



The Seeding of L'Arche in Canada

The Story of Steve and Ann Newroth, Founders of L'Arche Daybreak

How was L'Arche born in the minds and hearts of the bright, sophisticated young Canadians who brought it to Canada? What fired their imaginations to put aside their plans to follow a respected career path into the Anglican ministry and rather to live in a 200-year old farmhouse, used for a time as a stable, in a tiny French village far from the amenities of a city and to welcome three men to share it with them who could not read or write or carry on any kind of in-depth conversation and who needed help with the basic skills of living? Steve and Ann Newroth are that couple, and this is the story that lies behind the founding of L'Arche in Canada.

The early 1960s were a hopeful time in North America and a time of many changes in the ways people thought and lived. Both the USA and Canada had recovered from World War II and become prosperous. The United Nations had been created, it was a time of optimism, and many people felt they could build a better world. It was the era of the hippies and experiments in different ways of living together, especially on the West Coast of the USA. It was the Kennedy era and the period of the Peace Corps, and in Canada, of CUSO and The Company of Young Canadians, and there was a growing consciousness of human rights and of disparities in society. The eugenics movement that led to many people with disabilities being sterilized had been discredited. In the coming years the whole idea of putting people with disabilities into institutions would be increasingly questioned and produced a prolonged social struggle. Most North Americans identified themselves as Christian and most still had a church affiliation, but the churches, those bastions of conservatism and tradition, were also changing and denominations were becoming more open to one another and to different ways of worshipping.

The greatest change occurred in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1963, the Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John XXIII, had begun to meet. There was suddenly a new hope in the air as its previously firmly closed doors were thrown open and Catholics and those of other Christian denominations began to meet one another and engage in dialogue and informal sharing. For the young seminary students of St. Basil's RC College and Trinity College (Anglican) at the University of Toronto, this was an exciting time. Steve Newroth, who was studying theology at Trinity, recalls that on several evenings groups of St. Basil's students would gather with the Anglican students in the Trinity common room, where beer was permitted (not yet the case at St. Basil's), to share music and theological conversation that stimulated their minds and fed their hearts.

It was also the year before Jean Vanier started L'Arche in the small village of Trosly-Breuil, an hour by train north-east of Paris, and Jean was quickly becoming a very popular Philosophy professor at nearby St. Michael's College, the Basilian undergraduate college that was part of the University of Toronto. Jean had recently received his doctorate from the Institut Catholique in Paris, where he had lived in a small student community called "Eau Vivre" with a Dominican priest named Father Thomas Philippe



(affectionately known as Père Tomas), who had become Jean's friend and mentor. Jean was a Canadian, the son of Pauline Vanier and the man who was by then Governor General of Canada, Georges Vanier. Although a few years older than Steve and Ann, Jean Vanier too had undertaken a journey of discovery. His teen years during World War II were lived in the Royal Naval Academy and then in the navy. At the end of the war he had seen Holocaust survivors and had a sense of the horrors of what human beings can do to one another. He began university studies in Paris on a spiritual quest to find a meaningful path for his life. Père Tomas was a great help to Jean in this journey. Jean had contemplated being ordained as a priest, but by this time, with Vatican II in the offing, the church was already changing and young men and women were beginning to envision other ways of dedicating their lives to God and living out a vocation, besides the traditional paths of priesthood or vowed religious life as a nun or brother or monk. Communities such as Eau Vive, where lay men and women and vowed religious shared life together, were a new and radical idea.

Steve Newroth's path crossed Jean's when a Basilian seminarian invited Steve to sit in on one of Jean's lectures, certain that Steve would find it engaging. The lecture hall was so packed that the lecture needed to be moved to a larger hall. Steve recalls the students were crowding in everywhere—sitting in the aisles and lining the back of the hall—and they were all hanging on Jean's words. Jean had studied Greek philosophy, and one might have expected his lectures to be rather dry and boring, but his was a different way of teaching philosophy and it spoke directly to them about their lives and relationships and their daily decisions. When Jean began to speak, Steve immediately perceived there was indeed something different about him. He had a way of talking so naturally and insightfully about life, making connections with Aristotle's ideas about friendship and happiness, and infusing what he said with a profound but not necessarily obvious spirituality. Jean also talked about prayer. For Jean, it was the most natural of conversations. Steve began to visit Jean and they talked and came to know each other.

For three years, Steve was chair of the Canadian Theological Students Conference, which held its annual meeting at the University of Toronto during the Christmas break, from 1963 to 1965. (The Conference was sponsored by the Ecumenical Institute directed by Canon James Puxley, a fine academic who had been Steve's parish priest.) As keynote speakers in 1964, Steve invited Jean Vanier and William Stringfellow, a civil rights lawyer and Episcopal theologian who lived with the Berrigans, brother Catholic priests who were jailed in the USA for leading anti-nuclear and anti-war protests. Both Vanier and Stringfellow were seen by the establishment as radicals, and both were increasingly recognized by progressive thinkers as breathing new life into the churches. For Steve, planning for this conference with Jean was a time of bonding and it was then that Jean invited Ann and Steve to join him in his very new little community in the village of Trosly-Breuil, in France.

In the early and mid-60s, Jean condensed his Philosophy course into the month of February, gave retreats and talks in other parts of Canada, and spent a portion of his time each year in France where he visited Père Tomas, his mentor. By 1964, Père Tomas had become chaplain to a large institution for men who had intellectual disabilities on the outskirts of Paris. He had settled in the small village of Trosly-Breuil, an hour north-east of Paris, where there was another small institution and no church at all. Père Tomas created a tiny chapel in the small house where he lived. This village, Trosly-Breuil, had suffered

through a long history of war and had been at the front in both World Wars. (In fact, the Armistice that ended World War I was signed nearby in the forest of Compiègne.) The mayor and many people in the village were communists and the villagers tended to be suspicious of outsiders and of anything to do with Catholicism. Père Tomas had had experience in Paris as chaplain to the Canadian Chargé d'affaires (ambassador) and over the years that L'Arche grew in Trosly, his diplomacy skills were sometimes called upon so as to smooth interactions with their neighbours.

On his trips back to France, Jean Vanier went with Père Tomas to visit some of the large, bleak institutions where many men with intellectual disabilities were “warehoused,” as it were. Jean was struck by the barren conditions in which they lived and was touched by their loneliness, their cry for friendship, and their longing to connect with him. With Père Tomas, Jean conceived the idea of buying a small house and welcoming two or three of these men to live with him as a kind of family. In August of 1964, he moved forward with his plan, inviting Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux and another man, Danny, to come to live with him. (Danny could not settle in the house and within a day or two, he returned to the institution.)



Jean Vanier (right) with L'Arche friends in front of the first L'Arche house in the village of Trosly-Breuil, 1966.

The house Jean could afford was ramshackle, but friends came and helped with renovating it and before long they had become a kind of small extended family in and close to the house. Among those first friends who came to help was Louis Pretty, a French Canadian architect from Montreal who helped Jean choose the first house and plan the renovations. Jean called the house “L'Arche” after Noah’s Ark, a place of refuge and security. (In France it was customary for people to give names to their homes.)

When Jean returned to teach at St. Mike’s the following year, Steve continued his talks with Jean. He too was wrestling with whether he should be ordained. He and Ann had gotten married in 1965 and they invited Jean to dinner in their apartment, where Jean described the new little community in Trosly. Steve would graduate in the spring of 1966, and they were planning to travel to Europe as Steve had won a scholarship to study at the Ecumenical Institute in Geneva. Jean invited Steve and Ann to come to Trosly to work with people with intellectual disabilities in his new community. Ann had a beloved aunt who had Down Syndrome and Jean’s new life with people who had disabilities intrigued them. Steve postponed his scholarship, they made a one-year commitment to Jean, and in October 1966 they sailed to France along with a steamer trunk of their possessions. Fresh off the ship in their good clothes, they were taken to a L'Arche retreat at Ourscamp, near Trosly. It was a time when, especially in France, dress codes were still quite conservative and women didn’t even wear pants. They remember looking totally

out of place among the L'Arche people who were in country working clothes, for women usually peasant skirts and woolen stockings.

Steve and Ann recall spending the first few nights on an incredibly lumpy old mattress on the third floor of the old 19th century chateau that was the residence of the small institution in the village. Soon after he opened the house with Raphael and Philippe, Jean had been asked to take over directorship of this institution, called "Le feu vert." Jean threw open the gates and, to the alarm of some of the villagers, the men were for the first time able to walk about the village free from their previous prison-like existence. With friends and helpers, Jean was happy to take on the running also of the institution's workshop and gardens where the men could work according to their abilities. The workshop did bookbinding and created mosaics. Some of the men, such as the three men Ann and Steve were to welcome in a third house, were independent enough to work outside the sheltered workshop, as such facilities were called. (In the early years in France, L'Arche welcomed only men with intellectual disabilities. Women with intellectual disabilities began to be welcomed a few years later.)



When Ann and Steve arrived in Trosly in late September 1966, they found that the little community had acquired a 200-year-old farmhouse that had been last used as a stable, and their first job was to get it ready to welcome more men with intellectual disabilities. The house was called "Les Rameaux," in French, "the palm branches," an allusion to Palm Sunday. The house was in the process of undergoing major renovations and repairs, but it was in a good location, a short walk from the other two homes in Trosly at that time—the chateau household (the institutional residence) and the original house called "L'Arche," opened two years earlier. (In time, the entire grouping of homes in Trosly came to be called "L'Arche" or "L'Arche Trosly," and the name was carried elsewhere, so that when new communities were opened they usually assumed the name "L'Arche" in some form, often along with another word describing themselves or their location. What is now L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario, was initially called, "The Friends of L'Arche.")

Many links of friendship were formed in Trosly in those early days. At Jean's suggestion, before they left Canada Ann and Steve met with Brian Halferty, who had been a Basilian seminarian. Brian also decided to go to Trosly and was the one other Canadian there while they were there. Brian worked with Steve on the maintenance team. (In 1972, Brian, who had returned to Canada and married, came with his wife Mary Lou and their small daughter to help Steve and Ann in the new Canadian community.)

Steve's story at that time:

During that year (1966-67), Steve describes rising very early to join Jean in the small chapel in prayer. "Jean helped me to learn to pray that year," Steve explains. "He guided me beyond religion into the world of spirituality and into the peace and calm that lies in stillness." Steve was familiar with the prayers read from the prayer book and psalter. He tells of learning from Jean the deep spiritual experience of silence and prayer in which one could rest in God, even learning that there are different kinds of silence. "In those early days of L'Arche in Trosly, when it was still small and before Jean began

to travel much of the year speaking and visiting new communities, the community life was intimate and Jean was very readily accessible," Steve recalls. "I would confer each morning with Jean about the work to be done, and we would have the noon meal with Jean. This was the main meal for the 18-20 people of L'Arche at that time, which Ann worked to prepare with Anne-Marie Moranvillier during the morning." After the meal, everyone would then help with the dishes. Jean liked to wash. It was at time of comradery; they would sing and joke or play games as they washed up.



Christmas Dinner 1966 (Ann at Jean's left)

Steve describes this as a time when his and others' stereotypes were falling away. It was more and more clear to him that becoming a priest in the institutional church was not the only way to follow God's call, and that ministry could take other forms. He was questioning more deeply his journey towards ordination. He discussed this with Jean, who suggested Steve spend a retreat week at a nearby Trappist monastery to reflect on his questions. Steve recalls that the abbot would pick him up each evening and they would go for a walk. By the end of that week, he had decided not to be ordained and, while his Anglican bishop in Canada was upset, Steve felt a great burden had been lifted from him. Jean's moral support was very important to Steve at that time. The next year Steve and Ann did journey on to Geneva and Steve took up his scholarship, but with a clearer vision of the future as the idea of starting L'Arche in Canada was taking root in their minds and hearts.

In fact, Steve Newroth's personal history followed Jean Vanier's in several regards in these early years: Both had a military background (Steve attended the Royal Military College, in Kingston, Canada), both had taken flying training, both had felt called to ministry in their respective churches, and therefore they had assumed, to ordination, both had revisited this sense of call and become convinced that they could serve God perhaps better by not being ordained, both received scathing letters from their bishops because of their decision (Jean, five years earlier), and both discovered deep meaning and joy in the call to share their lives with people who have intellectual disabilities even though this meant entering a rather precarious time financially and living a life that was quite counter-cultural. Thankfully, both had the support of people closest to them, in particular Père Tomas in Jean's case, and Ann in Steve's case. Like Jean's father, Steve's father had also served in a war, though in his case World War II. After the war, Steve's family moved to a farm near Sharon, Ontario, and this farming experience as a boy and teenager later proved very helpful to Steve.

Ann's Story at that time:

Ann grew up in Oakville, Ontario, near Toronto, and after undergraduate studies in Merchandising Administration was recruited by Eaton's and sent to Montreal for a management training program. After graduating from university, Steve was hired by Air Canada and given a management role in Montreal. They met through Steve's roommate, who was in the same program as Ann, and they soon began dating. In time, Steve moved to Toronto to study for the Anglican ministry. At that time, Ann was working in fashion merchandising at Simpson's, a large upscale Toronto department store. They were

married in 1965, when Steve had one more year of studies at Trinity College. Ann's expectation, like Steve's, was that after ordination they would move to the Diocese of Labrador. There, Steve would serve remote Anglican coastal congregations to which he would need to fly in, since there was no road access. (His bishop described this parish area as 400 miles long and 400 meters wide.) With Steve's being awarded the scholarship to study in Switzerland, both were looking forward to their time in Europe first. They were also both very open to Jean's invitation to L'Arche Trosly. Their good relationship with Ann's Aunt Helen added to their interest. Helen could no longer live with her mother and was living in an institution near Toronto, from which they would sometimes pick her up and take her to spend a weekend with them. (As was the case for many families, placing Helen in an institution was a very difficult decision for Helen's family and they did so with great reluctance.) Needless to say, moving from a career in fashion to managing a household of people who had intellectual disabilities was a radical change for Ann, but she was up for it and she brought her good managerial skills to the role. Together, she and Steve formed a fine team.



Ann with the three men in Les Rameaux, 1966

Life in Les Rameaux that first year was much more comfortable than their first few nights on the top floor of the old chateau. They had a clean bedroom and the community had bought a new double bed for them. But still it meant overcoming many challenges, not least of which was constant fatigue as they struggled to understand French and to be understood, while labouring full time to establish the new home. Ann ran the house, cooked, and helped Philippe Seux with his needlework project during the days. Steve was head of the Maintenance Team and worked mainly outside. The three men they welcomed to Les Rameaux—Jean-Marie Lucas, Jean-Pierre Rontard, and Bernard Juliet—were moderately independent. They had been living with families or in foster homes in the area and all had jobs at a local brush factory, but each needed a permanent home. Ann was a good cook, and the men liked the meals. That certainly helped! Discovering what kinds of practical support the men needed took time. The laundry was sent out to a central location, and Ann recalls getting a note from the L'Arche laundry asking her to cut the toe nails of one of the men because his socks all had holes in the toes!

The kitchen of the house was a very busy place. It was the location for the only shower and toilet, and the only staircase led from the kitchen up to the men's dorm. The gas stove was difficult to light and would periodically explode. Ann and Steve's bedroom was at the front end of the house. Typical of old farm houses, the doorways were low. Steve, who is quite tall, recalls often whacking his head just at eyebrow level on his way into the kitchen. Steve did a great deal of physical work on the property and in the gardens and workshop, often making repairs with make-shift parts. With others, he also helped build a first small chapel for the community by converting a storage area behind Les Rameaux. This chapel was ready for the community's celebration of Christmas that year, 1966. Besides the scheduled work, Steve started a "Club de Velo"—a cycling club—and repaired old bicycles so that the men in the community would have a means to get around. He recalls that some of the villagers raised questions about the men's cycling abilities and they had to develop a certification program for the cyclists. And

then there were often unexpected demands. For instance, the water table was only about 3 feet below the floor level of the house. Dampness was constant and flooding was frequent during heavy rains. They often had to dig to make repairs in wet conditions.

Evening meals were eaten together with the men in Les Rameaux, and in spite of the fatigue and



Christmas 1966, Lucien, Henri W, Enid (Steve's sister-in-law, who was visiting), Raphael seated with Ann, and Jean-Marie, Jean-Pierre and Bernard behind.

demands of the language, Ann and Steve recall that they all did a great deal of laughing and joking. They explain, "It seemed the men thought it was their job to entertain us, and they attempted this with much enthusiasm." In the Christmas picture on this page Bernard is holding a sign which says (in French), "How I love work! I could watch it all day!"

By the end of that year, Ann and Steve were both functionally bilingual and the strains of trying to communicate had eased greatly. Life in the community was informal, and there were periodic outings and pilgrimages, for instance to Fatima, where Jean had built a small house a few years earlier. The community in the village of Trosly was growing in numbers of people and in houses, but, as Jean put it, it grew "like life," with no big overarching plan. During that year the community acquired the

house that came to be called L'Hermitage, and it too was being renovated. Soon after, another old house that also had been used as a stable and even a bakery and needed much work, was acquired as an overflow house for assistants.

Other Challenges--Married and Anglican! As a couple, Ann and Steve represented a challenge for the little L'Arche community. Others in the community were all single, and celibacy was the norm. The community was not quite sure how to relate to and incorporate a couple, so they were not always accommodated. Also, they were a little older and a strong team. They sensed at times that some of the younger assistants felt somewhat intimidated by them. The spiritual life of the community presented challenges as well. The others were all Roman Catholic. Ann and Steve were committed Anglicans, and while they deeply appreciated the prayer life for which Jean set the tone they sensed that there was sometimes tension with some of the more conservative Roman Catholics with regard to the daily Eucharist celebrated by Pere Tomas in the community's small chapel. (The local



Catholic bishop had decided that they were able to receive RC communion there since there was no Anglican church near them.)

Steve Newroth and Mme Pauline Vanier

During the year that Ann and Steve spent in Trosly, Jean’s father, Georges Vanier, died, and Jean went home to Canada for the funeral. (In the months that followed, he wrote a lovely book about his father, *In Weakness, Strength.*) A few months later, Mme Pauline Vanier, Jean’s mother, came for a visit. In her presence, Steve presented the Trosly community with a chalice and paten, a gift from his alma mater, Trinity College in Toronto, for celebration of the mass in the community’s new chapel next to Les Rameaux. The chalice was engraved in memory of Georges Vanier, and Mme Vanier was deeply moved by this gift—a gift from an Anglican seminary to a Roman Catholic chapel. Georges Vanier had attended daily mass throughout his life, she told Steve and Ann. The gift was very fitting. It was certainly one of many gestures that were the fruit of the growing ecumenism of the time and that were signs that L’Arche was being called to walk to this new drumbeat.

Beginning L’Arche in Canada:

In the summer of 1968, Steve and Ann visited Jean in Trosly on their way back to Canada after their year in Geneva. Together they agreed that Steve and Ann would work to found a L’Arche community in Canada. On his frequent travels Jean had developed helpful contacts



Ann and Steve in 1968 ready to return to Canada

including Red Foster, a Toronto advertising magnate who started the Special Olympics, and Eunice Shriver, sister of President John Kennedy in the USA. They had a sister with an intellectual disability, and Eunice had come to visit Jean in Trosly. Jean also had come to know various orders of sisters and religious.

During his time in Canada each year, Jean would recruit more young people to come and help in L’Arche. Steve recalls that Jean’s approach to recruiting was subtle, simply sharing stories of their life together in France and, with love and conviction, offering a vision of a different kind of society. People often didn’t realize they were being recruited!

Jean was asked by the bishop to give a retreat for priests in the late spring of 1969 at Mary Lake, the Augustinian monastery just north of Toronto. He agreed providing that the retreat could be open to an equal mix of—lay people, religious (nuns and monks or brothers) and priests. Ann and Steve attended. (Soon after, these retreats at Mary Lake were opened also to people with disabilities whatever their limitations and came to be known as Faith and Sharing retreats. These emerged out of the pilgrimage movement called Faith and Light, co-founded by Jean and Marie-Hélène Mathieu in 1971 as a support to families of people who have a member with a disability.)



The Big House, given to open the first L’Arche in Canada, with the original "gang" on the front porch, 1970

Among those present at the 1969 Mary Lake retreat were members of Our Lady’s Missionaries (a Roman Catholic order of nuns) who, upon getting word that Steve and Ann were prepared to begin L’Arche in Canada, offered their

large old house on a farm owned by the Basilian order of priests, at the north end of Richmond Hill. Ann and Steve recognized that the new community would take the shape of a farm and they would need land. For a dollar, the Basilians agreed to sell the new little community 13 acres of land that included the barn and other farm buildings near the house, and they agreed to the L'Arche's community's farming the other approximately 100 acres of adjacent farm land until such times as the Basilians needed to sell it. The rest of the farm property acquired for the new L'Arche community included a large barn (still standing today, 2014, and now a woodworking shop), a chicken coop, which soon housed 400 egg-laying hens, a garage and farm workshop building, fields that were used for pasture and crops, and a large market garden. Besides cattle, there were two ponies and later four horses. It also provided space for neighbours to keep bee hives. After a few years the farm acquired a milk cow and several sheep. Ann recalls that Mme Vanier gave her \$100 and the name of a bank president she should go to see to open an account for the new community.

Meanwhile, Steve enrolled in an Applied Psychology degree program at the University of Toronto so as to have a suitable credential for the work they proposed to undertake. Ann's background in organizational management and business would complement Steve's qualification. At that time the Anglican Houses for people who needed homes, were starting up in Toronto, and among the Anglican



On Big House steps (1970): Row 1: Helen Humphries, John Bloss, Bill Van Buren. R 2: Brian Hayday, Frank Sutton, David Harmon. R 3: Alva Gane John Smeltzer, Ronnie Johnson (a visitor) R 4: Debbie Andrews, Richard Herbenner, Peter Rotterman; R 5: Michel Tonnelier, Jean-Frederick Newroth held by Steve Newroth, Ann Newroth.

community there was an expectation that Ann and Steve might take leadership in these. There was a certain awkwardness as the Newroths needed to explain that, no, their intention was to start a L'Arche community, a community that would be their home as well as the home of the people they welcomed.

Ann gave birth to their first child, Jean-Frederick, in September 1968, and the community, initially simply called "Friends of L'Arche," officially began on October 16th, 1969 with Ann and Steve and one-year old Frederick welcoming Bill Van Buren into the Big House, as it came to be called. Bill had been living in the Lawson children's residence and, having turned 16, needed to move out.

Shortly after Bill, Peter Rotterman came from the small institution of Pine Ridge, in Aurora, a few miles



The same group in the renovated barn with Shep, the pony, 1970.

north of Richmond Hill, and then David Harmon, whose mother was closely involved as a volunteer from the

beginning. The community grew steadily over the first several months as more and more people with disabilities came and young assistants came and went. In 1970, they welcomed the first woman, Ann's Aunt Helen. Ann and Steve searched for a name for the new L'Arche community for some time. The name "Daybreak" was chosen at a meeting of all of the assistants and was suggested by a young man named Matthew-Mark, a fan of Joan Baez who had released an album with the hit song "Daybreak."

The big house that they had been given had been built for seminarians and later used by nuns. It was not structurally suited to the kind of homey living arrangement that was L'Arche. A large chapel occupied half of the downstairs. Ann and Steve made one main floor room into their bedroom. The retreat master's small bedroom, far down the long hallway on the main floor, became Frederick's bedroom. An institutional kitchen and a dining room occupied most of the rest of the main floor. The bedrooms on the second floor were small narrow cells each with room for a single bed and a small bureau. These were occupied by core members and the assistants slept on the 3rd floor. At the end of the second floor were communal showers and toilets and the laundry area. The basement was used for gatherings such as a monthly coffee house to which friends and families were invited.

By the fall of 1970, the community had reached 15 people and was continuing to grow. They needed more space. They renovated the barn and began to build a second, more "homey" house on the property (the "New House," opened in 1972) and also a bungalow where Ann and Steve and Frederick could live and where their daughter Stephanie was born. (Some years later, this bungalow became home for the farm manager and his family and today is L'Arche Daybreak's small retreat house called The Cedars.) In 1973, the community also rented a house on Avoca Avenue just near St. Clair and Yonge Street in downtown Toronto that was owned by the United Church of Canada. Though it was quite a distance from the Daybreak farm property, Steve accepted the offer of this house knowing it would be ideal for some of the core members who were city people and were happier in an urban environment. (Many years later, when the downtown community had opened more homes and settled eastward along The Danforth, it became a separate community and today is known as L'Arche



Mel Kirzner at Avoca House



A Daybreak group on vacation in Algonquin Park. They slept in tents.

Toronto.) When the New House was opened, several more people with disabilities and assistants arrived. Another house, the Green House (named for the colour it was painted), was built on the farm property and opened in 1974, again with more arrivals. The community also began to rent a house on Neal Drive in Richmond Hill where a couple, the Jamins, lived with some core members who were more independent lived. (This house later was replaced by 26 Church Street North, a 3-storey brick former rooming house that the community bought and renovated.)

Important aspects of community life included an annual community weekend away, an annual vacation together or in small groups, a monthly "coffee house" held in the

basement of the Big House, a weekly planning meeting for assistants, and a house meeting, usually on Sunday evening, where all could raise issues of concern and details such as shopping and meals and household chores would be sorted out among all in the house, and a weekly community worship time. The community was ecumenical and would often invite local clergy to lead services. Sometimes, a priest would come for a while to be an assistant and also lead services. At first, almost everyone had some kind of Christian background and those who wished, attended local Anglican, United and Roman Catholic churches on Sundays. In 1971, the community welcomed its first Jewish member. Faith and Sharing retreats and Faith and Light Pilgrimages were important to the early life of L'Arche in Canada as well as in France and as L'Arche spread to other countries. In 1971, many people in or close to L'Arche Daybreak joined their European L'Arche friends in a pilgrimage to Lourdes. In 1974, Ann organized a very large ecumenical pilgrimage to Canterbury with a follow-up visit to Taize. (Taize is an ecumenical community in France near the German border, founded after World War II to try to bring together people of different nationalities and faith traditions.)

One day each week a core member and an assistant would drive a route around Richmond Hill to deliver eggs and, as available, farm produce to townspeople who had ordered them. With the arrival of more women in the community, it was decided to turn part of the farm workshop into a bakery. This provided good work for three of the women core members. They sold their baked goods to homes that were on the egg route and later, at a farmers' market. Society was just becoming aware of the need for recycling, and with a grant the community was able to start a small recycling business with a truck that collected newspapers left on the curbside. This provided a good alternative for those who did not want to work on the farm or do sedentary work in the ARC Industries sheltered workshop run by the local Association for Retarded Persons.



George Beatty grading eggs. George came to L'Arche Daybreak in 1972.

In 1972, Brian and Mary Lou Halferty came to Daybreak with their little daughter, Erin. They opened the New House where eight members with disabilities gradually settled in. The second Halferty child, Peter, was born at Daybreak. With the passing of the Homes for Retarded Persons Act* by the Bill Davis government in Ontario, and new groups wanting to start, Steve was called to attend more meetings and to get involved in advocacy. He asked Brian Halferty to help with this. It was a time of huge social transition. There were tensions between families wanting their children to live in homes in their own community and families wanting their children to stay in the large institutions that existed across Ontario and throughout Canada. An important research centre, The National Institute for Mental Retardation (NIMR), had been established on the York University campus, with Wolf Wolfensberger, an early pioneer in community living, as a driving force. NIMR was working to influence government policy with regard to people with intellectual disabilities. In Toronto, the Metro Association for Retarded Persons formed around that time, and it too worked to influence provincial policy.** (For the first several years, funding for L'Arche came from donations from friends, family members and churches. Assistants worked as volunteers, receiving a small stipend.)



Brian became involved (representing L'Arche) with other groups who were advocating for deinstitutionalization in Ontario and the establishment of funding for people with intellectual disabilities, so that they could live in their home towns and cities. Brian was seconded to the provincial government where he wrote the first "Comprehensive Regional Plan of Services for People with Mental Disabilities." While it was not actually adopted, it did bring about the scuttling of a government plan to expand the Pine Ridge institution and it was used as a model by other groups in Canada and the USA.*** In 1975, the Halfertys left Daybreak to found the farm community of Frontenac, later relocated to Arnprior, Ontario.)

Ann and Steve's lives were extremely busy and often tough slogging. Ann recalls it as an exhilarating and an exhausting time. They lost a baby during those years. Not only was there a farm to oversee, but also a rapidly growing community with several work programs. Ann managed the financial side of the community, planning and overseeing the budgets and doing all the accounting. The youngest core members, as the people with disabilities were called, attended school until they were 21, and those who were already adults worked on the farm or in the ARC Industries sheltered workshop. Assistants came for varying amounts of time, some better workers and more suited to the life of the community than others. Steve, having been raised on a farm, oversaw the work on the farm those first years as well as being a part-time student.

From the early 70s on, L'Arche communities were founded in several locations across Canada, and for a time Steve was asked to serve as the first coordinator for L'Arche in North America. The first national L'Arche meeting was held in 1975 at Daybreak and at the Mary Lake Retreat Centre. Some of the other early L'Arche leaders (Maurice and Mary Charbonneau in Ottawa, who had been in Trosly, Pat and Jo in Alberta) looked to Ann and Steve for leadership. Ann served on the board of L'Arche Ottawa.

With the passing of the Homes for Retarded Persons Act, Steve was called to attend more meetings and to get involved in advocacy. It was a time of huge social transition. There were tensions between families wanting their children to live in homes in their own community and families wanting their children to stay in the large institutions that existed across Ontario and throughout Canada. The new National Institute for Mental Retardation, established on the York University campus, was more and more influencing policy. In Toronto, the Metro Association for Retarded Persons formed around that time, and it too worked to influence government policy. **

By the time Steve and Ann moved on from Daybreak in 1977, there were seven homes, a farm, a bakery, and Daybreak Publications. After seven busy years, Steve and Ann needed a time to re-focus and to determine whether they felt led to return to L'Arche or to move on to a new path. Daybreak had become a demanding job, their children were now of an age when they could no longer be put to bed after dinner and allow Ann or Steve to attend evening meetings. They needed some family time apart from the community of Daybreak. (In those early years, L'Arche had not come to grips with the needs of married couples, as the great majority of assistants were young and unmarried or had made a commitment to celibacy.)



A little earlier, Ann and Steve had bought a run-down house in Port Hope, Ontario, not far from Ann's mother, who was not well. Steve had been renovating and they spent a few months relaxing there and helping Ann's mother. They wrote a monograph on Alzheimer's Disease during that time and it was published by the still relatively recently-established National Institute on Mental Retardation (NIMR—now the Roeher Centre at York University). It was a very practical guide that came from their experience of supporting some of L'Arche members who had developed Alzheimer's Disease and proved helpful to many. Over the ensuing decades Ann and Steve remained close to L'Arche, sometimes in an advisory role (several other L'Arche communities opened across Canada after Daybreak was founded, and today there are 29 Canadian communities of L'Arche), and living in the spirit of L'Arche, and they continued to work for the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, bringing their leadership skills in various situations and to various organizations including provincial governments in Ontario and Alberta. When Access Community Services, Inc. was taking form in Port Hope, Steve served on the board, and later Ann became its Executive Director in 1978 when its founding leader, another former L'Arche assistant, went back to school. It continues today to serve people with disabilities, still promoting a vision of mutuality in relationships much like the vision of L'Arche that Ann and Steve brought to it.

When Steve paid a visit to Trosly around this time, Pere Tomas suggested he perhaps could be a link with the institutions, which they both felt needed to close. This indeed came to pass. Steve worked with the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services and, as the Administrator of the Muskoka Centre, and gradually closed down this institution after overseeing the seven-year process of finding homes for its residents in their own communities and closing down Centre. (Muskoka Centre finally closed in 1995.) It was not a simple process as many people in the town had found employment at the institution for generations. Steve was a target of much pressure as the one who had to keep the process moving. Later, Steve was CEO of the provincial Mental Health Board in Alberta, where there were two institutions slated for closure. He was there for two years.

After a couple of years living in Muskoka, to which they had relocated, Ann took a position with Catulpha-Tamarack Child and Family Services in Orillia, a service with 110 employees across far-flung Simcoe County. After a year, Ann became Executive Director. She was with this organization for twelve years.

For the past 8-10 years they have worked to help the small new L'Arche community El Arca Querétaro, about 200 km north of Mexico, fundraising and driving down to Mexico support them in practical ways. Steve had become a member of the Rotary Club in their area and this Club has provided much of the financial support for their first home and their workshop.

*The Homes for Retarded Persons Act was replaced by other legislation over time--the Ontario government's Developmental Services Act (2001) and in 2008, by the Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act.



Besides the new community of Daybreak, at the beginning of the 70s there were several small homes in southern Ontario for people who had a developmental disability—among them were Lorimer Lodge, Lawson Children’s Residence, Woodholme (the Colonel Lawson Home in London). The Metro Association for Retarded Persons (later the “Community Living Association”) formed around that time. There were six groups in the Association at that time, Steve and Ann recall, each running small residential services for people with intellectual disabilities.

The Metro Association was family-oriented and set up workshops for families who kept their member with a disability at home. It grew into the Community Living Associations that exist across the Greater Toronto Area and across Canada today. CLA’s and the CACL have long worked with other groups to influence government policy and as an advocacy organization for provincial funding.

** *Brian Halferty continued to be involved in advocacy work, representing the values of L’Arche. He was a member of the National ComServ (Comprehensive Services) Committee of the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded through the later 1970’s, while Director of L’Arche Frontenac in Eastern Ontario. In this capacity he was part of a visiting evaluation team to Lethbridge, Alberta, and to Sept-Isles, Quebec, where ComServ regions were being planned. He was also asked to participate in conferences in Ontario and Quebec having to do with services for people with handicapping conditions, and was part of a colloquium in Quebec City involving service providers and government officials.

Today, while L’Arche tends to keep a low profile, it continues across Canada and around the world (as L’Arche International) to advocate for government policies that treat people with disabilities with dignity and recognize their rights and their gifts. In recent years, L’Arche Canada has received grants from the Canadian government’s Social Development Partnerships Program to prepare a best practices book (*More than Inclusion/ L’Envers du monde*) and an interactive website on friendship for people who have intellectual disabilities (*iBelong.ca/jai-des-amis.ca*). Also, many people who have had experience in L’Arche, like Ann and Steve, have gone on to work for the recognition and rights of people with intellectual disabilities in the public sphere. From 2015-18 L’Arche will be represented on the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by Professor Jonas Ruškus, a nationally and internationally recognized expert in the area of disability and a member of the board of L’Arche Lithuania who spent four years in L’Arche in Trosly earlier in his life.

To learn about Jean Vanier’s founding of L’Arche in 1964 and the first members, click here:

http://www.larchefoundation.ca/en/econnect/number_1_may_june_2013