling with them, walking through the valleys as well as the mountains. Love is born of communion with others. Such communion will not always be easy, but we endure the pains with the other so that true life might be brought about in the other. That true life is living the call that they were given, living with their weaknesses, struggles, and their gifts and graces.

Entering into this communion fully means that not only will we help the other, but they will help us too. Just as the weak need the strong, the strong need the weak. This mutual communion will bring about true life in both people. Neither will possess the other. Communion between two people brings life through the presence of God as two people, or communities, are joined in love. This is a covenant love that is grounded in the universal source of all love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is present in our unconditional love, a love that the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized are gifted at witnessing to.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist, or Communion, is a physical sign of what it means to be in communion with God. When we partake in the Eucharist we are partaking in Jesus' life, death, and resurrec-

tion. We will explore this expression of communion in the next section, as it is also the embodiment of our final principle, celebration.

Celebration

To Vanier, 'celebration' has a much richer connotation than in common discourse. Common usage of the word focuses on happiness and festivity. Happiness is the goal only to avoid loneliness and vulnerability. Material items, accomplishments, and admiration become our quick fixes to satiate our need for fulfillment. There is a deep loneliness in us that we attempt to fill by using fleeting happiness and distractions. In this way, the meaning of celebration has become twisted. It now is equated with that momentary fix to alleviate our loneliness. We must reclaim the word celebration and connect it with true joy.

Joy is not a fleeting experience. It is a way of being that lasts. The reason for this is that joy is found in experiencing God's presence. "Celebration is a communal experience of joy, a song of thanksgiving" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 313). Joy brought by communion can be present even amidst the pain and tension that a community feels. When members of a community are able to have communion with one another, they see the presence of Christ in one another. The Spirit brings the peace and joy of Christ. "Somewhere at the heart of cele-

bration there is the consciousness of the presence of Christ" (Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 46). It is the presence of Christ that makes the Spirit dwelling inside of us jump for joy and celebrate the communion of hearts.

The parable in Luke 14:12-14, where the rich man hosts a feast, is central to Vanier's understanding of what it means to celebrate. In the story the rich man begins by inviting the powerful in order to feel important and fill the loneliness that he feels. When no one accepts his invitation, he faces rejection and decides not to waste all the preparation. He orders a servant to invite the poor and the lame. They are the ones who fill the table and celebrate. This story reveals the importance of the poor and vulnerable to any celebration. "If the least significant is excluded, it is no longer a celebration" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 319). Excluding the vulnerable from celebration can quickly turn a celebration into a party that focuses on ourselves, our achievements, and building our ego. Inclusion of the poor guides us to focus on Christ's presence. This holds true for all gatherings, especially in Church. When we exclude the poor and instead focus on those who flatter us, the powerful or the big donors, then we have excluded the least of these. If the poor and vulnerable are excluded from the Church then we must face the very real question of who, or what, is

really being worshiped. This is why in any celebration the poor must be included.

The parable in Luke 14 reminds us the importance of sharing meals together to all celebration. "Meals and love have been linked for us since we were infants. When a mother feeds her baby, there is mutual presence, joy and play" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 322). Jesus' ministry often took place around a table. The Gospels show the importance of meals and gathering around tables to Jesus' ministry. Some examples would be the Last Supper, or Jesus being anointed, celebrating with people like Zacchaeus, or even telling parables of banquets and meals.⁶ Even in the resurrection we see Jesus sharing meals like on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and breakfast on the beach with Peter (John 21:1-25). All of these stories demonstrate the importance of sharing meals with the community and brothers and sisters. One key to communion and celebration is to experience the ordinary together. Relationships are built in the daily ordinary tasks. A meal is a daily necessity. It is an ordinary practice that brings people together to share. In sharing a meal, we leave behind the distractions of ourselves and the world, we experience one another's presence and enter into relationship with one another.

⁶ Luke 22:15-20, Matt 22: 1-14, Luke 14:15-24.

Meals also help us to slow down and listen. When we rush we do not see one another. Busyness distracts and pulls us from fully listening. Rushing and distractions, like TV, are detrimental to communion and celebration. "Communities which live simply and without waste, and which do not use television all the time, help people to discover a whole new way of life, which demands fewer financial resources but more commitments to relationships and to celebration" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 309). Meals are a joyful ordinary time to celebrate one another by intentionally slowing down and developing relationships.

With the poor and vulnerable present in the celebration, laughter and play become essential to help us bring down barriers. Expectations of what the normal and the appropriate are can be used as barriers to relationship. One of Vanier's favorite things to do at a meal is to play around by throwing orange peels. This tradition at L'Arche Trosly-Breuil has shocked many guests, but as Vanier explains, play is crucial to celebration. "But I do know that it is one way to bring people out of their isolation to express themselves joyfully- especially if they can't communicate through words. People who cannot participate in interesting conversations can participate through play" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 324). He is able to enter into relationship because he uses

language that is open to all. He lowers his barriers and enters into communion and joy with the others there. Doing so brings the group into celebration that penetrates many guests' defenses and barriers.

Gifts are an important part of celebrations in the L'Arche vision. The difference is that Vanier does not see these necessarily as material items. Instead, a gift is to celebrate who the person is to the community. We say to one another, "You are a gift. You're a gift to the community" (Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* 38). Cultural rituals are one place to express the true gift a person is. A birthday party can be transformed by not focusing on material items, but telling the person how they have been a gift to all over the last year. This affirms the blessing and gift that the individual is to the family and sharing how they experienced Christ through them. This not only brings the community and family closer but also reminds us of each individual's personhood. It recognizes the presence of God in them, which is the greatest gift we can give and receive.

The final piece of celebration is lament. Although it may seem counterproductive to true celebration, it is an essential component. While celebration is a joyful thing, we are also reminded that not everyone is celebrating at that moment. People around the world are in anguish, mourning, and suffering. "That is why all celebration, which is

like a great 'Alleluia' and song of thanksgiving, should end with silence in which we remember before God all those who cannot celebrate and who are in pain today" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 320). Coupling lament with celebration enables the church to witness to God's joy within the reality of the world and distinguish itself from world.⁷

Celebration of Eucharist is the culmination of all of the principles of L'Arche. When we pull these five principles together we are able to enter into celebration. Nowhere is this more evident than in the celebration of the Sacrament of Communion in the Church. The Roman Catholic Mass, which Vanier participates in, utilizes and embodies every one of the six principles in L'Arche. A deeper look into this practice will help illuminate the aspects of celebration that the Church and L'Arche share.

Celebration in Church

In the middle of Mass, following the scripture and the homily, the congregation responds to God's Word through Communion. The

⁷ Seattle Pacific University recently wrestled with this exact aspect of celebration as there was a school shooting which claimed a student's life on campus. A short week later classes came together to celebrate graduation. The community recognized the need for lament within the joy of the accomplishment and relationships that had been established in their time on campus. By including lament in their celebration, Seattle Pacific University recognized God's presence among the community and saw the celebration as a sign of the resurrection.

gifts of the community are brought forth and presented to the priest and God, followed by the Eucharistic prayer. In this prayer the vision and story of God are retold.⁸ "It is important to remember and to re-read our own personal histories and the history of the community on certain feast-days, and then to give thanks for the way God has watched over us, protected us and saved us over the years" (Vanier, *Community and Growth* 318). Sharing the vision and story is a way to join in communion with one another and remember the unity we share is found in God. This unity is a part of the foundation for the celebration and the joy that is experienced. The Eucharistic prayer also centers us spiritually by recalling our true purpose and mission.

The Communion rite follows the Eucharistic prayer. After praying the Lord's Prayer as an entire community, the Church then shares a sign of peace among one another. We are reminded of the peace that we have in Christ as we turn to the community and offer the peace of Christ. This peace is centered in forgiveness. It forces us to look at the individuals around us and offer an expression of peace that begins to

⁸ The preface in Eucharistic Prayer II is a great example- "It is truly right and just, our duty and salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Father most holy, through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, your Word through whom you made all things, whom you sent as our Savior and Redeemer, incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin. Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands as he endured his Passion, so as to break the bonds of death and manifest the resurrection. And so, with the Angels and all the Saints we declare your glory, as with one voice we acclaim" (Eucharistic Prayers I-IV).

break down barriers and help us to see beyond our own issues to the common humanity that we find in the Holy Spirit that dwells in each person.

After passing the peace, the priest breaks the bread.⁹ This symbolizes the brokenness of Christ, God's vulnerability taken in the incarnation. It is this brokenness that unites the community and allows us to celebrate. The people respond by praising God for taking away the sins of the world, the barriers that separate us from one another and from God.¹⁰ Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the people have now been united.

The final response before partaking in Communion is to recognize our own weakness and vulnerability. The priest echoes what God has done in taking away the barriers. Then the community responds by saying that we are not worthy of what God has done.¹¹ We are weak, fearful, and vulnerable. The response is finished by noting God's saving action in Christ: "Only say the word and I shall be healed." This phrase reminds us that it is God that gives us our value and person-

⁹ "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: grant us peace" (Order of Mass).

¹⁰ "Priest: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb" (Order of Mass).

¹¹ "All: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed" (Order of Mass).

hood. We may not be worthy, but we are healed and united through God. We belong to community through God's love.

The community then partakes in the Eucharist, which means 'giving thanks'. Thanks for the love of Christ that saves us and reconciles us to God and one another. The Sacrament of Communion is a celebration of the presence of God and our unity with God and one another.

The celebration of the Sacrament is concluded with a time of silence. This silence is one of reflection and prayer that allows for us to combine lament to our celebration in a unique way. The joy and transformation experienced in and through the L'Arche principles experienced in Mass are unfortunately not shared by all. The community silently reflects, prays, and laments the suffering and divisions in the world. When the silence concludes, the community is blessed and sent out to love and serve the God in the world.

By taking this deeper look into the Sacrament of Communion, we were able to see all of the six principles working in conjunction for the transformation of the body of Christ. Before we examine how these principles can reshape our faith formation curricula for the transformation of our congregations, we need to review the principles that we will be applying.

Summary of L'Arche Principles

We belong to God, created in the *imago dei* to reflect God's perfect love. All people, no matter what their race, creed, ability, or sexual identity might be, belong to a common humanity.

Our value and personhood are found in God. The uniting aspect for all human beings is our identity as God's beloved children. Nothing takes away our value. As persons we are vulnerable. To embrace our personhood and identity, we have to accept our limitations, accept that we are not God. This means letting go of control, power, and the world's vision of success so that we may embrace our vulnerability. This recognition frees us from a fear of death and gives us new life in Christ.

Accepting the gift of new life also brings us peace. We see others as God does. We see the Holy Spirit active in the lives of others and in our own. As grace was offered to us, we now do so for others, forgiving trespasses against us. Tensions and conflicts do not disappear, but are transformed through the work of the Spirit in us. In our vulnerability and humility we also ask for forgiveness and repent.

The Holy Trinity, three persons in communion, is our standard of what healthy belonging and relationships are. We unite with God in communion through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. We then experience God's unconditional love and are able to share this love in relationships with others. True community is established in communion fulfilled in celebration. Celebration of renewal, love, joy, and peace of Christ comes through communion with God and with one another. This reconciliation with God and others is a joy that permeates every aspect of our lives and we are able to celebrate the kingdom of God now and yet to come.

Two Contemporary Curricula

L'Arche embraces the principles of belonging, vulnerability, peace, spirituality, communion, and celebration. These six principles will serve as our evaluation rubric for two elementary-age faith formation curricula in widespread use today. These curricula, applied in the Sunday school church setting are intended to teach and mold disciples for Christ. We have established the importance of the L'Arche principles to our humanity, faith, and our relationship with God. It is equally important that each principle may be set as a standard that is present in the Church today. Curricula serve as a window into what we believe to be true and imperative to our faith development. They also

reveal whether the six L'Arche principles are present and central to the body of Christ.

Before analyzing the specific curricula, the issue of context must be addressed. L'Arche assistants and core members live life with one another and are responsible for one another. In Church ministry the faith formation class gathers for a shorter period and is not the primary caregiver or faith developer for the participants. How then do these six principles transfer to the local church ministry context? L'Arche principles have already bridged extremely diverse context through new communities around the world. We have discussed many examples in the previous sections of how these principles can be applied to meetings, budgets, worship, and other aspects of church ministry. As for the time constrained gathering for faith formation, the principles can and do still apply, all be it differently than in L'Arche. We will begin by exploring how the six principles are present in the curricula, followed by exploring adaptations and additional applications for local church faith formation curricula.

Grow, Proclaim, Serve!

The first curriculum is called *Grow, Proclaim, Serve!*¹² This cur-

¹² I will refer to *Grow, Proclaim, Serve!* as *Grow* from this point forward.

riculum comes from a United Methodist publisher, Cokesbury. The target age is 0-12 years old. To discover what the curriculum teaches we will examine the scope and sequence, introductions to lessons, and instructions for leaders. These sources explain the goals, purpose, and foci of each lesson and the overall curriculum. For an in-depth look we will be using lessons produced for summer 2013.

All curricula use a learning model as its foundation. Knowing and understanding the base learning model is crucial to knowing the tensions and risks inherent in the structure and foundation for the curricula. By analyzing the foundational learning model we can see the challenges in how our two curricula apply L'Arche principles.

Grow falls into the scholar academic method as summarized by Schiro in his book *Curriculum Theory*. This method understands the purpose of education to be the accumulation of knowledge. This involves learning its "content, conceptual frameworks, and the ways of thinking" (Schiro 4). Teachers in this model are scholars who have the knowledge to present material accurately and clearly to their students. The method establishes a hierarchical community who search for truth in the form of facts and familiarity by which meaning can be derived. The top of the system are those who are "inquirers into truth". These would be the scholars, the teachers who pass on that truth that the

scholars have discovered. Beneath them are the learners. The goal of the system is to move people up the hierarchy and pass along information.

Grow's primary focus is on knowledge of the Bible for children. "First and foremost, *Grow, Proclaim, Serve* is a Bible study. Your children will hear the Bible story, apply the Bible message, and then live out the message in their lives in concrete and age appropriate ways" (*Grow, Early Elementary Age 5-6, Summer 2013, 2*). The name of the curriculum then implies that through Bible study the child will grow in their faith, proclaim the learned faith, and then practice it by serving others. This foundation raises the question if the curriculum is excluding persons with disabilities? If growth is linked to the accrual of facts and stories then there becomes a limited understanding of transformation and discipleship. "To grow in faith, Children must know Bible stories and Bible verses and the message of the Bible as a whole, as well as develop skills for using the Bible" (*One Room Sunday School Leader's Guide 3*). With this foundation, *Grow* excludes the vulnerable, such as those with degenerative diseases, from its understanding of growth.

The curriculum explains that the role of the teacher is to disseminate faith to the learners. Many teachers and leaders do not promote

or accept the role in their individual settings, but the curriculum itself implies that this is the role for a teacher. The danger with this role is for the teacher to limit revelation from other sources, such as other students. Doing so violates the vulnerability principle as it limits the value and witness that the vulnerable and weak can provide to the Church. Vanier pushes that the true teacher *is* the vulnerable person and that the strong must learn from them. The *Grow* curriculum fails to incorporate vulnerability by supporting a role for teachers and leaders that limits the witness and value of the other, the poor and vulnerable.

When it comes to using L'Arche principles of peace and belonging, *Grow* shines. The relationship that we have with our God is a central belief in the curriculum.

Through this curriculum we want children to: grow in their relationship to God and to Jesus Christ; grow in discipleship; grow in their love of the Bible and in their Bible skills; grow in their relationships to one another; and grow to love their neighbors as themselves (*Grow*, Middle Elementary, Summer 2013, 2).

All class members are empowered to recognize themselves as children of God. When they know this as their identity they can apply their faith to choices and critical thinking (*Grow*, One Room, Summer 2013, 3).

As each person is a child of God, they belong to the group. Belonging

leads to peace and ethical treatment of all, including love for neighbors.

Grow is pneumatologically deficient and would be significantly strengthened by attending to the L'Arche principles. The central beliefs, noted in the previous paragraph, demonstrate this deficiency by making the goal to grow in relationship with God and Jesus Christ, but failing to include the Spirit. Through summer 2013 elementary leader's guides the Spirit is not mentioned in one lesson. The three year scope and sequence for middle and early elementary children follows suit by excluding the Holy Spirit save for Pentecost (*Scope and Sequence*). Each lesson has a mission or application, yet even these are focused on our action with no mention of the Spirit. By ignoring the Holy Spirit, *Grow* risks teaching that the Spirit is irrelevant and limited to one specific role, evangelism, as in the Pentecostal story. Another consequence is that humanity is not aided in God's mission and discipleship. Holiness becomes only our work.

Without the Holy Spirit, the mission and evangelism aspect of the spiritual principle become twisted. The poor are acknowledged, but in a way that retains power and distance from those in need. Relationships with God and one another were a main goal for *Grow*, but there is no relationship established with the poor or oppressed. The mission

projects suggested and designed support this conclusion. Their primary focus for the service projects are on collecting supplies and fundraising (*Grow, One Room, 2013 Summer, 2*). While it is wonderful to help others, the children learn that compassion is not *with*, but *for*. The result is charity that maintains the status quo of an unjust system and misses what the spiritual principle is about.

Grow also fails to implement two main aspects of vulnerability. In a series of lessons focusing on morals and choices, *Grow* defines what it means to be human. "When God created human beings, God gave them a gift that God did not bestow on any other living things—the ability to choose" (*Grow, Middle Elementary, Summer 2013, 7*). The implication of choice is problematic. The consequence of loss of choice then is that one loses their personhood. This limited understanding of personhood denies persons with cognitive disabilities, elderly, and infants. Free will is not the same as choice. Intentional choice is not what makes a person valuable and human. In this context, choice is equated with the American cultural version which stresses "freedom-from". "Freedom-from" is being grounded in our individuality and denies our limits and responsibilities so that an individ-

ual can choose anything they want.¹³ “Freedom-for” has an aspect of choice, but recognizes our vulnerability as creatures and is grounded in communion with God and others. Our freedom is then for God. Vanier described this as giving and receiving love. Placing our value and personhood in choice elevates behaviors and morals to our purpose. “Being good people” and pursuing good works become the avenue to salvation.¹⁴ Participation with the Holy Spirit for personal and societal transformation is needed. Without transformation through the Holy Spirit, *Grow* embraces activism through service *for* others, as Vanier cautioned against, rather than *with* others in relationship (Vanier, *Finding Peace* 17).

Communion and celebration are essentially absent from the curriculum. The Sacrament of Communion has been deemphasized in many Protestant churches by celebrating it only once a month. *Grow* also deemphasizes communion. There are lessons on the last supper that focus on communion during spring each year, but for Vanier

¹³ “Because freedom is not a quality that can be uncovered; it is not a possession, something to hand, an object; nor is it a form of something to hand; instead it is a relation and nothing else. To be more precise, freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free” (Bonhoeffer 63).

¹⁴ Moral Therapeutic Deism holds to these five tenets: 1) A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth. 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. (Not what Jesus promises for Christians) 4) God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem. 5) Good people go to heaven when they die. (Dean 14)

communion is a part of everything, and an essential element of personhood. Fun and creative activities bring out a degree of fellowship among the group, but the poor and marginalized are not included. An individual church may include them, but the *Grow* itself focuses on good works for those in need rather than relationship. The pneumatological and communion deficiency make it impossible to fully celebrate the joy of God's presence in our lives and in one another.

Godly Play

The second curriculum we examine is *Godly Play*. *Godly Play* was designed for 0-12 year olds, but has also been adapted for older youth and adults. The goal for *Godly Play* is not centered on knowledge, but rather the experience of God's story and developing a language to talk about and with God (Introduction to *Godly Play*). Through a discovery model of learning, *Godly Play* reaches persons with all abilities and invites them into relationship with the class and God through story. To evaluate *Godly Play* I have used training videos, leader guides, class experience, and training at Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle.

Godly Play uses a learner-centered method. Schiro explains that this model focuses on the needs and concerns of individuals. Schools

and classrooms should be enjoyable places designed for learning and growth. The goal is the growth of the individual and their unique abilities. Learners here must actualize their own capabilities for growth. People are the center and source of the curriculum. Growth is the central theme of this method as the teacher becomes a developer who is to draw out the inherent capabilities of people. Learning comes from interaction with the environment and discovery. Learning will also be unique to each individual. Curricula within the learner centered-model consists of "contexts, environments, or units of work in which students can make meaning for themselves by interacting with other students, teachers, ideas, and things" (Schiro 6). The job of the teacher then is to design different contexts and environments that help the students grow and gather meaning in their lives (Schiro 5-6).

The emphasis for *Godly Play* is on relationship with God and developing faith. This is accomplished by the use of story and discovery, which limits the transmission of barriers to participants. *Godly Play* also utilizes a different structure, as the class leader is no longer called the teacher, but the storyteller. This recognizes them as a facilitator, but does not exclude them from learning and experiencing when the class explores three dimensional models and materials.

Godly Play begins with greeting each member during a gathering time and forming a circle. The circle symbolizes that everyone is valued and equal. Each person's name is said as they enter the room which establishes belonging to the Church community. After a prayer, the group begins to experience God through story. The story utilizes three dimensional models and materials like wood figurines and sand for a desert. "I wonder" questions are used to help the group engage their imagination and discover the story for themselves. Following the story, the group responds to God's word in a way they feel called.¹⁵ The response could be an art project, playing with other story materials, journaling, or any other unique way the participants think of. This time is designed to promote engagement and processing of the story in a personal and tangible way. Lastly, the group partakes in a love feast. This feast is an expression of communion. While not the sacrament, it is a time through which each person can experience God's love and presence in one another.

The discovery model in *Godly Play* comes with its own limitations. The participants could become confused if there is no guidance of the theological implications of the stories. Leaders skilled in recognizing the underlying implications and questions asked by the group

¹⁵ This response time is also called "work".

can mitigate this challenge. However, in a church this type of leader is not always readily available. In a discovery model many of the conclusions and ideas that come out may not be theologically sound. This is a natural part of trial and error. One example would be to have people take the story of Job and come up with their own conclusions that God is mean or evil. The storyteller and leaders need to be able to guide participants to see the problem with an incorrect conclusions or assertions without discouraging the exploration and learning processes.

Another limitation of *Godly Play* is in the implementation. The liturgical aspect should become a celebration like the Mass we examined earlier. The danger is if the liturgy in *Godly Play* replaces the church worship service or Mass, then it breaks the belonging and communion that the group has in the larger church body.

The response time following God's word is a unique way that allows for participants to become co-creators and discern God's call. The articulation of this time can present both benefits and challenges. The benefit for calling our response to God "work," is that the group connects worship to work. This is not commonly done in our culture and can make our faith feel separate from the world. The negative is possibly eliminating the concept of rest and waiting by equating what we do on a Sunday with a time of work. This could lead to change the

meaning Sabbath and threaten the principle of vulnerability as we deny our limitations and need for rest. This denial can ultimately lead to us denying our need for God.

The largest failure in Godly Play is, as seen in *Grow*, the lack of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is included in many more lessons with *Godly Play*, but by following the Church calendar the group can go long periods without mentioning Jesus or the Holy Spirit. This became clear in *Godly Play* training as the storyteller shared the parable of good shepherd, John 10:1-21. The lesson did not help people draw the conclusion that Jesus was the good shepherd. Storytellers are instructed during the wondering time to accept all answers. "The storyteller listens respectfully to every answer...never calls one answer good or another answer wrong. She simply listens and accepts the responses" (Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play* 16). The good shepherd could have been anything even by the end of the lesson as Jesus was never mentioned. This lesson demonstrated the danger with abstract topics, like the Holy Spirit, even among a group of adults. The language the leaders used for prayers made this worse by not giving participants the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but a prayer formula that can lead to modalism. Without this language imbedded in

each lesson then participants miss out on Jesus, God the Father, or the Holy Spirit for long stretches of the year.

Overall *Godly Play* brings a unique and different perspective to faith formation. Even so, it too can use the insights from the L'Arche community to better transform the lives of those it serves.

Adaptations

It is evident by examining both *Godly Play* and *Grow, Serve, Proclaim!* that the principles at the core of L'Arche are not fully represented. While both incorporate belonging by creating a safe space and a community for participants, there are many other principles that could be integrated. In this section we will examine the five principles that are not included and see small tangible ways that we can better incorporate the principles into the curricula that may ultimately bring about transformation in the life of the participants and congregation.

This transformation begins by encompassing vulnerability into the curricula. In L'Arche, Vanier modeled vulnerability by recognizing his own weakness and limitations. Church teachers and leaders must be encouraged to recognize and own their vulnerability and limitations. This cannot be done in a model that sees knowledge as one way communication. Leaders and teachers role must change to become co-

learners with the class. This change would break the illusion that only the strong lead the weak and not visa-versa. The vulnerable children in a class have great lessons and gifts that are essential for all to be able to grow in inner freedom and become who God created them to be. *Godly Play's* "I wonder" questions move to revelation through and for all persons. One classic way to emphasize vulnerability, limitations, and personhood is the practice of Sabbath. If the faith formation class is held on Sunday, then it will be important to have the curriculum vary from the traditional school and work practices.¹⁶

The other crucial piece of vulnerability that must be adapted is what it means to be a person. This begins by recognizing our limitations and weaknesses. A leader can model this by becoming a co-learner or dealing with fears and personal barriers. Essentially, the leader can model vulnerability by being authentic and participating in the material beyond just presenting it. To understand and incorporate vulnerability and personhood, we must have a sound understanding of who God is.

Both curricula have a danger of losing a grasp on God as triune. Without the Holy Spirit, the principles and our faith weaken. One simple way of changing the curriculum to incorporate the Holy Spirit and

¹⁶ For further insight into Sabbath and ways to practice it, I recommend reading Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*.

Jesus is to have our prayer be Trinitarian in nature. This can be done simply by praying in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Some groups try to be more inclusive and use "creator, redeemer, sustainer," but this can lead to a heresy known as modalism. Inclusive language is wonderful and ought to be used, but in this case we are undermining the principle of communion by teaching students to regard the three persons of the Trinity as functions or roles of a unitary Divine Being. This inadvertently limits God and isolates each of the persons into a singular role. Isolation of the persons of the Trinity can create a hierarchy and fundamentally change how we understand communion. The small change in our prayers can help to bring the whole Trinity into any lesson. Other simple ways to bring the Spirit into our lessons is to point to quiet, free, or response times as Spirit-led times. This means that our worshipful response is accomplished by ourselves but *with* the Spirit. How we incorporate communion can also help bring the Spirit and Jesus more fully into each lesson.

Vulnerability must be established before communion is addressed. Attempting to have communion with God and others without recognizing our humanity can lead to a distortion of

ion.¹⁷ Once we accept our vulnerability, communion can be experienced. The feast in *Godly Play* is a great way to accomplish this. Another way to incorporate communion is to explore questions such as those from Wesleyan Class Meetings. The ideal question would be to ask everyone where they have experienced or seen God that week. This question brings many principles together. Being open-ended allows for vulnerability as we share laments or joys with one another. The leader would also participate in answering the question, and would experience God through other's answers. This addresses the role issues mentioned before. It establishes belonging by finding our value in God and commonality in one another. Finally, this question could bring communion and peace as we experience God's presence in one another and see how we are all united in God throughout the week.

By bringing a Wesleyan question and a love feast each week, we would begin to experience God's joy and celebration. The biggest thing holding back most curricula from celebration is not recognizing the Holy Spirit. We celebrate God's joy and love through the power and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A small way to encourage true celebration and combat the world's connotation of celebration would be to recognize one another's gifts and God's presence, which is where the Wes-

¹⁷ One great discussion on our limitation and creatureliness is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Creation and Fall*, 113-115.

leyan question can help. Another countercultural adaption could be to change class birthday celebration to take time to share how each person has experienced God through the birthday person in the last year. This change would affirm the gift that they are to the group and the world.

Peace, although present in both curriculums, tended towards a passive tolerance rather than an active grace. Having a tolerant culture and people get along is not true peace. There is and will be tension within the class between adults, children, and one another. Forgiveness must be implemented in all curricula. The Catholic Mass has two places that intentionally incorporate forgiveness and peace. Before communion, congregations ask for God's forgiveness. The "peace" is also passed among the congregation. Both curricula can incorporate these elements into their gatherings. The passing of the peace could be added for *Grow* after musical worship or as a greeting, where *Godly Play* can incorporate it into the beginning of the love feast.

These adaptations applied to any curriculum can help to transform our faith formation to better equip churches to pass on the Christian faith and create disciples. Each principle will help to ensure that we incorporate the revelation of God through the witness and sign of L'Arche into our community. There are many other creative and pro-

ductive ways that each principle can be incorporated each church context to transform faith formation.¹⁸

Conclusion

By focusing on the principles that lay at the foundation of L'Arche we have a way to evaluate faith formation curricula. Attendance to these six principles – belonging, vulnerability, peace, spirituality, communion and celebration – makes for a fuller and more meaningful experience for young disciples. While this has been immensely helpful to ensure that we are imparting the faith we intend, the benefits of adapting curricula is only just the tip of the iceberg. These principles can transform not only our curricula to be faithful to the God's word, but our faith and the entire Church. Snippets of the implications have been seen throughout this work when examples of the Church living the principle faithfully or failing to do so were used. We can imagine the possibilities of how these principles might change our wor-

¹⁸ One example of other creative applications: one Northwest church was contemplating the six principles in a class I led. The group focused in on how they could transform their fellowship hour. The following Sunday was Easter and it had been suggested to have an Easter egg hunt during the service. Using the principles we noted how great it would be to show our vulnerability and allow for the kids to not only receive by give love too. To do this the group came up with the idea to have the children find the eggs but then to take them to the fellowship hall and fill the eggs with notes of encouragement for the rest of the congregation. Then following the service the children would get to lead the adults on an Easter egg hunt. This activity was able to incorporate vulnerability, communion, and celebration to transform a churches fellowship hour and Easter celebration.

ship, meetings, programs, membership processes, evangelism, mission work, or any area of church or parachurch ministry. While beyond our present scope, this could be a fruitful endeavor for churches and leaders to pursue. This is why Jean Vanier witnesses to the sign of God's love and Kingdom present with and in persons with cognitive disabilities in L'Arche.

Our two widely adopted curricula, *Grow* and *Godly Play*, served as an important opportunity to apply the six principles of L'Arche. Through the analysis we saw strengths that each one had, but ways that we could improve them. Small tangible adjustments allowed for us to transform the curriculum to include the revelations gleaned from L'Arche. As a result, we have a more dynamic curricula that learns from Jesus revealed through persons with cognitive disabilities. These small but important changes show the transformative power of our six principles from L'Arche.

With these six principles in hand, and an example of how to apply them and transform curricula, we can move forward to use the lessons taught by L'Arche to transform our own faith formation. Doing so will help us to form disciples better equipped to give and receive the love of God. They will know at their core that they belong to God and humanity. These disciples will be empowered to be more vulnerable.

They will have peace through accepting their limitations and offering and receiving forgiveness. The Spirit will dwell within them, sanctifying them and helping them to love as God loves. This will bring them into true communion with God and one another that is worth celebrating. This transformation is what is possible by recognizing the witness of L'Arche through Jean Vanier's writings.

As Vanier explains, L'Arche is a sign for the church and the world, not the solution. These principles are not the solution, but another avenue to witness God's grace and love. This is what the least of these, persons with cognitive disabilities, have taught. We as a church must now recognize the sign and respond accordingly.

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