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# **Use of the L'Arche Philosophy in Assisting People with Disabilities to Overcome Social Barriers**

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| AND    | Australian Network on Disability                             |
| BBC    | British Broadcasting Corporation                             |
| CRPD   | <i>Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities</i> |
| CRS    | Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service                          |
| DDA    | <i>Disability Discrimination Act of 1992</i>                 |
| DPI    | Disabled Peoples' International                              |
| DSA    | <i>Disability Services Act of 1986</i>                       |
| IYDP   | International Year of Disabled Persons                       |
| NDIS   | National Disability Insurance Scheme                         |
| NIV    | New International Version (of the Bible)                     |
| NLT    | New Living Translation (of the Bible)                        |
| PWDA   | People with Disability Australia                             |
| UK     | United Kingdom   |
| UN     | United Nations   |
| US/USA | United States/United States of America                       |
| WHO    | World Health Organization                                    |

## SUMMARY

The Australian government has adopted the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to develop more accessible and inclusive policies for people with disabilities. However, many people with disabilities continue to suffer social exclusion and face multiple barriers to community inclusion. This study uses the example of L'Arche (the Ark) communities to determine how Christian values and practices might address the plight of people with disabilities through the development of social groups. Social isolation severely affects people with disabilities, and the implementation of L'Arche principles might help to create inclusive communities for them.

This study explores the social barriers to establishing L'Arche communities based on Christian faith principles. In undertaking the study, I conducted a review of historical and biblical literature and deployed an interpretative social science approach. To provide its terminological framework, the study defines the terms 'disability', 'persons with disabilities', 'suffering' and 'barriers'. This methodological procedure was necessitated by shifts in the study of disability and its impact on individuals and communities. Historically, an individual with disabilities was viewed as ill and in need of medical assistance. This view has been displaced by a model in which people with disabilities are perceived as appropriate recipients of community and relational support. This theoretical shift lacks a theological justification and biblical grounding. This study therefore provides a theological perspective for understanding the L'Arche community and its Christian foundations.

This study emphasises the key values underlying the theory, method and practice of L'Arche communities. These values comprise the following: the insistence that all persons are valuable; an anti-hierarchical "ladder" perspective; the promotion of

communion and social inclusion; and the encouragement of friendship. Moreover, the study provides a first-hand narrative to show how these values are lived daily in L'Arche communities. This study proposes these values as the basis for overcoming the barriers to adapting the L'Arche philosophy. The study confirms the L'Arche community's capacity to unify itself and to address the role played by its residents and their lives through unifying intentional communities and dealing with the challenges and barriers faced by residents in their lives.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed..... *Hong Suk Lee* .....

Date..... *24 September 2021* .....



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I wish to thank each person reading this thesis and wish supporters encouragement and blessings in the name of Jesus Christ. I thank the Lord God overall, stating to Him that all the glory is Yours.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Australian government has adopted the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)<sup>1</sup> to develop policies that are more accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> With these changes, via the NDIS, people with disabilities can make choices and take control of their lives. Nevertheless, many people with disabilities, both physical and intellectual, continue to suffer from and to face multiple barriers to becoming fully included members of society. The L'Arche philosophy focuses on Christian principles to help people live abundant lives despite their disabilities.<sup>3</sup> This philosophy provides valuable insight into how persons with disabilities can overcome social barriers and experience fuller social inclusion in a supportive and diverse community. This study therefore focuses on the practices and techniques that L'Arche communities have put in place for residents with intellectual disabilities who live in the community. It is imperative that the social isolation faced by these individuals is understood in order to find usable practices that can help other communities to implement L'Arche principles, enabling individuals with disabilities to live full and socially inclusive lives.

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<sup>1</sup> National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), "What is the NDIS?" accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.ndis.gov.au/understanding/how-ndis-works>.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'people with disability' is used by United Nations' (UN) documents on disability. The reason is that people with disabilities also have the rights to claim their rights and to make decisions in their lives as members of society. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*, New York NY, United Nations General Assembly, 2008, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Faith in Focus, "What I learned from living at Jean Vanier's L'Arche," YouTube video, 3:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTRTY314Eik>.

L'Arche was developed to create communities that celebrate life while living within "its own cultural and spiritual expression of community ... [to] ... value and celebrate diversity."<sup>4</sup> After Jean Vanier befriended two men with disabilities, Philippe and Raphaël, he established the first L'Arche community in Trosly, France, in 1964.<sup>5</sup> Six years later, Vanier opened a community in Richmond, Canada, in response to the need for more "communities of belonging".<sup>6</sup> Also in 1970, a new community was established in Bangalore, India, that welcomed Hindus and Christians, opening up the idea that other faiths are necessary for a truly diverse community.<sup>7</sup> Over the next 50 years, L'Arche communities have spread around the world to more than 38 countries.

Vanier saw that value could come when people with disabilities and those without disabilities live together and share their daily lives in mutually beneficial relationships. This insight led to the community structure of "core members" (people with disabilities) being taken care of by assistants (people without disabilities).<sup>8</sup> This belief came to be the founding identity of L'Arche communities which is as follows: sharing in communities that are part of an international organisation, establishing mutual relationships and trust in God, and celebrating everyone's unique value while recognising our need for one another.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> L'Arche International, "What We Do," L'Arche.org, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.larche.org/en/what-we-do>.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine E. McDonald and Christopher B. Keys, "L'Arche: The successes of community, the challenges of empowerment in a faith-centered setting," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 9, no. 4 (2005), 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> L'Arche International, "The Story of L'Arche," L'Arche.org, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.larche.org/en/timeline>.

<sup>7</sup> L'Arche International, "The Story of L'Arche."

<sup>8</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012): 22.

<sup>9</sup> L'Arche International, "Identity and Mission," L'Arche.org, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.larche.org/en/identity-and-mission>.

The L'Arche mission is to: make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, revealed through mutually transforming relationships; foster an environment in the community that responds to the changing needs of our members, while being faithful to the core values of our founding story; and, by engaging in our diverse cultures, working together toward a more human society.<sup>10</sup>

This study found in its investigation into L'Arche principles that suffering serves as a starting point for questioning why people with disabilities face barriers in their social lives. Some may question why is it that, if God is an all powerful and all loving, He allows suffering in this world, particularly as we study how people may suffer through having a disability. This study explores the social difficulties faced by people with intellectual disabilities in Australia and attempts to understand the key elements of the L'Arche community that can be replicated in other programs. For instance, the Australian government released a report called "Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and Their Families in Australia<sup>11</sup>" to provide valuable data, perspectives and details related to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, the current study explores the L'Arche philosophy as the basis for a new community model for understanding young adults living with disabilities. This philosophy encompasses the theological perspectives for understanding and addressing the needs of young adults with intellectual disabilities. In doing so, the study applies the ideas and recommendations of Jean Vanier for a practical theologically based method for these Christian communities.

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<sup>10</sup> L'Arche International, "Identity and Mission."

<sup>11</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia. National Disability Strategy Consultation Report," 2009.

Jean Vanier's writings and ideas are at the heart of the L'Arche community philosophy. Vanier was recently accused of sexual misconduct with six women between 1970 and 2005. A report claimed that "sexual relations were instigated by Vanier, usually in the context of giving spiritual guidance".<sup>12</sup> All women involved in these alleged relationships were non-disabled adults; however, Vanier still used a position of confidence and power to manipulate others. My interest in undertaking this research stems from the evidence-based outcomes of L'Arche communities and the increasing number of studies that are using objective metrics.<sup>13</sup> While Vanier's personal life causes one to question his morality and life choices, the ideas he presents in his writings ultimately led to the formulation of the L'Arche community as a solution to assist young people with disabilities.<sup>14</sup> Hence, his writings are crucial to understanding the underlying philosophy of L'Arche communities. Consequently, the evidence-based outcomes of the use of Vanier's writings to establish such a successful community are the foundation of this study.

This investigation begins by identifying the different forms and particularities of the marginalisation of people with disabilities. People with disabilities may view their circumstances and sufferings as God's fault or evidence that God does not exist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "L'Arche founder Jean Vanier sexually abused women – internal report," Accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51596516>.

<sup>13</sup> David Li prepared a program evaluation plan in 2018 for a L'Arche community in Chicago to document measurable indicators that will show the outcomes for community residents. His findings had not yet been published at the time the current thesis was written.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (2nd rev. ed.) (New York, NY, Paulist Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Disability is "the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual with a health condition and that individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)." World Health Organisation (WHO), "Understanding Disability. World Report on Disability," Geneva, 2011, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK304082/#ch1.s1>.

However, the L'Arche perspective explores how various forms of life ultimately come under God's control and may flourish. The current study seeks to understand the marginalisation of people with disabilities and how L'Arche communities propose to overcome these barriers. Yet the prior questions raised by many people persist. Many ask: why does the Almighty God allow people to do evil? Why should people suffer? Why is it that some people suffer while others do not? Where is God when we suffer?

The theology of the L'Arche community encourages us to explore these questions by positing the nature of God's will and plans. Vanier's insights and writings offer a useful approach that helps one to understand the connection between God's will and personal pain and suffering.<sup>16</sup>

## **1.2 Research Questions and Purpose of the Research**

### **1.2.1 Primary research question**

What do the foundational texts of L'Arche reveal about the theological ways of thinking about humanity, friendship and mutuality?

### **1.2.2 Subsidiary questions**

- How is disability understood in secular and Christian contexts?
- What barriers confront people with disabilities in secular and Christian contexts?
- What kind of community provides an ideal lifestyle for people with disabilities who face barriers to achieving the best outcomes?

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body* (Homebush, NSW, St Paul, 1988).

### **1.2.3 Purpose of the research**

This research examines the secular perspective of the challenges faced by young people with intellectual disabilities and their barriers to social inclusion. In so doing, it seeks reasons for adopting the Christian approach recommended by the L'Arche philosophy. I also suggest how other Christian communities can implement the L'Arche philosophy and values to address the barriers faced by young people with disabilities to finding social fulfilment and overcoming their social hurdles. Furthermore, this research analyses L'Arche communities and their approach as an understanding, a model and a praxis appropriate for the broader Christian community. People with disabilities are entitled to experience salvation through a faithful life and enjoying human dignity and freedom. Examining the L'Arche approach reveals a philosophy and set of values for other Christian communities that can change the lives of people with disabilities and those who care for and live with them.

### **1.3 Methodology**

This study explores the social barriers faced by adults with intellectual disabilities and suggests a community environment that will improve their lives. The study also explores the social barriers to establishing this ideal community where these adults can live their faith. In developing the study's methodology, the researcher applies an interpretative social science approach and conducts a historical and biblical literature review. Due to their marginality, people with disabilities in religious communities have generally not been adequately researched by academia. Given this exclusion, an interpretative research method must be initiated in the current study as a basis for the construction of theory. "Interpretive or hermeneutic philosophy holds that the study of human behavior—and

thus all social sciences—ought to be historical, employing narratives as explanations.”<sup>17</sup> Disability research has often neglected narratives and case studies that could provide a better understanding of the social aspects of disability for persons with disabilities and those who interact with them.

This lack of information necessitates research before the construction or positivist imposition of a theory regarding the problem. It is thus possible to see through qualitative and interpretative inquiry what patterns emerge from the data collected. This research sheds new light on how adults with disabilities have lived; the injustices they have faced; and the solutions proposed by various religious communities. This method allows the emergence of various perspectives and knowledge concerning the experiences of people with disabilities.

Previous qualitative research is first reviewed to inform the interpretative framework of the study and to better understand the suffering of people with disabilities. I collect data from various writings of the L’Arche philosophy, presenting the data in context with a first-person narrative. From this interpretation, researchers can understand the individual’s marginality as a social phenomenon that might be addressed through the development of relationships with individuals with similar afflictions in an appropriate community. After analysing the historical data, a social science approach is used to understand how a Christian community, such as L’Arche, can help people with disabilities to overcome social inclusion barriers, thus easing their suffering. This research will help to build the reader’s comprehension of the impact of Christian theology on the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 9.



## 1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The many articles, books and dissertations examined in the literature review have explored the lives of people with disabilities and put forward proposals for improvements to their support. The current research focuses on rebuilding our communities for people with disabilities to become communities where they should be welcomed and surrounded with inclusive social groups. I personally have viewed depression, brokenness and hopelessness as the consequences of the marginalisation of people with disabilities. Thus, this study aims to identify social barriers to healthy, fulfilling lives for people with disabilities, using the previously cited Australian government report "Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and Their Families in Australia" and the L'Arche philosophy.

Many books and resources have been written about suffering and why God allows suffering to exist. The L'Arche philosophy can provide a solid foundation on which to build mutually beneficial relationships in a community designed to break down social barriers. In these communities, many individuals (i.e., community members, support workers and volunteers) work together to create an inclusive group of which all members feel that they are a part. One limitation of focusing on Vanier's writings is that he does not describe social inclusion opportunities in terms of decision-making strategies or social participation. However, the L'Arche staff have provided participants with opportunities to support meaningful daily activities, such as going to the gym, having meals, praying together and other things that people do in communities. The current research does not provide recommendations for opportunities through which connections can be made for social participation nor for ways in which people with disabilities can more actively participate in the decision-making processes and social

participation choices in their lives. These opportunities and ways have already been established and supported by the L'Arche community.

## 1.5 Definition of Key Terms

### 1.5.1 Disability

A disability is more than a health problem. The term 'disability' is often defined as

the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors).<sup>18</sup>

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the term 'disability' as a complex phenomenon that reflects an interaction between the characteristics of an individual's body condition and his/her surrounding society. Moreover, the United Nation's (UN) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), Article 1 reveals that "[p]ersons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."<sup>19</sup> Intellectual disability is the focus of the current study, which seeks to interpret the social implications for people with this type of disability. Therefore, my study's focus excludes physical disability.

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<sup>18</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), "Understanding Disability. World Report on Disability," 2011, Accessed September 26, 2019: 4.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*, 2008, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

### 1.5.2 Intellectual disability

People with intellectual disabilities have difficulties in cognitive functioning and in superordinate skill domains such as conceptual, social and practical areas of living.

The term 'intellectual disabilities' refers to neurodevelopmental disorders that begin at an early age, as classified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) (DSM-5).<sup>20</sup> The DSM-5 is a psychological diagnostic manual that specifies criteria for a plethora of psychological diseases and disorders. For an individual to be diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, he/she must meet each of the following criteria:<sup>21</sup>

- Deficits in intellectual functioning are identified by clinical evaluation and individualised standard IQ testing. Intellectual functioning includes "reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience";
- Deficits in developmental and socio-cultural standards are the areas required for a diagnosis of intellectual disability. When the individual's adaptive functioning significantly hampers the conduct of his/her independence and ability to take up his/her social responsibility; and
- If evaluation begins to show these deficits at an early age, this can lead to a diagnosis of intellectual disabilities.

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<sup>20</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), 2013, Accessed March 7, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Boat and Joel Wu, "Mental disorders and disabilities among low-income children," NCBI.gov, 2015, Accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK332882/>.

Hence, the term 'intellectual disabilities' focuses on irregular or abnormal cognitive functions and social behaviours. As this definition highlights internal cognitive functions as well as external social behaviour, it is imperative that the current study also includes how these areas are addressed through the L'Arche philosophy.

Youth with intellectual disabilities and their families need to consider transitional life stages, such as post-secondary education or employment, when seeking to achieve independence in their lives. However, the opportunities for these activities are often limited for people with intellectual disabilities. Youth with intellectual disabilities have experienced negative attitudes and discrimination within society when deciding to take the next step owing to difficulty in identifying and choosing important life options. Thus, younger individuals with intellectual disabilities may have many challenges and barriers to social participation, including further education and employment. They can be reluctant to choose the available life paths.

### **1.5.3 Definition of suffering**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines suffering as the "physical or mental pain that a person or animal is feeling".<sup>22</sup> According to this definition of suffering, those with a physical and/or mental disability can experience suffering in their lives in the form of pain. For this study's purposes, suffering is described in relation to feelings of pain and rejection stemming from social exclusion. People with disabilities can experience physical or mental pain when they cannot do meaningful and regular daily activities or cannot separate themselves from others.

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<sup>22</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed March 11, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/suffering>.

### 1.5.4 Definition of barriers

A study by Abbott and McConkey highlights the barriers to social exclusion that people with disabilities may face.<sup>23</sup> Their study conducted focus groups with 68 individuals with intellectual disabilities living in Ireland. The researchers found four themes in the pattern of social barriers encountered by these individuals. These themes comprised social exclusion related to: personal abilities and skills; staff and management; life in the community; and experience at home. Abbot and McConkey expanded upon the details of their subjects' knowledge, activity, and individual and social experience to create a paradigmatic scheme. Figure 1 shows the themes extrapolated by Abbott and McConkey into a broader paradigm, based on further analysis of their subjects' lives.

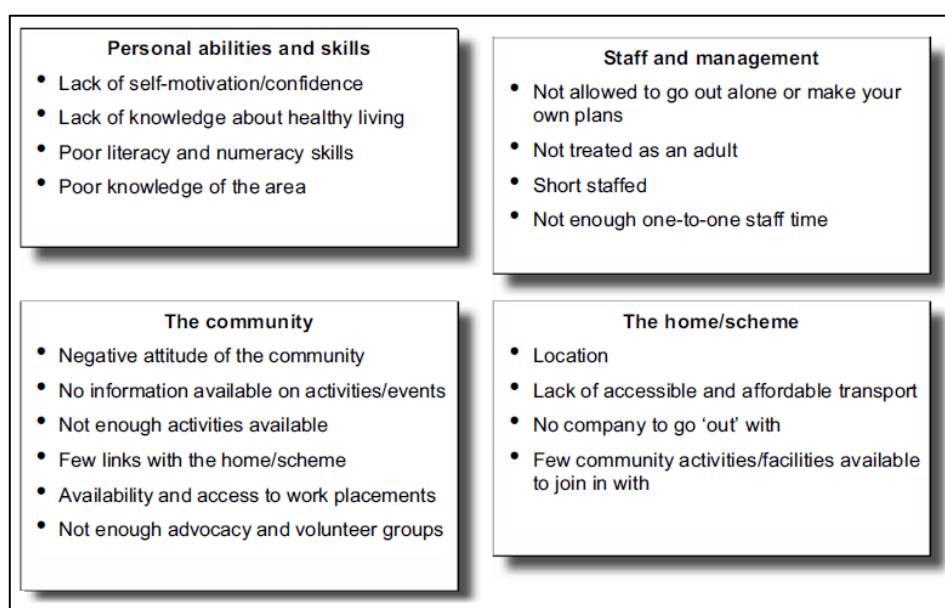


Figure 1.1. Perceived barriers to social inclusion<sup>24</sup>  
(data adapted from Abbott and McConkey, 2006: 281)

<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Abbott and Roy McConkey, "The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities," *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 10, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Abbott and McConkey, 281.

These four themes were also considered in the current study. However, theoretical frameworks were added to the list of barriers as theological theories themselves can be a barrier for people with intellectual disabilities. As the L'Arche philosophy focuses on helping people with intellectual disabilities from a Christian perspective, it is imperative to understand how theological ideas themselves can act as barriers to social inclusion.

## **1.6 Structural Overview**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, provides the statement of the problem, the purpose of the research, the methodology, the scope and limitations, and definitions of the key terms. Chapter 2 compares previous research on barriers faced by people with disabilities from a secular perspective and from biblical and theological perspectives. Chapter 3 consists of a contextual review that explores the necessity of understanding disability and shifting the models from a social perspective to a theologically defined perspective. Chapter 4 discusses the L'Arche philosophy to explore the values of its Christian communities and how they create life opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The chapter provides insights and blueprints for the Christian community in addressing the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 5) answers the primary research question and highlights the general theological significance of the L'Arche philosophy and practice to the Christian community.

## CHAPTER 2: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

It is essential to understand the extent of previous research undertaken to demonstrate what is known about this topic.<sup>25</sup> For the current study, the previous literature related to the development of L'Arche communities and to social barriers for people with intellectual disabilities is used to provide the background. This review was derived from publications and reports of organisations (i.e., the UN and the WHO), Australian government reports and various other writings. Other writings include journal articles, books and the peer-reviewed literature.

Disease, injury and physical limitations are barriers that can arise from disability. Attitudes about people with disabilities are more positive among students and disabled-services support staff but more negative among the general population.<sup>26</sup> In 2018, the *Survey of Community Attitudes toward People with Disability* found that only a minority of people had an exclusionary attitude toward people with disabilities.<sup>27</sup> However, most non-disabled respondents reported that they did not know how to interact with people with disabilities and were uncomfortable asking them what kind of support they needed. People without disabilities tend to view disability as unhappiness or personal misfortune.<sup>28</sup> Disability has come to be seen as an internal problem within a person's body requiring medical treatment.<sup>29</sup> However, sociologists study disability from an

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<sup>25</sup> Gary Thomas, *How to do Your Research Project* (London: Sage, 2017): 28.

<sup>26</sup> Marie Yazbeck, Keith McVilly, and Trevor R. Parmenter, "Attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities: An Australian perspective," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004): 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Survey of Community Attitudes toward People with Disabilities*, Accessed February 21, 2021, [https://www.statedisabilityplan.vic.gov.au/application/files/5415/7526/0530/University\\_of\\_Melbourne\\_Community\\_Attitudes\\_Final\\_Report\\_19.06.19\\_-\\_PDF.PDF](https://www.statedisabilityplan.vic.gov.au/application/files/5415/7526/0530/University_of_Melbourne_Community_Attitudes_Final_Report_19.06.19_-_PDF.PDF).

<sup>28</sup> *Survey of Community Attitudes toward People with Disabilities*: 108.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Goering, "Rethinking disability: the social model of disability and chronic disease," *Current Review of Musculoskeletal Medicine* 8, no. 2 (2015): 134.

environmental and relational approach, leading the way to the social model of disability whereby disability is viewed from both an internal individual perspective and an environmental perspective. From a socio-political perspective, people with disabilities are considered a minority social group.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, many articles, books and other resources have found various ways in which people with disabilities can experience joyful lives and minimise their physical or mental suffering. Meanwhile, various organisations, communities and governments have strived to improve the services and support for people with disabilities while researching the barriers that these individuals may experience. Gaining an understanding of the previous research shows how disability has been conceptualised in interdisciplinary fields.

## **2.1 Paradigm Shifts – to a Theological Perspective**

Brock and Swinton<sup>31</sup>, in exploring multiple theologians and disabilities, show that, traditionally, the concept of disability has not been adequately addressed from the theological perspective. Their book, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, presents contributions from multiple authors, laying a foundation for how theologians need to expand discussions of disability and what it means for Christians. They highlight that no “serious or systematic inquiry” into disability has been conducted from a theological perspective and introduce writing from current authors to contribute to the discussion from this perspective.

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<sup>30</sup> Natalie Cherkas, “Reducing Barriers and Increasing Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities: A Comparative Case Study of Two Post-Conflict Nations, Cambodia and Sierra Leone,” (PhD diss., The University of Birmingham, 2004): 29.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Brock and John Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012): 4.



Swinton points out the deep theological significance demonstrated by Dr Stanley Hauerwas in his work with people with intellectual disabilities. Dr Hauerwas explores and discusses the theology of disability and how disability is a social construction. When society establishes acceptable norms and defines people with disabilities as undesirable or less than desirable, people begin to treat this as an indisputable truth.<sup>32</sup> As the sociologist W. I. Thomas warns, "if men define situations as real, they become real in their consequences."<sup>33</sup> Hence, as Hauerwas describes from his experiences, when people with disabilities are treated poorly or as being incapable of the same thoughts and feelings of those without disabilities, those with disabilities also begin to believe these attitudes, and this emerges as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. This example highlights the very nature of how many aspects of society are socially constructed through established and perpetuated cultural norms.

Eiesland explores the themes of the disability-rights movement, which identified people with disabilities as a socially disadvantaged group, thereby shining a light on the historical context of how people with disabilities had endured poor and discriminatory treatment.<sup>34</sup> Eiesland points out that Christians should encounter a disabled God to experience a new wholeness and justice model. This work allowed people to change how they saw God and the Eucharist and indemnifies the church as responsible for stepping up, fighting the injustice of discrimination, and being an example to the world for how people with disabilities should be treated. Historical attitudes of the church have fed these discriminatory attitudes by justifying them through scripture. For example,

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<sup>32</sup> Swinton, "The Importance of Being a Creature," In *Critical Reflections of Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*. 512-545 (Binghamton, New York, NY: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004): 533.

<sup>33</sup> W. I. Thomas, *The Unadjusted Girl* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1923): 41.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994).

Koblitz<sup>35</sup> points out that, traditionally, churches viewed the disabled poorly by referring to Leviticus:

no one who has a defect qualifies, whether he is blind, lame, disfigured, deformed, or has a broken foot or arm, or is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or has a defective eye, or skin sores or scabs or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron who has a defect may approach the altar to present special gifts to the Lord.<sup>36</sup>

Pointing out the Old Testament denial of the disabled approaching the altar allowed prejudicial attitudes against people with disabilities to grow in the church.

In his 2011 book, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Yong challenges the church to become more inclusive faith communities for people with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> He points out that many of the attitudes about people with disabilities stem from historical biblical interpretations wherein disability and disease were seen as an outward expression of sin. Moreover, Yong emphasises that these historical interpretations have created discriminatory attitudes within the church and relegated the disabled to being marginalised community members. Moving forward as a more accommodating church means questioning how Christians have traditionally viewed God.

Williams ponders a Mantegna (1465) painting of Jesus being presented at the temple and notes that the appearance of Jesus resembles that of a child with Down Syndrome.<sup>38</sup> He then poses the question that if Jesus was born with a learning disability, could he have fulfilled the will of God? Furthermore, what would it mean to a Christian

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel C. Koblitz, "Theology and disability: Reexamining scripture as it applies to stuttering," *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability* 5, no. 5 (Spring/Summer 2016): 36.

<sup>36</sup> Leviticus 21: 18-21 (New Living Translation [NLT]).

<sup>37</sup> Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Martin Lloyd Williams, *Beauty and Brokenness: Compassion and the Kingdom of God* (London: SPCK, 2007).

community to worship a disabled God? He uses these questions to reflect the humanity of God and to point out that people with disabilities are also members of this community we call humanity. Hence, when confronted with people with disabilities, we should consider that humanity reminds us to use a Godly perspective, treating them with the love and compassion demonstrated by God. We can demonstrate this love by living in community with people with disabilities.

Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn illustrate the theological meaning of disability and reflect on deep insights into the mystery of Trinity God as a community.<sup>39</sup> If the Almighty, All-Knowing and All-Powerful God lives in community with others, does that not speak to how human beings are also meant to live? Disability grants special privileges wherein all the love and concern of Jesus can be revealed to the world and invites others to come into a community of grace and love. The opportunity to live in community with people of varying abilities, in a way, reflects heaven on Earth and the nature of how God intended us to live in harmony with one another. For it says in 1 Corinthians,

our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies.<sup>40</sup>

Living in community is only the beginning of understanding God's intention in human relationships, as we must also understand how society views those with disabilities. In *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, Reinders emphasises how people with intellectual disabilities need their dignity and personal freedom.<sup>41</sup> Rather than excluding

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<sup>39</sup> Tataryn Myroslaw and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 43-44 (NLT).

<sup>41</sup> Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

people with intellectual disabilities from everyday social life and keeping them hidden, Reinders argues that a paradigm shift is necessary. For people with intellectual disabilities to experience dignity and personal freedom, we must begin to look at disability differently from a philosophical-theological perspective.

Haack's research, presented in "Autism, the Church and the Image of God", points out that despite the extensive research regarding disability, not enough research has been conducted for it to be socially and theologically relevant.<sup>42</sup> Researchers have not integrated a Christ-centred perspective into any known analysis of the topic. Hence, as L'Arche and other Christian communities serve to assist people with intellectual disabilities, evidence-based outcomes themselves need academic support and empirical evidence to show the connection between these approaches and their outcomes.

As established by these academic authors in their books, a theological framework is necessary. A framework can also help us to understand how the L'Arche philosophy leads to personal changes. Information from governments and organisations that work with people with disabilities can also supplement these academic sources by providing a more general understanding of the difficulties that people with disabilities can encounter.

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<sup>42</sup> Brian Haack, "Autism, the Church, and the Image of God: A Social Distance Study," (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017).

## 2.2 Organisational and Governmental Reports

Given the gap in the previous research on the experiences of people with disabilities, this study has also included publications and reports by the UN (2006), the WHO (2011) and the Australian government (2012) to provide a more general understanding of the difficulties experienced by people with disabilities. Since the issuing of the UN's *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) in 2006, more attention has been placed on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people with disabilities.<sup>43</sup> Some of the convention's general principles include: equality of opportunity, full and effective participation in society, non-discrimination and accessibility.<sup>44</sup> The convention is, however, a fairly recent development and has not deeply penetrated how governments and their citizens understand and relate to people with disabilities. In 2011, the UN published its *World Report on Disability* which undertook a more in-depth look at the persisting disability-related inequalities throughout the world.<sup>45</sup> The report identified the following primary barriers for people with disabilities: lack of accessibility to proper health care and to assistance and support, in physical environments (e.g., public transport and buildings), and to education and employment.<sup>46</sup>

In considering the statistics from Australia as a specific case, it is clear that these barriers still permeate society even in developed nations. The Australian Network on Disability found that one in five people has some form of disability, and that the

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<sup>43</sup> United Nations (UN), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol* (CRPD), 2006.

<sup>44</sup> UN, CRPD: 4.

<sup>45</sup> UN, CRPD.

<sup>46</sup> UN, CRPD: 3-6.

likelihood of developing of a disability increases with age, resulting in two out of five people having a disability.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, people with disabilities have lower labour force participation (53.4% instead of 84.1%) and higher unemployment rates (10.3% instead of 4.6%).<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, graduates with disabilities take 61.5% longer to obtain employment than non-disabled graduates. This hardship is further emphasised by the fact that almost half the instances of discrimination against people with disabilities are by employers.

Furthermore, for people with disabilities in Australia, the difficulties of participating in society also extend to spaces and environments outside the workplace. For example, 18.9% of people with disabilities experience discrimination by organisations with which they have interacted<sup>49</sup>, and almost one-third of Australians with a disability aged 15 and older have reported avoiding social situations due to their disability.<sup>50</sup> It is clear that people with disabilities in Australia face discrimination in various social situations which prevent them from being able to fully participate in civil society.

While the UN report and the Australian Network of Disability's research demonstrate many of the material conditions which create barriers for people with disabilities, both reports, relatively speaking, overlook the emotional barriers faced by people with disabilities. In the report "Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia", researchers asked people with disabilities,

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<sup>47</sup> Australian Network on Disability (AND), "Igniting Innovation through Inclusion," 2012, Accessed 11 February, 2021, <https://www.and.org.au/>.

<sup>48</sup> Australian Network on Disability, "Igniting Innovation through Inclusion."

<sup>49</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, "Missing Out: The Business Case for Customer Diversity," Accessed February 20, 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/publications/missing-out-business-case-customer-diversity-2017>.

<sup>50</sup> Australian Network on Disability, "Igniting Innovation through Inclusion."

their families, friends and caregivers to identify the main barriers to their full participation in society. The answers included many similar to those listed in other research reports, such as problems with accessibility to transport, employment, income support, rights, justice and infrastructure.<sup>51</sup> However, the principal barrier, mentioned by most participants, was the lack of "social inclusion and community participation".<sup>52</sup> While the report indicates the grave importance of economic, health and political justice for people with disabilities, it also highlights the need for social environments that are nurturing and that allow people with disabilities to feel a sense of community.

## **2.3 Identified Barriers**

### **2.3.1 Barriers to social inclusion**

Having an understanding of the barriers to social inclusion is crucial to understanding how the L'Arche philosophy addresses and ameliorates these barriers. As stated in the introduction, the six main themes of barriers explored in this study are as follows: theological frameworks, the community, support staff and social programs, education experiences, employment experiences and the home.

#### ***2.3.1.1 Barrier 1: Theological frameworks***

Eiesland warned that three theological themes (sin and disability conflation, virtuous suffering and segregationist charity) create barriers for people with disabilities.<sup>53</sup> The first theological theme is that the cause of disability is sin. Eiesland points out that this theme

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<sup>51</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 2.

<sup>52</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 4.

<sup>53</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*.

conflates disability with sin.<sup>54</sup> The New Testament supports this theme in the following passages:

Some men came carrying a paralysed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So, he said to the paralysed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."<sup>55</sup>

Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."<sup>56</sup>

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in his life."<sup>57</sup>

The first two passages can be interpreted to mean that disability indicates punishment for sinning. People believed that those with disabilities might erase and mar the image of God in humans. Therefore, people with disabilities were presumed to lack faith, and they were mistreated by the community, including having no ecclesiastical visibility or authority. However, in the third passage from John 9:1-3, Jesus says that the disability

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<sup>54</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. 587.

<sup>55</sup> Luke 5:18-26 (New International Version [NIV]).

<sup>56</sup> John 5:14 (NIV).

<sup>57</sup> John 9:1-3 (NIV).



of the blind person is not because he has sinned, but to show God's work through his healing.

Another theological theme perceived for disability is virtuous suffering:<sup>58</sup>

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.<sup>59</sup>

Through this passage, we see that disability can actually be the weakness that allows God's strength to show. Disability is ultimately suffering through which one must persevere to receive pure righteousness—the obedience and virtue in the suffering of divine testing that is praiseworthy for Christian disciples. Thus, people with disabilities are encouraged to accept suffering as a means of purification and spiritual development.

The third theme perceives people with disabilities as cases for charitable giving.<sup>60</sup> Charitable activity, including charity and healing activities for people with disabilities, is essential to provide the opportunity to create social justice while empowering people with disabilities to undertake social, economic and political participation.

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will

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<sup>58</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*: 585.

<sup>59</sup> 2 Corinthians 12: 6-10 (NIV).

<sup>60</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*: 585.

be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.<sup>61</sup>

Jesus encourages us to give to all, including the crippled, the lame and the blind, showing that charitable giving is an attitude and behaviour that Christians should adopt. If we exclude people with disabilities from our charitable giving, this can lead to their social isolation from the community and larger society.

### ***2.3.1.2 Barrier 2: The community***

Social inclusion and community activities can increase an individual's sense of well-being and build social networks and support systems.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, people with disabilities often cannot have meaningful involvement due to a lack of social inclusion and various barriers to participation in any activities. Social isolation is a major issue for people with disabilities. Isolation and exclusion negatively influence personal identity and damage self-worth and self-esteem.<sup>63</sup> Significant concerns are raised regarding social inclusion and social involvement as people with disabilities often report exclusion and negative social attitudes, abuse, marginalisation and prejudice.<sup>64</sup> This means they are treated differently. For example, the WHO's *World Report on Disability* reveals a remarkable difference in access to health care services between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, people with disabilities may experience barriers through

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<sup>61</sup> Luke 14:12-14 (NIV).

<sup>62</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 3.

<sup>63</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), "Disability," 2015, Accessed March 17, 2021, [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4430.0main+features202015#:~:text=Almost%20one%20in%2012%20Australians,%25%20and%20women%20\(8.9%25\).](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4430.0main+features202015#:~:text=Almost%20one%20in%2012%20Australians,%25%20and%20women%20(8.9%25).)

<sup>64</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 3.

<sup>65</sup> WHO, "Understanding Disability. World Report on Disability," 2011. Accessed September 26, 2019: 62.

others' misconceptions and stereotypes which create the negative attitudes and behaviour of individuals and communities.

### ***2.3.1.3 Barrier 3: Support staff and social programs***

People with disabilities and their families, support workers and health professionals need support for their participation in daily and community life.<sup>66</sup> However, not enough services and social support programs are available.<sup>67</sup> Some services are unavailable or infrequent and lacking in quality.<sup>68</sup> If people with disabilities are facing these problems, this means that disability services are not meeting their needs. Additionally, they often require financial support to achieve their goal of having meaningful, independent lives.<sup>69</sup> Despite increasing the level of support with public funding, the current support system for people with disabilities cannot meet their needs to help them achieve their full potential.

The lack of infrastructural support for daily living means that people with disabilities often need to rely on others. The Productivity Commission's report in 2011 demonstrated that the current system was not working for people with disabilities, failing to provide effective long-term support, services, and care and support funding.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was established to provide funding to support a lifelong support scheme. Under this plan, the NDIS offers the resources needed for people with disabilities, depending on their abilities and capacities.

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<sup>66</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 4.

<sup>67</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 4.

<sup>68</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 4.

<sup>69</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 16.

<sup>70</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, "Report on Government Services: 2011," January 2011, Accessed March 17, 2021: 517, <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2011/2011/rogs-2011-volume1.pdf>.

The NDIS provides funding for support and services for those aged 65 years or younger with a disability including intellectual, physical, sensory, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities to improve their life skills and increase their independence over time.<sup>71</sup>

#### ***2.3.1.4 Barrier 4: Education experiences***

The Australian government report, "Shut Out"<sup>72</sup>, highlights the importance of education in providing for a child's economic future and in increasing their sense of personal identity and world view, while developing their social and emotional senses. However, the current education system does not provide the best services for people with disabilities owing to a lack of teacher understanding and training regarding how people with intellectual disabilities learn.<sup>73</sup> Only limited education settings are available in which students with disabilities can thrive. Generally, they face widespread ignorance and abuse, lack of opportunities for inclusion and lack of innovative educational approaches. The lack of educational opportunities leads to adults with disabilities having limited employment prospects.

#### ***2.3.1.5 Barrier 5: Employment experiences***

As previously stated, limited educational opportunities lead to limited employment opportunities. Being employed brings various benefits for personal well-being, such as economic security, physical and mental health, and a sense of identity.<sup>74</sup> Adults with disabilities have higher unemployment rates than adults without disabilities; for example,

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<sup>71</sup> National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), "What is the NDIS?"

<sup>72</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out."

<sup>73</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 50.

<sup>74</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 5.

47.8% of people with disabilities are employed compared to 80.3% of those without a disability.<sup>75</sup> Even if an individual with a disability has a job, it is typically not meaningful employment. Their wages are also significantly lower than those of people without a disability, owing to negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability even though they are able to work.<sup>76</sup> Many people with disabilities may not be able to rely on a pension or allowance; hence, their lives may be directly affected by poverty.

### ***2.3.1.6 Barrier 6: The home***

Another barrier is the lack of building and community accessibility. Inaccessible building facilities for people with disabilities are a significant barrier to social inclusion and community involvement.<sup>77</sup>

People with disabilities may face physical barriers owing to the inappropriate architectural design of buildings and facilities, such as door entries, unsuitable equipment or transportation, inaccessible parking areas, lack of elevators, poor signage, narrow doorways and inadequate bathroom facilities.<sup>78</sup> Although the Australian government has set clear guidance for inclusion of people with disabilities regarding facilities and access, implementation of this guidance is inconsistent.<sup>79</sup> For example, although regulations recommend ramps for building entry to improve access for individuals in wheelchairs, some government and public buildings do not have these ramps. Bringing about changes in this domain is a slow and arduous process of law and policy.

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<sup>75</sup> Australian Network on Disability, "Igniting Innovation through Inclusion."

<sup>76</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 34.

<sup>77</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 44.

<sup>78</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 6.

<sup>79</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out." 8.

## **2.4 Chapter Conclusion**

Previous research has shown not only the lack of a theological framework for developing programs for the inclusion of people with disabilities but has also identified the most common barriers that they face. This gap, that is, the lack of a theological framework, sets the stage for research on how a theological framework can be used in practical settings to help people with disabilities overcome these barriers by providing a more socially inclusive environment. First, we must distinguish between traditional secular and Christian views of disability and how the model of disability has morphed historically.

### CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Many different approaches and models have been utilised for studying disability due to the differences in experience, socio-economic background, education, culture and values held by each individual. Currently, the three models of disability are the medical model, the religious and charity model, and the social model.<sup>80</sup>

The medical model, the original model which saw disability as a disease, was the dominant approach to disability. This model focuses on curing or managing illness in health care and related services to cure or manage disabilities medically.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the medical model views disability from a physical standpoint and views the cure as some kind of medical intervention, such as rehabilitation.<sup>82</sup> From the medical perspective, disability is a reduction in an individual's quality of life, indicating that they need medical assistance to 'fix' what is wrong with them. By extension, the medical model supposes a 'compassionate' or just society will invest resources to address issues of disability.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, the medical profession's responsibility and potential in this area are seen as central.

People with disabilities were once considered unfunctional owing to the plague of their impairments. The medical model was concerned with these issues, primarily from a health standpoint. Thus, it was seen as necessary to diagnose people, labelling them as disabled. In this manner, people with disabilities could be socially distanced or isolated, thereby hindering their autonomy. The UN has worked for decades to change

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<sup>80</sup> Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability*, (London: SPCK, 2020): 8.

<sup>81</sup> Pamela Fisher and Dan Goodley, "The linear medical model of disability: Mothers of disabled babies resist with counter-narratives," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 29, no. 1 (January 2007).

<sup>82</sup> Fisher and Goodley: 67.

<sup>83</sup> Fisher and Goodley: 73.

attitudes about and approaches to people with disabilities. The UN's 2006 *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) attempts to shift people's perception of people with disabilities from being vulnerable 'objects' who need charity, medical treatment and social protection to being seen as 'subjects' who have rights and dignity.<sup>84</sup> Hence, the UN's work has moved beyond the medical model to establish a social model of disability.

The social model posits that people with disabilities are entitled to have their rights, freedom and dignity respected and that their suffering and barriers to their social inclusion should be recognised and acknowledged.<sup>85</sup> People with disabilities want to be recognised as equal members of society and communities. The social model looks at the differences between impairment and disability, suggesting that social structures are the locus of the 'disability problem' rather than the people themselves.<sup>86</sup> Scholars, academics, writers and activists consider that the actual problem is failing to provide full access and inclusion. Disability is described as an interaction between some form of impairment and the lack of opportunities for social inclusion and meaningful participation in society:

the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*, 2006.

<sup>85</sup> McCloughry and Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability*: 13.

<sup>86</sup> McCloughry and Morris: 13.

<sup>87</sup> McCloughry and Morris:15.



The exclusion of people with disabilities is the impetus behind the social model approach as it attempts to improve the social inclusiveness of people with disabilities.<sup>88</sup>

Bliss, in his dissertation, suggests “a new church model” as inviting and including individuals with mental health conditions.<sup>89</sup> He highlights the following five major findings from his study: people with disabilities need to feel like they belong in a community; the church is responsible for advocating for people living with mental health conditions; involvement in the church includes discipleship; a new church model should emerge from blending previous church models; and healing helps develop a ministry.<sup>90</sup> This church model allows for a practical application of how Jesus’s ministry served to heal the broken and crippled. Within a church, this type of ministry should be replicated. Additionally, Bliss argues for the necessity of reframing disability theology through disciplined New Testament biblical studies and Pentecostal testimony’s integration. He addresses the four primary models of disability: moral model, scientific or medical model, social approach, and theologically derived position.<sup>91</sup>

Vanier’s writings provide great insight into how the new church model should look. He observed five different attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities in Western society, as presented in Table 3.1.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Community Tool Box, “Section 4: Ensuring Access for People with Disabilities,” 2012, Accessed March 24, 2021, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/physical-social-environment/housing-accessibility-disabilities/main>.

<sup>89</sup> Gregory Bliss, “Reframing Disability,” (PhD diss, Regent University, 2018): 3.

<sup>90</sup> Bliss, “Reframing Disability”: 67.

<sup>91</sup> Bliss, “Reframing Disability”: 10.

<sup>92</sup> Jean Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008a): 48-49.

Table 3.1. Attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities

| Model of disability | Attitude toward intellectual disability  | Characteristics  |
|---------------------|--|--|
| The medical model   | Disability is a sign of a disorder   | To be suppressed   |
| The charity model   | Charitable attitude  | To be marked by pity   |
| The social model    | "Human beings who can grow and progress" through community and professionals             | Through competent and attentive care, integrated school, work opportunities and independent living |
| The social model    | "When you are in relationship with people with disabilities, something good can happen." | Vanier suggests "has merged from the third"  |
| The L'Arche model   | "Is about humanising disabilities"   | People with disabilities can lead others to God. They are a path to an experience of God.          |

Vanier insists that every individual's human rights should be respected as individuals are unique and sacred.<sup>93</sup> His vision of humanity is that every person is created in the image of God. Every person is made to love, be loved, belong, bond, have friendships and be spiritual. Thus, every person is valuable, no matter how much each person contributes to the community. Vanier found that, by living with people with intellectual disabilities, he could not accept the wounds of people with disabilities without openness and acceptance of himself.<sup>94</sup> Vanier noted that "the beauty and tenderness of their hearts, their capacity for communion and tenderness" revealed to him how God viewed these individuals.<sup>95</sup>

Vanier began to demonstrate God's love to people with disabilities by working to build a L'Arche community. He tried to change the world, to transform society and communities with love through his work with L'Arche communities. In his writings, Vanier

<sup>93</sup> Jean Vanier, *Finding Peace* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 2003): 54-55.

<sup>94</sup> Jean Vanier, *Followers of Jesus* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976): 54-58.

<sup>95</sup> Martin O'Malley, "An interview with Jean Vanier," *American Magazine*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/07/interview-jean-vanier>.

emphasises that love can change people and their hearts, changing society through relationships and community. Vanier's interpretation of Jesus' message is to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, he believed that the brokenness and weakness of disability is a mechanism to reveal God's grace to people.<sup>97</sup> When people with disabilities are mistreated and rejected by society, they are discouraged from giving their hearts to others. Vanier argues that those who are not allowed to participate in society feel useless.<sup>98</sup> Hence, the principal belief of L'Arche communities is participation by all community members.

L'Arche demonstrates the "new church model" in the form of a community model for people with intellectual disabilities in which to create a community together, becoming friends and family. These communities demonstrate how to enhance lives for people and act as a sign of hope and peace. L'Arche began in 1964 with three men living together, Jean Vanier, Raphaël and Philip, the latter two being isolated, rejected and having been treated wrongly.<sup>99</sup> L'Arche emerged as a response to poverty and injustice: the community was concerned with individuals' diverse backgrounds and cultures and the various capacities of each community member.<sup>100</sup> L'Arche communities became a home for people with intellectual disabilities and their supporters. Members with disabilities had equal responsibility for their communities along with any other member of the community. In this way, L'Arche communities created inclusion

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<sup>96</sup> Luke 6:27-29 (NIV).

<sup>97</sup> Jean Vanier, *Images of Love, Words of Hope* (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1991): 88-90.

<sup>98</sup> Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York, Paulist Press, 1992): 10.

<sup>99</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1999): 23.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human (CBC Massey Lectures)*, (Toronto, Ontario: House of Anansi Press Inc. Kindle Edition, 2008): Location 705 of 1920.

opportunities and built a community where people with intellectual disabilities could develop their skills.<sup>101</sup> Thus, L'Arche implies a new model of disabilities for healing inner pain, restoring the image of God, seeking gifts, and bonding and caring with "forgiveness and reconciliation".<sup>102</sup>

Understanding how disability has been viewed from both secular and Christian perspectives is important to fully appreciate the L'Arche philosophy and to distinguish the differences between these perspectives. Jean Vanier's writings have been central to the disability model that built L'Arche communities. The evidence-based outcomes from these communities provide proof that this philosophy works to help people with intellectual disabilities. L'Arche is a journey for people with intellectual disabilities and the staff who live with them. In addition, Vanier highlights the universal questions of freedom, happiness and the image of human beings while living with those who are vulnerable and weak in the community. These questions can be answered as people with disabilities who have experienced the pain of isolation and brokenness become included in a L'Arche community environment.

In terms of the first subsidiary research question – how is disability understood in secular and Christian contexts? – this study has shown that the secular perspective has moved from the medical model to the social model. However, the Christian perspective of incorporating theology into the model goes further than the social model as it focuses on demonstrating love for people with disabilities rather than simply showing them understanding and caring.

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<sup>101</sup> Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*: 47.

<sup>102</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 39.

## CHAPTER 4: LIFE BEFORE L'ARCHE AND THE L'ARCHE PHILOSOPHY

As previously mentioned, historically, people with disabilities have been discriminated against and pushed to the edge of society. This chapter explores the progression of the disability rights movement and the L'Arche meaning, while explaining the L'Arche approach. In explaining the L'Arche approach, the first-person narrative of Adam's story (as told by Henri Nouwen) is used to provide an example of the situational context in which the L'Arche philosophy is lived daily.

### 4.1 Life Before L'Arche

People with intellectual disabilities were historically separated from society, being required to live in large institutions in the mid-1800s.<sup>103</sup> In the United States of America (USA), services for people with intellectual disabilities changed after legal cases led to the closing of a state institution displacing 700 residents into community settings.<sup>104</sup> That incident led the United States (US) government to conduct a study on how the change affected residents<sup>105</sup> and, consequently, introduced the idea that people with intellectual disabilities may not belong in large state institutions. These developments allowed for improved products and services for people with disabilities, permitting them to become more integrated into society. In the case of Australia, in 1908, the government introduced the Invalid Pension, a policy for a more active approach which raised the

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<sup>103</sup> Scott Spreat, "Brief history and future of intellectual disability services in America." *Social Innovation Journal*, March 23, 2017, Accessed March 15, 2021: 23.

<sup>104</sup> Spreat, "Brief history and future of intellectual disability services in America." 23.

<sup>105</sup> Spreat, "Brief history and future of intellectual disability services in America." 23.

level of independence while providing income support for people with disabilities so they could live as society members.<sup>106</sup>

Historically, society treated people with disabilities as the problem and placed them in institutions or prisons.<sup>107</sup> For women and girls with intellectual disabilities, being sterilised was considered adequate treatment.<sup>108</sup> With the increase in the numbers of people with disabilities, governments struggled to institutionalise citizens properly.<sup>109</sup> As governments struggled to keep up with the rising numbers of people with disabilities, it was clear that a change in the perception and understanding of disability was necessary.

The principles of normalisation, combined with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, led to the deinstitutionalisation movement which sought to address how people with disabilities were shuffled to large social institutions for care.<sup>110</sup> One consequence of this movement was to revolutionise service provision for people with intellectual disabilities. This revolution in services was reflected in the expansion of efforts by many Western countries to relocate persons with intellectual disabilities from large congregated institutions to smaller community-based facilities or independent living environments.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Federal Register of Legislation, "Invalid and Old Age Pensions," June 10, 1908, Accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1908A00017>.

<sup>107</sup> Spreat, "Brief history and future of intellectual disability services in America."

<sup>108</sup> Gary Albrecht, Katherine Seelman, and Michael Bury, *Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2001): 40.

<sup>109</sup> Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury, *Handbook of Disability Studies*: 35.

<sup>110</sup> Louise Young and Adrian F. Ashman, "Deinstitutionalisation in Australia Part I: Historical Perspective," *The British Journal of Developmental Disabilities* 50, no. 98 (2004).

<sup>111</sup> Eunjung Kim and Michelle Jarman, "Modernity's rescue mission: Postcolonial transactions of disability and sexuality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 53.

Until the late 1970s, the views of persons with a disability were mainly filtered through the voices of disability service providers, professionals working in disability services or family members.<sup>112</sup> At the time, the primary international disability organisation, Rehabilitation International, had a policy that people with disabilities could attend its periodic international conferences as observers, but they were not permitted to speak.<sup>113</sup> People with disabilities strongly protested against this policy at the 1980 Rehabilitation International conference, held in Winnipeg, Canada. During the conference, a new international organisation of and for people with disabilities was developed, Disabled Peoples' International (DPI).<sup>114</sup> At this time in Australia, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS) and volunteer organisations began extending their services, allowing people with disabilities to become more involved in providing services to other people with disabilities.<sup>115</sup> Many individuals in Australia became interested in their own treatment and, with professional qualifications, began working in rehabilitation. This increase in the numbers of people with disabilities working in the field of rehabilitation allowed for new insights into communicating and assisting people with intellectual disabilities.

1981 marked a turning point in the history of the Australian and international disability rights movements. Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) held its first World Assembly in Singapore during the UN-declared International Year of Disabled Persons

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<sup>112</sup> Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury, *Handbook of Disability Studies*: 561.

<sup>113</sup> Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury, *Handbook of Disability Studies*: 47.

<sup>114</sup> Peter Oakley, *Community Empowerment: A Reader in Participation and Development* (Atlantic Heights: Zed Book Ltd., 1991): 33.

<sup>115</sup> Auditor General's Australian National Audit Office, "ANAO Report 2010-2011," April 14, 2011, Accessed March 30, 2021: 47, [https://www.anao.gov.au/sites/default/files/ANAO\\_Report\\_2010-2011\\_36.pdf](https://www.anao.gov.au/sites/default/files/ANAO_Report_2010-2011_36.pdf).

(IYDP).<sup>116</sup> In 1981, people with disabilities began to think of themselves more as a public issue than a private problem.<sup>117</sup> The concept of systemic oppression also emerged as a motive for developing a social movement in Australia and overseas. While individuals and groups had advocated for the rights of people with disabilities before the IYDP, this action was mostly based around a medical diagnostic group or specific issue. In 1981, disability became more than a diagnosis, that is, something to be dealt with by medical professionals.<sup>118</sup> The social nature of people with disabilities became more evident when people united to claim self-determination and self-representation to overcome their social oppression as a group.

By 1986, disability rights advocacy was recognised as a program area to be funded under the Australian *Disability Services Act of 1986*.<sup>119</sup> Since that time, disability activism and advocacy began its sustained focus on several important cornerstones of disability self-determination with this new legislation, the *Disability Services Act of 1986* (DSA), followed by the *Disability Discrimination Act of 1992* (DDA).<sup>120</sup> These cornerstones included:

- a general move from institutional-type services to community-based services
- relocation of people with a physical disability from hostels and nursing homes into community housing

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<sup>116</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia," Accessed March 31, 2021, <https://pwd.org.au/about-us/our-history/history-of-disability-rights-movement-in-australia/>.

<sup>117</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."

<sup>118</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."

<sup>119</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."

<sup>120</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."



- enlightened mental health legislation in various states
- the establishment of public advocates and guardianship boards in most states.

In 2008, the adoption and ratification by the Australian government of the UN's *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) was the most recent major advancement of the Australian disability rights movement.<sup>121</sup> The organisation, People With Disability Australia (PWDA), had an extensive knowledge and understanding of the CRPD, with the convention being central to its work. During the CRPD development, PWDA participated in several UN Ad Hoc Committee meetings and undertook two consultative processes with people with disabilities throughout Australia.<sup>122</sup> It made over 32 interventions to the Ad Hoc Committee, including at the last meeting where the draft was finalised.<sup>123</sup> In many aspects, the final draft of the CRPD reflects the content of the consultation reports and interventions through PWDA's systemic advocacy.

Despite regulations and progress made to date, the Australian government's report "Shut out" indicates that many people with disabilities are still treated poorly, as evidenced by social exclusion and discrimination.<sup>124</sup> Owing to prejudicial attitudes, larger social institutions have hidden the struggles of those with disabilities, viewing these as a personal problem rather than a public issue that needs to be addressed by the government or community.

The UN's *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) clearly defines disability discrimination as:

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<sup>121</sup> UN, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*.

<sup>122</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."

<sup>123</sup> People With Disability Australia, "History of Disability Rights Movement in Australia."

<sup>124</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out."

Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.<sup>125</sup>

Many people with disabilities cannot find opportunities to live in society as community members due to the previously described different institutional barriers. This is the point where L'Arche comes in, providing a home for marginalised people with disabilities so they can live as community members.

## **4.2 Meaning of L'Arche**

L'Arche communities, with the term "L'Arche" meaning "the Ark", now serve people with disabilities in 134 communities in 38 different countries worldwide.<sup>126</sup> In Vanier's book, *From Brokenness to Community* (1992), two different characteristics are presented as necessary for the community: sharing in the pain and developing relationships through community.

### **4.2.1 Through their wounds, we are healed – sharing in the pain**

Through sharing pain and brokenness with others, people can see the truth and consequently grow from their situations. The purpose of the L'Arche community is to share lives with those who are vulnerable in order to build a "family-like environment".<sup>127</sup>

L'Arche communities are also places of pain because they are founded on people who have been through a great deal of anguish. Today, in rich

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<sup>125</sup> UN, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*.

<sup>126</sup> L'Arche International, "The Story of L'Arche."

<sup>127</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*. 10.

countries, hospitals and asylums may be cleaner, but the same men and women with disabilities are still there crying out for a home and for love.<sup>128</sup>

The L'Arche philosophy stresses that large social institutions cannot be a home to individuals as they do not have an ideal environment in which to build personal relationships where they can experience love.<sup>129</sup>

L'Arche communities are based on religious faith to share the Gospel's message about how one must love broken people because God is dwelling in their hearts. In this way, people can have a deeper sense of relationships and can seek "the treasure of the poor" with God's heart.<sup>130</sup> The community is founded on love for people with disabilities (i.e., core members) and fixating on the core member's needs helps others to find their path in the community.

Through Vanier's writings, readers can feel empathy for the role of L'Arche and understand the spirit of L'Arche. Additionally, the L'Arche philosophy emphasises understanding what it means to be friends with those who are suffering and broken: friendship allows one "to witness [and] to tell our story".<sup>131</sup>

In L'Arche, we love to tell our stories and how people with disabilities have transformed us, stories that reveal their love and simplicity and speak of their courage, pain, and closeness to God.<sup>132</sup>

This philosophy stresses the importance of telling personal stories to evoke empathy and understanding.

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<sup>128</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*. 12.

<sup>129</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*. 12.

<sup>130</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Kindle Edition): Location 1028 of 1920.

<sup>132</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*, (Kindle Edition): Location 1028 of 1920.

#### 4.2.2 Community: a place of bonding, caring and mission

Jesus calls those who are vulnerable to the community. L'Arche is a place of bonding, caring and mission. One L'Arche story introduces Armando, a child from an orphanage. Armando is described as unable to "walk or talk or eat by himself" with a "twisted and broken" body indicative of a severe mental disability.<sup>133</sup> However, when Armando is picked up and held by someone, "his eyes and his whole body quiver with joy and excitement and say: "I love you".<sup>134</sup> This non-verbal, mysterious connection has a profound therapeutic effect on people who come into contact with Armando.<sup>135</sup> Although Armando has disabilities, he has the power to bond with others through a love that does not need to be verbalised. The L'Arche approach shows that "people with disabilities have revealed ... their incredible capacity for creating community and bringing people together".<sup>136</sup> This philosophy highlights that brokenness and vulnerabilities are part of individual uniqueness.

Healing can happen when those who are vulnerable and broken share their unique gifts together in the community. L'Arche emphasises that it is important to have a sense of belonging together.<sup>137</sup> The heart of God strives to give life to others: people can love, heal and liberate others with "a new life and a new hope".<sup>138</sup> Therefore, it is important to seek belonging and meaning within a community. The approach used by Jesus was to be in deep communion with people in need and to develop friendships.

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<sup>133</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 28.

<sup>134</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 28.

<sup>135</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 28.

<sup>136</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 28.

<sup>137</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche* (London: SPCK, 2013): 616.

<sup>138</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 30.

Jesus suggests to his followers that if they want to enter that relationship, they must decide to give up their lives for his sake, thereby emphasising the importance of relationships. As Jesus says, “[f]or whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it”.<sup>139</sup>

Through Vanier’s writings, the community’s perspective shows that inside each of us is a place of conflict.<sup>140</sup> Conflict reveals the tension between the individual and the communal. He writes that “the conflict between the values of the world and the values of community, togetherness, and independence”<sup>141</sup> can bring about pain from losing one’s independence when one comes to rely on and make decisions with others, especially in a world that values self-independence above all. A direct contradiction exists between worldly expectations if individual independence clashes with the kind of dependence stressed by L’Arche through biblical scripture. However, conflict in the community provides learning opportunities for individuals to grow and develop their gifts. Tending to the growth and freedom of others can cost individual freedom. Hence, it is necessary to undertake self-sacrifice to invest in and help others: without that sacrifice, people will not experience freedom and growth.

Moreover, the L’Arche philosophy shows that people desire community to liberate themselves from their brokenness and inner pain through love and bonding.

We are too broken; the inner pain is too great ... However, somewhere, in the heart of humanity today, there is a cry coming from our loneliness and the injustice and pain of our world: a cry for community, for belonging, for togetherness and love.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Matthew 16:25 (NIV).

<sup>140</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 30-31.

<sup>141</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*.

<sup>142</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 35.

How can human beings live in isolation when God also lives in community? God exists in communion with the Trinity: three persons in one with love, so that no one individual is alone but all are called together.<sup>143</sup> When people find their community, they drop psychological barriers and walls and allow themselves to become vulnerable with each other. Therefore, the community has a responsibility to care for and support people so they can grow with dignity. This community insight is a place for living, growth and support with "forgiveness and reconciliation".<sup>144</sup>

### 4.3 The L'Arche Approach

As stated on its website, L'Arche is a place that celebrates people with intellectual disabilities and builds circles of support around them.<sup>145</sup> This organisation surpasses the provision of simple basic needs and focuses on relationship building and fostering a sense of belonging for community members. In L'Arche communities, four key elements are balanced: spirituality, community, service and outreach, with each element playing an important role in the philosophical approach.<sup>146</sup> Regardless of gender, age, race, sexuality, religion and whether or not one has disabilities, all are welcome. Take the following case of Adam, for example.

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<sup>143</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 28.

<sup>144</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 36.

<sup>145</sup> L'Arche in the UK, "What We Do," L'Arche.org.uk, Accessed March 29, 2021, <https://www.larche.org.uk/what-wedo#:~:text=L'Arche%20Communities%20hold%20in,each%20of%20the%20other%20elements>.

<sup>146</sup> L'Arche in the UK, "What We Do."

### 4.3.1 Adam

Henri Nouwen provides a biography of his friend Adam, who he met in the L'Arche community, Daybreak, in Canada. While at Daybreak, Henri was Adam's assistant for his morning routine in New House. Henri describes Adam's early life, noting that although he was not very vocal and was slow to do things, he developed patterns for getting around and interacted well with those around him.<sup>147</sup> Adam was diagnosed with seizures as an infant, a disorder shared with his brother, Michael. However, when Adam was a teenager, he experienced a severe seizure that changed him irrevocably.<sup>148</sup> The doctor's response to this seizure resulted in an accidental overdose of seizure medication, after which Adam was never the same.<sup>149</sup>

As Adam's parents aged, they knew they could not care for their two grown sons and began looking for longer-term care.<sup>150</sup> For Michael, finding a home was simple; he could move into the L'Arche community, Daybreak.<sup>151</sup> However, it was not so easy for Adam who required special accommodation in facilities and consistent supervision as he could not easily move by his own volition.<sup>152</sup> However, Adam's parents pressed and pursued until Daybreak sent someone for specialised training, with the facilities updated to offer Adam a place to call home.<sup>153</sup> Daybreak is where Henri met Adam for the first time in August 1986. They developed an intense bond and lasting friendship. Henri

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<sup>147</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 11.

<sup>148</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 13.

<sup>149</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 13.

<sup>150</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 14.

<sup>151</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 15.

<sup>152</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 15.

<sup>153</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 17-20.

documented this journey in his book, *Adam, God's Beloved* (2012), to explain what he experienced in a L'Arche community.

Meeting a core member like Adam allows us to explore each of the core elements of the L'Arche approach. The four elements are to treat all persons as valuable; to experience healing at the bottom of the "ladder"; to embrace communion; and to grow in friendships. Using Adam's story as a case study, we can see these elements in the context of life in L'Arche.

#### **4.3.2 All persons are valuable**

The L'Arche philosophy strives to discover the beauty, the grandeur and the nobility of people with disabilities in the community.<sup>154</sup> This philosophy is emphasised in the person-centredness nature of life, meaning that every person is the centre of their own life.<sup>155</sup> Hence, people with disabilities can provide spiritual gifts for others: "[e]ven if you cannot speak, even if you cannot walk, even if you've been abandoned, you have a gift to give to the other". Every person has a unique call and purpose from God, whether or not they have disabilities, and even if they may be socially marginalised. For L'Arche, people with disabilities are simply human beings.

Nevertheless, in mainstream society, people with disabilities are expected to conform to specific norms. They are not typically welcomed due to their vulnerabilities and failure to meet expected norms.<sup>156</sup> People with disabilities are typically quickly judged and labelled which can lead to social isolation. While no perfect communities or

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<sup>154</sup> Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*. 62.

<sup>155</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 599.

<sup>156</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 25.



perfect people exist, it is especially hard for people with disabilities to be welcomed and fully included in a mainstream community.<sup>157</sup>

Community can provide diversity which may hinder the establishment of cohesive environments. Nevertheless, a community can be “a mixture of good and bad, darkness and light, love and hate”.<sup>158</sup> Within L’Arche communities, people with disabilities feel more respected by others.<sup>159</sup> These communities provide an environment of grace that accepts others who do not conform to mainstream social norms.<sup>160</sup> The L’Arche community is the only place where people with disabilities can share the love in their hearts without fear of rejection. L’Arche emphasises how community provides a safe space for people to be heard and to develop authentic and loving relationships.<sup>161</sup>

On the other hand, people with disabilities can experience jealousy and insecurity in their hearts because they are hurt from past rejections.<sup>162</sup> People with disabilities generally do not have as many opportunities to find their potential, so it is more difficult for them to experience recognition. L’Arche helps individuals to learn how the Spirit accepts everything about them.<sup>163</sup>

“I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.”<sup>164</sup> This focus on how much God loves them helps people with disabilities to overcome weakness and insecurities and allows them an environment of

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<sup>157</sup> Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Mulgrave, Victoria: John Garratt, 2004): 267-268.

<sup>158</sup> Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*. 42-43.

<sup>159</sup> Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*. 42.

<sup>160</sup> Vanier, *Images of Love, Words of Hope*: 88-90.

<sup>161</sup> Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008): 30.

<sup>162</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*. 42-43.

<sup>163</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*.

<sup>164</sup> Psalms 31:7 (NIV).

grace in which to make mistakes and grow.<sup>165</sup> The more time that people without disabilities spend with people with disabilities, the more they grow in understanding how God sees and loves these individuals.

The metaphor of children is used to demonstrate the fragility, weakness and dependence of people.<sup>166</sup> The point of this metaphor is that children need support, protection and love in mutual relationships with other people. Therefore, people should open and share "their beauty, their worth, and their importance to show love to others".<sup>167</sup> In his writings, Vanier claims that people with disabilities who are lonely can experience less peace or joy when they are rejected by other people in the world. This rejection can lead to feelings of emptiness, weakness and pain that can bring about depression.<sup>168</sup>

Consequently, the approach used by L'Arche to create accepting and loving communities increases peace and joy for people with disabilities and improves their inner well-being while helping them learn to overcome past rejections. Thus, human beings must be valued in a "universal and inclusive vision" and "a path of hope".<sup>169</sup> The community can provide the security necessary for inner peace, providing grace and fruitfulness, while helping people with disabilities to share their gifts and weakness in the community.

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<sup>165</sup> Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid* (New York, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1975a): 5.

<sup>166</sup> Jean Vanier, *Seeing Beyond Depression* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2000): 99.

<sup>167</sup> Vanier, *Seeing Beyond Depression*: 113.

<sup>168</sup> Vanier, *Seeing Beyond Depression*: 317.

<sup>169</sup> Jean Vanier, *Eruption to Hope* (Toronto, Ontario: Griffin House, 1974): 98-99, 102-103.

### 4.3.3 Value of Adam

As previously mentioned, Henri Nouwen, a well-respected pastor and academic, recounts his experiences with Adam. When Henri joined Daybreak, he was immediately asked to care for Adam, yet he felt quite overwhelmed and underqualified, unsure how he could care for Adam with no special training.<sup>170</sup> Henri says, "Adam was weaker and more vulnerable than anyone else ... and ... was given to me, the least capable of all to care for."<sup>171</sup> This responsibility was a heavy burden for Henri, but as he learned Adam's rhythm and routine, he grew to see Adam as a person and a gift from God.<sup>172</sup> Henri notes that Adam was "explaining to me by his very presence what I should have known all along: that what I most desire in life—love, friendship, community, and a deep sense of belonging—I was finding in him".<sup>173</sup> Adam "simply lived and by his life invited me to receive his unique gift, wrapped in weakness but given for my transformation".<sup>174</sup> Henri was quite overwhelmed at the beginning of his time at Daybreak and initially saw Adam as simply disabled. Over time, Henri grew to understand Adam's true value and purpose. Consequently, it was Henri himself who was changed due to Adam's value.

### 4.3.4 The ladder

Vanier's writings consistently present the metaphorical term "ladder". Generally, people aim to go up the social ladder as high as they can; however, in this sense, the L'Arche community runs in the opposite direction to that cultural mentality.<sup>175</sup> L'Arche

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<sup>170</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 22-24.

<sup>171</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 24.

<sup>172</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 27.

<sup>173</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 26.

<sup>174</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 30.

<sup>175</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 6.

demonstrates stepping down to the bottom of the ladder to be with the weak and the poor. The purpose is to create a community with them, live with them and be their friends. Vanier presents a personal story about himself from when he sought promotions to climb the ladder.<sup>176</sup> However, as he worked with people with disabilities, he experienced healing at the bottom of the ladder, a position occupied by the poor and incapable, the excluded and marginalised.<sup>177</sup> Through his writings, Vanier emphasised that Christians should step down to the bottom of the social ladder to interact with others to be their friends. "Descending the ladder" illustrates how one can begin to establish connections with people with disabilities.<sup>178</sup>

Jesus became an example of God's Word by coming into the world as a defenceless child, the incarnation.<sup>179</sup> Vanier also points out that living in the body of Christ means building friendships. The L'Arche community life demonstrates how to live in the body of Christ: it is not only difficult and painful but also confronting and demanding. However, it can bring the joyful, meaningful life, spiritual growth and personal growth. This perspective of friendship is related to belonging and inclusion as communion, where one can escape from isolation and loneliness while bonding together with love and communion.<sup>180</sup>

"We are all wounded, we are all poor."<sup>181</sup> Jesus exemplified the metaphor of descending the ladder to be with the poorest, weakest members of society, giving up

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<sup>176</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*: 267-268.

<sup>177</sup> Jean Vanier, "A Rebel for Peace: Apostle of Peace: Essay in Honor of Dan Berrigan", ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996a): 133.

<sup>178</sup> Vanier and Hauerwas, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*: 350, 441.

<sup>179</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*: 460.

<sup>180</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*: 322.

<sup>181</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* 22.

the glory of God in heaven, stepping down to the bottom to share his life with not only humans but the outcasts of society. The event of incarnation, washing His disciples' feet and His death on the cross are visible examples of coming down to the bottom in the place occupied by a slave.<sup>182</sup> This is indeed Good News because, if part of the Trinity can give up heaven and come to the world in the place of a slave, then all human beings are redeemable and deserve love through relationships and personal connections. We can also experience the true meaning of this good news while serving the broken and the oppressed.

Those at the lowest rung of the ladder are vulnerable, hurt and broken. When "poor people are hurt; they are in pain and can be very angry, in revolt or [depressed]".<sup>183</sup> God came down to the bottom of the ladder in Christ Jesus's form to serve the poor and become one of them, thus sharing their life situation. Hence, when the Word of God became flesh as a defenceless child, identifying with weakness and choosing to be with the poor and hurting, He called everyone to serve the needs of those at the bottom of the ladder.<sup>184</sup> This serving meant providing love and bonding together in communion to demonstrate "a heart-to-heart ... relationship of communion and love".<sup>185</sup>

Jesus's identification as weak and poor showed that spiritually we are all weak and poor, but God's image is created within us. It does not matter who we are: whether we have abilities or disabilities or whether or not we are dependent upon others. We all have the purpose to fulfil a mission for humanity. Part of this mission can occur by learning in various ways at the bottom of the ladder. For Vanier, his learning at the

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<sup>182</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*: 227.

<sup>183</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*: 10.

<sup>184</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*: 460.

<sup>185</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*: 408.

bottom of the ladder changed his life radically, solidifying his belief that healing occurs in that place.

The visual metaphor of ladders provides a clear example of the Good News. The story of the Samaritan woman epitomises these metaphors.<sup>186</sup> A person rejected by the Jews and her own people<sup>187</sup>, she is one of the poorest and most broken women in the Gospels, moving from man to man<sup>188</sup>, searching for love because she is so wounded. However, when the Samaritan woman met Jesus, he told her everything she had ever done,<sup>189</sup> and she was healed. She then returned to her community.<sup>190</sup> Jesus did not scold her or tell her to get her act together. Instead, he exposed to her his own need. He says to her: “[g]ive me a drink”.<sup>191</sup> We thus see the good way in which Jesus approaches broken people, from a humble position rather than a superior one. This attitude of needing help from others implies that the broken can be just as helpful as the non-broken.

#### **4.3.5 Healing with Adam**

Adam was truly a healer of others. Henri recalls the story of his friend Murray who visited him at Daybreak. Although Murray seemed comfortable in the home<sup>192</sup>, he did not say much. During Adam’s morning breakfast one day, Henri was called away and Murray had to finish feeding Adam. Murray explained that he was very anxious, but during that brief time, he came to see Adam as a “beautiful human being who shared with him

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<sup>186</sup> John: 4 (NIV).

<sup>187</sup> John 4:7 (NIV) and 4:9 (NIV).

<sup>188</sup> John 4:18 (NIV).

<sup>189</sup> John 4:29 (NIV).

<sup>190</sup> John 4:28 (NIV).

<sup>191</sup> John 4:7 (NIV).

<sup>192</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 32.

many vulnerabilities".<sup>193</sup> Murray's life changed after that day, as he explains it, when he had "a new feeling of being accepted, loved, and appreciated—not just by Adam, but by all people in the New House".<sup>194</sup> Henri goes on to explain that the healing given by Adam during his time at Daybreak made a deep impact on all those with whom he came into contact.<sup>195</sup> For Henri, Adam "was really there for [him], listening with his whole being and offering [him] a safe space to be".<sup>196</sup> This statement encompasses the degree to which Henri was healing in a "safe space" during his time at the bottom of the ladder. This healing helped Henri to step further into communion and inclusion within the larger community.

#### **4.4 Embracing Communion and Inclusion**

For L'Arche, the community is a place to learn about the relationship between love and communion, a key element of the L'Arche philosophy. "Communion means to be vulnerable and tender; it means opening one's heart and sharing one's hopes and pain, even all that is failure or brokenness."<sup>197</sup> L'Arche promotes the view that inclusion and belonging are necessary for meaningful communion.

Communion is a to-and-for of love; we give and receive mutually ... We give our hearts bonded in gentle unity as words flow into silence and inner voice, as movement flows into quiet peace and inner rest ... Life flows from one to another.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 33.

<sup>194</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 33.

<sup>195</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 34.

<sup>196</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 25.

<sup>197</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Kindle Edition): Location 976 of 1920.

<sup>198</sup> Vanier, "A Rebel for Peace:" 134.

Union with others is consistently stressed and emphasised throughout the New Testament:

For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jew or Greek, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.<sup>199</sup>

There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>200</sup>

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.<sup>201</sup>

In the L'Arche philosophy, Jesus incarnates the model of communion and unity with others. It is significant that Jesus broke down the barriers and walls between the rich and poor, the strong and the weak, the healthy and the sick, when he came into the world as flesh. Jesus found people on the fringes of communities.<sup>202</sup> A prominent example of the way that Jesus found the weak, the sick and the poor is the Samaritan woman described earlier. Jesus's tender heart made it possible for Him to approach others as He did, approaching those who are broken and vulnerable to heal them, lead them into love, and transform their lives and communion.<sup>203</sup> L'Arche communities are often the last hope of belonging for people with disabilities: "when someone has lived most of his or her life in the last place and then discovers that Jesus is there in the last place as well, it is truly good news."<sup>204</sup> L'Arche therefore stresses "the way of the heart" in the community.

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<sup>199</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13 (NIV).

<sup>200</sup> Galatians 3:28 (NIV).

<sup>201</sup> 1 Peter 3:8 (NIV).

<sup>202</sup> Mark 2:17 (NIV).

<sup>203</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 182.

<sup>204</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 23.



#### 4.4.1 The way of the heart: living in the body of Christ

The “way of the heart” in the L’Arche philosophy is a person-centred approach that means interacting through personal relationships.<sup>205</sup> One must approach everyone with openness and share their needs and weaknesses with gentleness and kindness. The L’Arche philosophy emphasises that the way of the heart is to use our gifts and open “our hearts to a few people who are different” by becoming their friends and receiving life through them.<sup>206</sup> “When we are in communion with another, we become open and vulnerable to them. We reveal our needs and weaknesses to each other ... [and] ... weaknesses and needs call us together into ‘oneness’.”<sup>207</sup> Sharing vulnerabilities and uniting in oneness leads to communion with others living in the body of Christ.

The heart is a metaphorical term to present the resource of affectivity, including peace, joy, fear and anger in the heart.<sup>208</sup> When people have affective experiences with others, the heart reacts to these experiences to build meaningful relationships. When people build meaningful relationships, they do not need to think about any benefits or what another individual thinks, and they do not need to pretend to be smart and important. Another importance signified by the way in which people are treated, even people living with painful relationships, is the awareness that they need understanding and kindness. “To treat each person as a person means that we are concerned for them, we listen to them, and love them and want them to become more whole, free, truthful and responsible.”<sup>209</sup> Therefore, the heart's way is the way that friendship communicates

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<sup>205</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Kindle Edition): Location 976 of 1920.

<sup>206</sup> Vanier, “A Rebel for Peace:” 134.

<sup>207</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Kindle Edition): Location 1011 of 1920.

<sup>208</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*: 85.

<sup>209</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Kindle Edition): Location 976 of 1920.

with others without verbalising anything. For vulnerable people who have lost their ability to communicate with others, the heart is the only communication needed. Christians who are meeting with God show concern for those who are weak and humble with the kind and loving approach that Jesus showed which encourages social inclusion.

Communion is always focused on others even though human relationships are often selfish and self-centred. While applying the understanding of communion, L'Arche communities create a circumstance through which to escape isolation and loneliness and bond together with love and communion.<sup>210</sup> L'Arche emphasises how people with disabilities need security and inner freedom in the community rather than simply doing whatever they want: "[t]he sense of belonging and the need for security are the basis of the growth of each person to inner freedom".<sup>211</sup> Therefore, belonging to a group provides a sense of security that promotes internal growth and an environment in which individuals can flourish.

#### **4.4.2 In communion with Adam**

Henri describes a point that occurred after he had been at Daybreak for several months. He notes that he felt "privileged" to be caring for Adam.<sup>212</sup> He was so thoroughly engaged in his time and relationship with Adam, that when a friend from pastoral theology came to visit, Henri experienced a sort of shock. As his visiting friend saw Henri's daily routine of caring for Adam and the people with whom Henri was living, he asked why he would care for Adam with no formal training and concluded by saying

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<sup>210</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 322.

<sup>211</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 599.

<sup>212</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 27.

"[s]urely, you have better things to do with your time".<sup>213</sup> Henri's friend did not understand the way of the heart, nor could he see the way communion had changed Henri.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, what was it that prevented the other assistants at Daybreak from seeing their roles as simply "housecleaners, cooks, diaper changers and dishwashers?" The answer was that the "core member entrusted to them had as much to give them as receive from them."<sup>215</sup> "Not only would [they] have become bored, exhausted, and deeply frustrated, but Adam and the others would not have been able to give their gifts, accomplish their mission, or reach fulfillment of their human potential."<sup>216</sup> The mutual benefit of Adam and other core members feeling secure and taken care of and the healing for the assistants resulted from the communion and inclusion in the community.

## 4.5 Friendship

During the time that Vanier spent living with people with disabilities in L'Arche, he found that the most important element to creating community was friendship.<sup>217</sup> People with disabilities were seeking someone to listen to them and to respond to their suffering and brokenness.<sup>218</sup> Thus, Vanier's response was to seek and befriend people with disabilities. Rather than focusing on relationships defined by power and domination, the focus is placed on personal friendships that are a source of inclusion. Befriending people with disabilities is a way of "touching the roots" of humanity.<sup>219</sup> Jesus Christ was a model

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<sup>213</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 28.

<sup>214</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 29.

<sup>215</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 31.

<sup>216</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 31.

<sup>217</sup> Vanier and Hauerwas, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*. 30.

<sup>218</sup> Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*. 42.

<sup>219</sup> Jean Vanier, *Our Life Together: A Memoir in Letters* (London: DLT, 2008b): 1.

of the way to befriend and include others in social situations.<sup>220</sup> Friendship and inclusion demonstrate the dependence of human life on creating community and being together. They can be established through self-sacrifice, giving up that on which one relies to provide freedom and healing for others. Self-sacrifice truly shows the love of God.

To love is to reveal the hidden beauty in the hearts of all people, to trust them and to call them forth to greater trust. To love is a way of looking, of touching or listening to all: taking time with them, especially with those who are broken, depressed, and insecure, revealing to them their importance. As we take time with them and enter into communion with them, they in turn reveal to us our beauty. Communion is a to-and-for of love; we give and receive mutually.<sup>221</sup>

The L'Arche philosophy leads to reflection on how we can befriend and include people with disabilities by loving others through self-sacrifice and accepting all of someone, good and bad.<sup>222</sup> Thinking of others in this way can be the first step to establishing friendships.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.<sup>223</sup>

Humbling ourselves to be with others, especially if it is against one's world view, can be difficult. As Vanier puts it,

I have discovered that I have many filters within my own self where I select and modify the reality, I want to welcome ... I select what pleases me, boosts my ego and gives me a sense of worth. I reject that which causes inner pain or disturbance or a feeling of helplessness.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Mark 2:13-17 (NIV); Mark 5:1-20 (NIV); Luke 7:36-50 (NIV); John 4:1-41 (NIV).

<sup>221</sup> Vanier, "A Rebel for Peace:" 134-135.

<sup>222</sup> Vanier, *Images of Love, Words of Hope*. 112-113.

<sup>223</sup> Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV).

<sup>224</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 265.

Our own selfish nature has to be overcome to deny our desires and pleasures and place others as better than ourselves.<sup>225</sup> When we do that, friendships flourish.<sup>226</sup> L'Arche promotes self-sacrifice to lift others and welcome them into mutually beneficial friendships.

Furthermore, humbling ourselves to enter into friendships with others leads to a concept that Vanier describes as a "mutuality of relationships".<sup>227</sup> This mutuality means that not only do people with disabilities benefit from friendship, but so do those interacting with them. For instance, a study of narratives with L'Arche caregivers and residents found that "long-term rewards seem rich on both sides [of the caregiver relationship]".<sup>228</sup> Four key shifts in perception were necessary to achieve this mutuality: they comprise seeing people with disabilities as subjects and not as objects; recognising and accounting for difference; a sense of solidarity and community; and establishing conditions of trust and openness.<sup>229</sup> When these shifts in perception occur, the situation is ideal for realising the mutuality of relationships with others.

#### **4.5.1 A biblical understanding of becoming friends**

The L'Arche philosophy emphasises the ultimate act of friendship as seen in the act of self-emptying when Jesus washed his disciples' feet.<sup>230</sup> It is a significant event for

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<sup>225</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 322.

<sup>226</sup> Vanier, "A Rebel for Peace:" 134-135.

<sup>227</sup> Vanier, "A Rebel for Peace:" 135.

<sup>228</sup> Pamela Cushing and Tanya Lewis, "Negotiating mutuality and agency in care-giving: Relationships with women with intellectual disabilities," *Hypatia* 17, no. 3 (2002): 188.

<sup>229</sup> Cushing and Lewis: 188-189.

<sup>230</sup> John 13: 4-5 "so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him".

understanding how we can show true friendship to others. Jesus "showed [the disciples] the downward path of humility, service and non-violence"<sup>231</sup>, which was the message he preached. Jesus demonstrated that leaders could act as a servant for others<sup>232</sup>, the foot washing becoming a symbolic action of servant leadership and sacrifice for the sake of friendships.

The world does not see friendship in this way:

when you have been taught from an early age to be first, to win, and then suddenly you sense that you are being called by Jesus to go down the ladder and to share your life with those who have little culture, who are poor and marginalised, a real struggle breaks out within you.<sup>233</sup>

These two competing views create a struggle that one must overcome in the L'Arche community to choose to follow the example of Jesus.

In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus states that the disciples should invite lowly members of society to their banquets. Through this example, Jesus becomes friends with those who are different, eating together with them as brothers and sisters. Similarly, the assistants at a L'Arche community try to establish connections and friendships with people with disabilities rather than simply acting as their helpers. The L'Arche philosophy stresses that their community is "bonded together in a covenant of love ... of the same family".<sup>234</sup> This approach means that non-disabled community members are not simply there to do things for those with disabilities, to be competent in teaching them skills or to have verbal dialogue with them. Instead, the focus is on caring for them through love.

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<sup>231</sup> Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005): 42.

<sup>232</sup> Mark 10:45 (NIV) "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

<sup>233</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*. 18.

<sup>234</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 16-17.

L'Arche is the covenant of love that binds us all together ... bonding implies eating together and such realities as presence, communion, and touch ... there is communication of the heart through our bodies.<sup>235</sup>

This approach is a practical application of Luke 14:12-14, which demonstrates love and acceptance through community and friendship.

#### **4.5.2 Adam's friendships**

Adam developed many friendships while he lived at Daybreak.<sup>236</sup> Henri repeatedly describes his friendship with Adam, explaining that through their time together, "Adam was becoming [his] teacher, taking [him] by the hand, walking with [him] in [his] confusion through the wilderness of [his] life".<sup>237</sup> Henri explains the reason why Adam had so many people come to visit him and care for him: people formed friendships with Adam because that was his ministry.

Adam's ministry was unique in that he seemed unaware of all that was happening around and through him because he didn't know about care, ministry, healing, and service ... He was simply present, offering himself in peace and completely self-emptied so that the fruits of his ministry were pure and abundant.<sup>238</sup>

Having a sharing heart and simply being present, in much the same way that Adam was a safe space for Henri, are what led others into friendship with Adam and resulted in profoundly changed lives.

As previously discussed, the ladder metaphor highlights God's willingness to descend the social ladder to save all of humanity. Nevertheless, God lifted people into

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<sup>235</sup> Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*. 16-17.

<sup>236</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 34.

<sup>237</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 26.

<sup>238</sup> Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*. 34.

a new community of believers that does not forget or exclude anyone through that descent. This new community believes that respecting the dignity of all people is the centre of transforming their lives and healing their pain. In Vanier's personal experience of working at L'Arche, he found that making friends with people with disabilities was the deepest and the most precious work.

## **4.6 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter explained life before L'Arche, the meaning of L'Arche and the key elements of the L'Arche approach. Furthermore, each element was epitomised through the first-person narrative of Henri Nouwen. As shown through the first-person narrative, L'Arche communities offer exceptional outcomes in helping people with disabilities reach their full human potential in loving environments of grace.



## **CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Implications for Community**

This study has possible implications for the Christian community in relation to people with intellectual disabilities. The implications relate to how Christian communities respond to barriers and challenges. The study found the role played by shared ideals in communities to overcome barriers and challenges while adopting Vanier's insights and the values of the L'Arche community. The study confirms the community's role in unifying intentional communities and identifies ways of dealing with challenges and barriers faced by those living within the community.

The first implication is that the study shows the value of community acceptance of people with disabilities as valuable humans with something to offer. International and Australian government reports emphasise the importance of human dignity, human rights and freedom for every individual. L'Arche stresses the uniqueness and preciousness of any member of humanity, no matter who they are. L'Arche communities demonstrate how those who are isolated from the community can transform their lives after encountering Jesus Christ. The community focus is on the value of relationships with a variety of different people. These relationships, founded in respect, offer the same dignity and rights by accepting all individuals through the love of God. L'Arche communities effectively apply Vanier's insights within their community. It is important to create a successful community, encouraging adherence to strong values. When the community expresses acceptance of people with disabilities; they can, in turn, open and share their brokenness and weakness.

The second implication is that the community can restore the image of the body of Christ, which is spiritually insightful. This means that all Christians should live in hope, in unity with Jesus and receive the gift of God as the body of Christ. The metaphor of 'stepping down the ladder' for people with disabilities demonstrates the image of the body of Christ. This understanding of the image of the body of Christ provides a good understanding of the church community and individual involvement, which is based on 1 Corinthians 12:18-25. This scripture passage shows that God brought together the many church members into one body, so those members should love and care for one another as God loves and cares for them. Within the body of Christ, all human beings are sacred, unique and equal, including those with disabilities. Therefore, Vanier descended from a higher status position to be open and share his weakness and brokenness with people at the bottom of the ladder. The L'Arche philosophy implies that God's will is done when called Christians welcome and spend time with those who are rejected and weak. However, bodily dissension arises due to human desire. People want to climb up the ladder rather than down. Coming down the ladder demonstrates God's love and shares the pain and healing with others. This is the point at which people can be in communion with God.

The third implication is learning from each other while living and sharing in the community. People can have a hidden prejudice, thinking that nothing can be learned from the vulnerable and broken. However, Vanier confesses that L'Arche was a school of love for him as he learned a great deal about the human heart and about the relationships of love and communion with others even through difficult times. While learning from the weak and the broken, people with disabilities can also learn how to make decisions and take on more responsibility for their lives in the community.

## 5.2 Summary and Conclusion

The writings examined in this study show that a place is needed where God works for people, including healing, caring, growing and bonding. The purpose of this study was to address the major barriers for people with disabilities and to demonstrate how L'Arche communities approach these barriers and challenges. Through a review of different reports, mainly national organisation reports, government reports, peer-reviewed papers and academic books, we can see that people with disabilities suffer in different ways in their lives. The Australian government's "Shut Out" report stresses that the term 'disability' is a complex phenomenon as it is related to the limitations of physical, emotional, psychological and learning conditions.<sup>239</sup> People's dignity, human rights and freedom are threatened due to the lack of infrastructure set up to aid them. To protect the dignity and human rights of people with disabilities, the UN and governments have established legislation and laws.

One of the major areas of suffering was the social exclusion and discrimination faced by young people with intellectual disabilities. Vanier suggested that the L'Arche community provides communion and inclusion between people with disabilities and staff in following Jesus's teaching, thereby allowing friendships to develop. In the L'Arche philosophy, all persons are valued and have God's gift of salvation, with no discrimination revealed in L'Arche communities. A L'Arche community, then, is genuinely good news for people with disabilities.

The study analysed Vanier's insights through his books and the evidence-based outcomes of the L'Arche community philosophy through the first-person narrative of

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<sup>239</sup> Australian Government, "Shut Out:" 4.

Henri Nouwen. People with disabilities express the insight that God has a special purpose in the brokenness, vulnerability and neglect of others.

Primary limitations of this study are the first-person narrative and the heavy use of Vanier's writings. First-person narratives (or case studies), while providing good qualitative and contextual data, are not generalisable to a larger population.<sup>240</sup> Additionally, only a few authors have a significant amount of written work describing their time in L'Arche communities, thereby limiting the number of sources for insights (and, consequently, the reason that references to Vanier's work make up the bulk of Chapter 4). Future studies should consider first-person interviews from L'Arche community core members and assistants to develop a more extensive database of knowledge. Additionally, with the current study having established the key elements for a Christian model of disability, more research must be done to create theories of change in establishing these communities and documenting their outcomes.

Overall, this study supports the need for a faith model of disability wherein people follow Jesus (or adhere to another faith that focuses on the spiritual elements of life and relationship) to be in communion with God and consequently demonstrate the body of Christ. Faith-based communities that bring people with disabilities together with non-disabled individuals create environments that can be truly reflective of God. Each person is unique, yet may be scared to learn from others owing to their vulnerability and brokenness. Moreover, it is not easy to overcome one's selfish desires. Therefore, Christians should continually pray to receive strength and encouragement at the bottom of the ladder to be a fully inclusive member in the body of Christ.

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<sup>240</sup> Ben Willis, "The Advantages and Limitations of Single Case Study Analysis." (July 5, 2014): 3-4.

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