



# A Human Future

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L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.



Stephen Lewis is the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. He also sits on the WHO's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health and he is a director of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, dedicated to easing the pain of HIV/AIDS in Africa. His roles over the past two decades include Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and Canadian Ambassador to the UN. Recipient of many honours, he is well known for his deeply compassionate commitment to issues of justice and his concern for Africa. He is this year's CBC Massey Lecturer.

## *This does not permit us silence* An interview with Stephen Lewis

*Stephen Lewis touches our deepest aspirations to build a better world. In this interview Stephen Lewis talks not only about his passionate concern for Africa but also about his own motivations and hopes and about democratic socialism today.* Beth Porter, ed.

A Human Future is a free e-quarterly. We invite you to read back issues and to subscribe at: [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca).

**Beth Porter:** You say that sometimes you despair in face of the African pandemic. Why do you keep at this work?

**Stephen Lewis:** Mostly because futility leads nowhere. There is so much death it's hard to avoid feeling emotionally scalded, but you can't submit to that kind of thing.

I wrote the Massey Lectures because I needed to say to the world, 'Look, not that I've failed, but I've fallen dreadfully short, and these are the reasons for things not functioning.' If sometimes I

incriminated my own beloved United Nations and it is offended, I can live with that. I could not live with silence, or with another four years the same. I don't think anybody who isn't in Africa can under-

stand the incredible, completely unnecessary daily loss of thousands of lives. This does not permit us silence.

**How can our schools help people acquire a global vision?**

Focus more on developing countries, raising consciousness and heightening interest. Teach about the Millennium Development Goals, the targets that the

**"...part of a never-ending effort to create a more equal, caring and principled society."**

## Tara McElroy



*In Africa what touched me most was the people's sense of joy in the face of AIDS and so much poverty and hardship. Here, we don't have to worry about our basic needs and we're easily distracted and not so in touch with ourselves.*

*I don't want my perception of the people's joy to make me complacent. Nor do I want to be paralyzed by the complicated politics and problems; nor by wondering whether I have a right to be there. Unintentionally, the Western mentality has sometimes caused serious problems. The people there need to have control. I hope to be a support.*

*I plan to return soon to get re-grounded. In academic life you can lose touch with the realities that people are living and the ways policies and theories concretely impact people. Africa draws me for two reasons: The direst circumstances exist there. But also, the people have a latent strength in them that I could feel; a power that hasn't been accessed and can really bring change. It is bubbling just beneath the surface.*

Tara McElroy is a 3rd year student in International Development at McGill. In Grade 12 she visited Malawi, Zambia and South Africa with a Toronto Catholic School Board program. Says Tara, "I grew up with a sense that we're really blessed and that it's important to give back, and I want to do this."



United Nations has set for 2015, and about the nature of HIV and AIDS and what it is doing to high prevalence societies. The Board of York Region (north of Toronto), for instance, completely redid its curriculum around these issues and is making a tremendous difference.

**What do you think of programs that take students to Africa for a short volunteer experience?**

I think they are uniformly effective. The young people can learn a lifetime in one month and they usually come back fired up to make a contribution, which is what you want when you are trying to create global citizens. They are enormously welcome. You can keep them safe and not go where it is risky.

**How did your work in Africa in your early 20s influence you?**

It profoundly influenced the way I've seen the world ever since. I've understood the nature of disparity and inequality and social injustice vividly in international terms by having seen the extraordinary efforts needed to yank the continent out of impoverishment. And I've seen the enormous resilience and courage, the inherent generosity, sophistication and intelligence that exists at the grassroots in Africa. Also, a certain idealism flows from going to a continent like Africa. You feel social change is possible and you want to work for it.

**You have said that if the commitments to gender equality had been honoured we'd have a different world today.**

Generally, I think women bring to world affairs a heightened sensibility to human needs and human vulnerability. In developing countries, they do all the caring and most of the work, and they have a better sense of the way the country works at the community level. Those who have been to international conferences know the international covenants and fight for change, whether it's property rights, inherited rights, laws against sexual violence or schooling for girls. The more women in prominent positions, the more likely we are to have a better set of social relationships and a more sane, balanced, decent and humane society.



## Anurita Bains



*One of my favourite projects, Umoyo, is a training centre in Zambia for orphaned teenage girls. The girls gain a basic education, learn a skill such as sewing or cooking, receive counseling, and learn about the risk of unprotected sex. They usually arrive painfully shy. When they leave, they are strong, confident women ready to face life.*

*This is so important because what is happening to young women on the African continent is almost beyond imagining. In the age group of 15 to 24 year olds, 76 per cent of those who are HIV-positive are young women. Their vulnerability stems not simply from ignorance, but from their pervasive disempowerment. Many women have little capacity to say no to sex; they are unable to negotiate condom use in their relationships; they lack legal protections against abuse, and it is girls who are pulled out of school to care for sick parents and orphaned siblings. For too long, we've paid lip service to gender equality. Our lack of action is coming back to haunt us now....*

Condensed from "The Female Face of AIDS," an address at McGill University for World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, 2004. Anurita Bains is Special Assistant to Stephen Lewis. She previously assisted with the children's work of Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel in South Africa. In Canada she is known for her journalism.

I'm excited that the monolithic array of male leaders in Africa has finally been breached with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's recent election in Liberia. She will be a good president and will also advance women's rights. In the context of AIDS, if women had power, things would change. Universal access to treatment and reversal of the destruction of the social and economic order will be impossible without women at the center.

**You draw a huge audience. What are people responding to?**

I think they are responding because they feel that when part of the human family is under siege, the privileged part should respond. There's a decency and generosity in Canada. It's not merely financial; it's compassionate, expending of self, inclusive. People want to help. I myself am not responding from some overwrought humanitarianism. I respond because in my family from my father's generation to my own and I hope to our children, the overriding principle is that you spend your life struggling against social injustice. I'm part of a never-ending effort to create a more equal, caring and principled society.

**Is there a spiritual foundation to your work?**

No. I'm driven by a social philosophy, by democratic socialism, not by any spiritual instinct.

**Is democratic socialism changing today?**

I want to write a book about democratic socialism one day. I think it has been profoundly distorted in the post cold war period. Tony Blair is probably the leading democratic socialist internationally. His participation in Iraq has dealt a pretty savage blow to democratic socialism. I think his leadership on Africa through the Commission on Africa, is entirely commendable, but there's no certainty it will go anywhere.

In Canada, we're not a government in most provinces and federally, but we have some standing and we've still got our integrity, and that's what's most important. In a minority government you make compromises so the system can work, or so as not to self-immolate for the pleasure of capitalism. I think the fundamentals of democratic socialism remain in place.

How do we situate ourselves in front of cynicism about the UN?

I believe the United Nations remains the best-placed agency to bring change. If it could provide full leadership, I think it would prevail. It has been dreadfully sullied, mainly by its peace and security staff – in Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Srebrenica, Darfur. Conflicts, rivalry and unprincipled behavior, often amongst the permanent members of the Security Council, put a kind of straightjacket on the Secretary-General.

What the world appreciates about the UN is the work of UNICEF, the WHO, the World Food Program and agencies that really make a difference in lives. If we can shift the debate, which I'm going to try to help do, then the United Nations will come back into its own and the cynicism will dissipate.

What gives you optimism?

The fact that there is now among African governments an absolutely formidable determination to break the back of the pandemic. They were in a pattern of denial, of silence, but that has changed. And a time will come when the western world will not be so passive and inert.

*A Human Future* is edited by Beth Porter.



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 130 communities of L'Arche on five continents, 28 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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L'Arche Canada, 10265 Yonge Street,  
Richmond Hill, ON L4C 4Y7, Tel: 800-571-0212, Fax: 905-884-4819  
Email: [eporter@larchecanada.org](mailto:eporter@larchecanada.org)  
Website: [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca)

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## FOR YOUR INTEREST

### Jean Vanier and Balfour Mount in conversation

Join us for this live simulcast.

*Journey to Personal and Social Transformation*, Ottawa, January 31, 2006. Check this website: [www.larcheforum.com/](http://www.larcheforum.com/) for more information and to find out how you can join the live simulcast or attend a simulcast event sponsored by a local L'Arche community.

Dr. Balfour Mount is the founder of the Hospice Movement in Canada. Jean Vanier is founder of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities. Both are outstanding moral and social leaders who are convinced that society has much to learn from the most vulnerable among us.

- Stephen Lewis, *Race Against Time*, Toronto: Anansi, 2005 (The CBC Massey Lectures).
- The Stephen Lewis Foundation: [www.stephenlewisfoundation.org](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org)  
Before Dec. 12, you can give a Holiday Season Gift in someone's name and have it acknowledged:  
[www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/donate.html](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/donate.html)  
"Voices from the Frontlines" in the fight against HIV/AIDs in Africa: [www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/grassroots/frontlines.htm](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/grassroots/frontlines.htm)
- The United Nations Millennium Development Goals: [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)
- UN World Health Organization (WHO): [www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)
- Make Poverty History Alliance: [www.makepovertyhistory.ca/](http://www.makepovertyhistory.ca/)
- CIDA [www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/index-e.htm](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/index-e.htm)
- Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger, *Me to We: Turning Self Help on its Head*, Canada: Wiley, 2004
- International Volunteer programs for young people:  
Free the Children: [www.freethechildren.com/index.php](http://www.freethechildren.com/index.php)  
Leaders Today: [www.leaderstoday.com/](http://www.leaderstoday.com/)  
Canada World Youth: [www.cwy-jcm.org/en](http://www.cwy-jcm.org/en)  
Intercordia Canada: [www.InterCordiaCanada.org](http://www.InterCordiaCanada.org)  
The Coady International Institute: [www.coady.stfx.ca/](http://www.coady.stfx.ca/)
- New book from PLAN: *The Company of Others: Stories of Belonging*, [www.planinstitute.ca/products\\_books.cfm](http://www.planinstitute.ca/products_books.cfm)

L'Arche Canada's new website is on-line, though not quite finished. Please take a look: [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca)