

## A Visit to L'Arche Clinton: An AIM Initiative by Marcia A. Murphy

"I got a blue ribbon!! I did my best!! I'm so happy!!"

Becky, a petite forty-something woman with short brown hair, eye glasses with tiny sparkling butterflies design on the sides, and who has Down syndrome, exuberantly raised her palms in the air for a double high five. Happy to comply, I joined my hands to hers. Never had I seen such a joyful, radiant smile or someone so alive with energy. She, with four others in the house, Arche 2, had competed in the Special Olympics and Becky, along with the others, showed us not only several ribbons, but also shiny gold medals all of which hung from around their necks.

*What is most important in life? To love and to be loved. The L'Arche Clinton community provides homes where people with [core members] and without intellectual disabilities [assistants] live and work together as peers, create inclusive communities of faith and friendship, and transform society through relationships that cross social boundaries.\**

As an AIM [Access & Inclusive Mission] Initiative, I asked St. Andrew members Ken and Ginni Gibson if they could provide transportation to Clinton, IA, to visit the L'Arche home. They graciously agreed and we left after the first worship service at St. Andrew on Palm Sunday. The first L'Arche Clinton house was donated back in the 1970's for a period of 40 years by a local Presbyterian church. There are currently three houses and some apartments in this L'Arche Clinton community. We had a very enjoyable visit, first, with a tour of the L'Arche house which included seeing a small black dog quietly lying in its bed on the floor of the living room. We then had a delicious lunch of soup, sandwiches, and fruit, seated around a dining table. Before eating we held hands in prayer, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* classic painting on the wall. Lively conversation during the meal involved everyone there: core members, the assistants, the Executive Director, Devin Land, and us.

***Jean Vanier 1928-- Founder of L'Arche***

***"Our community life is beautiful and intense, a source of life for everyone. People with a disability experience a real transformation and discover confidence in themselves; they discover their capacity to make choices, and also find a certain liberty and above all their dignity as human beings."***

L'Arche began in 1964 in a small cottage in Trosly-Breuil, France, by Jean Vanier. After earning a Ph.D. in philosophy, he later worked in a mental institution but was appalled by the conditions in the institution for those with mental handicaps—not only a physically decaying building, but people abandoned by society and relatives, who felt rejected and who were starving for loving relationships. With great compassion he arranged for two men in the institution who had intellectual disabilities to be put into his care and thus began L'Arche with one cottage. His aim was for the men to feel valued, cherished, and loved. Canadian-born Vanier who is a Roman Catholic, started L'Arche in the Christian faith tradition. Currently, there are 147 member communities in 35 countries, reflecting diverse cultures and religious traditions. However, Devin told us that the majority of L'Arche homes in the United States are of the Christian tradition. In his writing Vanier has stated that, “Jesus is leading the way.” Vanier was recently awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize, as well as, others.

When it was time to depart from the group, Devin explained: “The secular systems in our society that also provide homes for this population, in their training, tell the assistants, “If someone says, ‘I love you!’ you can only say, ‘Thank you.’” However, in L'Arche homes the assistants have freedom to reciprocate with kind, loving words of their own choosing.

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.  
1 Corinthians 12:20-26 New International Version (NIV)

**“L'Arche is a way of life, but it's also a model of care that is unique. In our community...**

People with intellectual disabilities are at the heart of L'Arche. They're not clients, patients, or recipients of services, but rather they are friends, teachers, and companions. People with intellectual disabilities grow through their encounters in L'Arche. Through daily acts of care, trust, and friendship, they develop into ambassadors of compassion and leaders for social change and the common good. A divided society is mended through inclusivity; where people with many differences—social-economic status, race, religion, and intellectual capacity—live and work together.” \*

\*From the L'Arche Clinton website <http://www.larcheclinton.org/>

**Ways to Help:** From the L'Arche Clinton website: [Besides financial contributions] We are always looking to widen the circle of our community and there are many different ways to be involved in our

community life. Some are very hands on and others are more removed; all are equally important! Below are some possible ways of becoming involved in L'Arche Clinton as a volunteer:

- Offer time in one of the homes doing anything from cooking a meal to gardening.
  - Build a relationship with one of the core members by spending time together on a regular basis.
  - Get your hands dirty in any of our yards pulling weeds, planting flowers, edging, etc.
  - Prepare a meal to drop off at one of the homes (We'd love to have you stay for dinner, but you don't have to).
  - Become a member of our Board of Directors.
  - Take mending or hemming home.
  - Have a house over to your home for dinner.
- ....the possibilities are endless.

To pursue any of these ideas, or if you have come up with one of your own, please email your areas of interest to [clc.larcheclinton@gmail.com](mailto:clc.larcheclinton@gmail.com) or call our Administrative Office at 563-243-9035 to be put in touch with Bethany Luzny, our Volunteer Coordinator.

### **L'Arche Clinton Wish List: items you can donate**

<http://www.larcheclinton.org/participate.php#donate>