



DI-204

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY LIFE

This is an Guideline document to be used by L'Arche Communities
Designed to be a tool for reflection and learning,
It should be adapted according to different local situations and cultures.

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FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY LIFE

Introduction

We have learned a lot from more than thirty years of community life in L'Arche. L'Arche is called to welcome wounded people and to unite within the same community people who have such different origins, personal histories, culture, religious faiths, ages and maturity; this is an extraordinary gift, but also, some might say, an attempt to do the impossible. We have discovered that living together always implies having clear points of reference to which each person can refer. These points of reference follow from experience and relate to a common vision. Today oral tradition alone is no longer a sufficient way to communicate the wisdom of our lived experience. We need to find new ways to communicate in order to avoid confusion and build confidence.

Some communities have clear policies concerning various aspects of community life. These policies help each person to take his or her place, to build confidence, and to provide an objective basis for dialogue. It is a concern to see that many communities have not had the opportunity to establish any policies, or that, in certain cases, these policies are divergent. While respecting our differences, a certain consistency is necessary among our points of reference at L'Arche. This is why several communities in the Federation have asked to be able to refer to a set of norms for L'Arche.

This document has risen from careful reflection on replies to a questionnaire put out by a working group (which was essentially North American) named by the International Council. These replies come from 130 long term members from the whole of the Federation. They provide a great deal of information drawn from the experience of life in L'Arche communities. They also highlight the fact that, in many situations difficulties may stem from a lack of clarity and dialogue around fundamental principles and mutual expectations.

This document is intended as a tool to help communities to form and implement policies. It is also intended to encourage dialogue and ongoing education in the communities around these questions. Each community will see how to use it and to adapt it in a way appropriate to its situation. It seems essential to us that our points of reference are not coming "from on high", but that the body of each community may be able to "make them its own". The goal is to help members of our communities to become mutually responsible for community life, which belongs to all of us.

This document is intended to narrow the gap which exists between the ideals expressed in the Charter and the reality of our life in community. Each part takes as its starting point quotations from the Charter, which is the expression of our common values. It then attempts to translate those values into community processes and elements of policy, which can serve as guidelines for community life. This is no meant to be comprehensive, nor does it explore the many nuances of our life together in L'Arche. It is meant to be practical, straightforward and helpful information, which will guide those who have embarked upon the challenge of living together in a L'Arche community. Each part ends with questions designed to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and sharing of experiences lived in community.

After touching briefly on the Spiritual Life, four areas of community life have been selected because they seem particularly sensitive: Relationships and Sexuality, Violence and Our response to it, Money and Stewardship, the Exercise of Authority.

Spiritual Life

Everyone is of unique and sacred value...Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognised and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed...Each community member is encouraged to discover and deepen his or her spiritual life and live it according to his or her particular faith and tradition. Those who have no religious affiliation are also welcomed and respected in their freedom of conscience.

Charter of L'Arche

Since the beginning, L'Arche has tried to meet the essential needs of the people with a handicap, who, in their poverty, reveal the deepest need of every human person. In order to become more fully human, each person needs to be considered unique, loved by God, and capable of entering into relationship. People with handicap help us to discover how much the need to love and be loved is hidden in the heart of each person no matter what their pain or limits may be.

the deepest need

Being at the service of each person, particularly the weakest, community life at L'Arche is aimed at bringing us out of our isolation, healing our wounds, opening us to others and to God, and enabling us to be instruments of growth and fecundity for each other. Community is the favourable environment which enables us to welcome our personal poverty, to grow in inner freedom and to form covenant relationships through which God is revealed to us. At L'Arche, shared littleness and vulnerability are a privileged path which open people to love, compassion and an encounter with God. The most vulnerable members are at the heart of the community and are a sign of the presence of God.

a path to God

It is in living the great joys and the real difficulties of community life that the mystery of L'Arche is revealed. However different we are from one another, we must be able to find in community the opportunity to give as well as to be sustained. In order to become aware of our specific spirituality, we need to put words on our experience and to "re-read" what we are living in the light of the Word of God. It is essential to receive community life as a gift, to announce it and to celebrate it.

a specific spirituality

Each member is invited to deepen this spiritual life through the resources of his/her particular faith: faith in the human person and faith inscribed in a religious tradition. In order for that faith to be nourished it is hoped that each person will be rooted in his or her church or faith community. Communities try to be open and welcoming to pastoral ministers, spiritual guides or animators, and to entrust them with a responsibility for the spiritual growth of the community as a whole and for individual members. Communities should have a great respect for the freedom of conscience and the spiritual growth of each person.

open and nourished

Spiritual life cannot be reduced to any particular activity within community life, but it inspires and permeates everything we do and are. It is undoubtedly necessary to arrange privileged time for spiritual life: time for personal and community prayer, time to listen to the Word of God time to worship together. However, it is equally necessary for all community life to be oriented in such a way that our spirituality is made incarnate: life style, the way we see each other, particularly those who are most in pain, the quality of presence and listening, the priority given to relationships and to sharing, mutual bonds, a choice of activities, celebrations and openness to the whole world. All the other aspects of community life such as therapy, administration, work should help towards the development of the inner freedom of the community members.

through daily life

Questions for Reflection

1. What aspects of community life foster the spiritual life?
2. Are there aspects of community life which are obstacles to spiritual life? How do we remedy this?
3. What space is given to the community members, especially to the weakest, to share their gifts?
4. Where and how is the spirituality of L'Arche announced to the community members and shares with people outside of the community?

Relationships and sexuality

Since the deepest need of a human being is to love and to be loved, each person has a right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life...If human beings are to develop their abilities and talents to the full, realising all their potential as individuals, they need an environment that fosters personal growth. They need to form relationships with others within families and communities. They need to live in an atmosphere of trust, security and mutual affection. They need to be valued, accepted and supported in real and warm relationships...Unity is founded on the covenant of love to which God calls all the community members. This implies welcome and respect for differences. Such unity presupposes that the person with a handicap is at the centre of community life.

Charter of L'Arche

Home life, centred on relationships of mutuality and fidelity, is at the heart of L'Arche. Our mission is to create and maintain homes where each person, especially core members, can find acceptance and love in their gifts and in their vulnerability. This way of life is intense and calls us to be particularly attentive to issues of relationship and sexuality. The quality of our relationships is at the heart of our community life. Our human relationships are rooted in our relationship to God. We are called to discover together how community life in L'Arche with its celebrations, relationships of friendship, and its emphasis on forgiveness and covenant helps each of us to grow toward wholeness. Likewise, we are called to be responsible in the ways that we build intimacy with one another.

*home is
at the centre*

We consider that sexuality is part of every relationship. There is a deep and fundamental link between sexuality, creativity and spirituality. A denial or distortion in one aspect will affect the others.

call to growth

fundamental link

Members commit to be a living example of what we most deeply believe and profess about the nature of love and faithfulness. Members will strive for personal integrity and corporate unity, being conscious of the negative effects of double messages or double standards.

living example

We are an ecumenical and interfaith Federation. As faith communities we welcome people from diverse spiritual traditions. Within the context of relationship and sexuality, matters of faith and individual conscience will be protected and respected.

*respect for
individual
consciences*

Intimacy, including touch, is vital to growth and healing. We are committed to maintaining a common vision and practice of "safe touch". Some members of our communities require physical care. This demands sensitive training in providing personal care. It also means ongoing formation and sensitivity about how we greet, physically touch and express affection for one another. We all need to feel safe, emotionally and physically. The strong affective relationships that are the fruit of sharing life together will be supported and protected by this practice of safe touch.

safe touch

In order that the dignity of all community members be safeguarded, consistent guidelines about sexual behaviour, regardless of sexual orientation, must be articulated. Each member has a responsibility to learn from and listen to the other, and to avoid imposing on the other his or her own viewpoint. Likewise, everyone has a responsibility to ensure that personal convictions, opinions and behaviour do not hinder or undermine what has been accepted as community policy and practice. All members agree to not sleep together or engage in sexual relations in homes of L'Arche.

dignity

Each community must abide by legal norms and standards regarding reporting and investigating allegations of sexual abuse. All assistants must understand that under no circumstances will sexual relations with core members be allowed. Communities will provide

sexual relations

education and training to foster competence and to ensure that personal care is given respectfully.

sexual abuse

Sharing life as we do, the relationships between members of a household can take on special significance. Our experience is that when two individuals within a household develop an intimate romantic relationship, the energy of the entire household is affected. Couples will require privacy as well as support in order that these relationships may grow in love and fidelity. As community members, our desire is to both honour those personal relationships and to ensure the harmony of our homes. Although it may seem paradoxical, it is usually best to help individuals in such relationships to live or work in different places. Dialogue with the community leader or appropriate Coordinator will be needed to work out the best possible arrangement when a move is appropriate.

education

romantic relationships

All members will be encouraged in their personal growth recognising that growth and development do not proceed in a linear fashion but in rhythms of ebb and flow. Wholeness is about integration, not perfection.

integration

Questions for Reflection

1. How are new assistants orientated to the community's values and policies around sexuality and relationship?
2. What is the procedure for training new assistants to provide personal care?
3. What forums for ongoing education and discussion are in place to ensure that there are opportunities to deepen our understanding of this aspect of community life?
4. What are the commonly understood procedures for reporting and investigating allegations of sexual abuse?
5. What are the concrete ways we acknowledge the need for private time and space for all community members?
6. How is the communal life structured to foster the development of meaningful relationships with others within the community and outside the community?

Violence and our response to it

In a divided world, L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be a sign of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation.

Charter of L'Arche

<p>The relational richness of our life in L'Arche holds within it the potential for both intimacy and violence.</p>	<i>relationships</i>
<p>We understand violence to be any invasion of another person, be it personal space or physical self, which is against his or her will and is painful in some way. Violence is anything that interferes with the growth and development of the true self. Any attitude or behaviour, which refuses to meet the other person in a mutual, respectful relationship, is a form of violence. Violence is always the distortion of a still deeper instinct for life and love.</p>	<i>What is violence?</i>
<p>It is important to understand the sources of violence. We assume that manifestations of violence themselves reflect a violence that has at some time being done to the person who is now the aggressor. Arising from our early life experiences, there may be a profound sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, or guilt, which can block our respect for and openness to others.</p>	<i>understanding the sources of violence</i>
<p>By recognising the potential for violence that is within each of us, we can have more understanding and compassion for those who do not or cannot contain it. We acknowledge our ongoing need to recognise the more subtle and indirect ways in which our structures, attitudes and behaviour may be contributing factors to violence, if not aspects of violence itself.</p>	<i>the potential for violence within each of us</i>
<p>Common factors which may precipitate violence include: mocking, teasing, sarcasm, impatience or criticism without affirmation, speaking of another person without respect either in their presence or being their back, ignoring or refusing to enter into relationship, failing to respect the dignity of another's body, intruding upon another person's personal space without permission, manipulating, ordering others about.</p>	<i>precipitant factors</i>
<p>We acknowledge that we are called together to begin to live and to grow through those energies which transcend and heal violence. Daily life and work must be structured in such a way as to give security, provide consistency and safeguard the dignity of all community members. Non-violence is a reality to be discovered in our daily life.</p>	<i>healing</i>
<p>Among the necessary conditions for a healthy life together are: stable relationships, meaningful work, regularity and structure balanced with spontaneity, honouring of personal time and space, power to make choices that affect one's own life, good communication, outlets for physical activities, and channels to express problems or discontent, as well as times of joy and celebration.</p>	<i>healthy life</i>
<p>Violent episodes are better managed and tend to be less frequent where there are clearly understood, written policies and procedures in place in the community regarding violence and the repercussions of violent behaviour. This policy should be constantly under review and development so that it remains dynamic. All community members have a right to live without the fear of becoming victims of violence.</p>	<i>written policy and procedure</i>
<p>While we honour diversity, it is advisable that all community members be made aware of what constitutes acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour. All incidence of violence require a response. There must be strong consequences for assistants and core members who are violent. Reporting procedures must be in compliance with legal requirements. Cultural</p>	<i>fostering a common understanding</i>

differences need to be articulated, particularly when a community as foreign assistants. We need to be explicit in defining what we understand to be acceptable behaviour.

Our communities are limited in their capacity to respond to all form of violence. It is important for each community to have the outside resources to help evaluate a given person's appropriate placement in a L'Arche home. For some, the L'Arche model will not meet their needs.

*recognising
limitations*

Questions for Reflection

1. What is in your community's contingency plan of response to an incident of violence? How are community members made aware of this plan?
2. What professional support/resources can you identify as ones that you can consult?
3. Does your community have in place a clear procedure for incident reporting that is understood and used by all assistants?
4. Are there opportunities for community members to receive training in conflict resolution and non-violent crisis intervention?
5. Consider how the many aspects of the structure and rhythm of daily life and work affect the quality of your community life. How might they have an impact on the incidence or the healing of violence?
6. Are community members given the opportunity to learn about their own inner dynamics, developing communication skills and discovering how to work with what we might judge as "negative" emotions?

Money and stewardship

Communities of L'Arche, called into being by God, are united by the same vision and the same spirit of welcome, of sharing and simplicity. The communities wish to secure for their members' education, work and therapeutic activities, which will be a source of dignity, growth and fulfilment for them. Home life is at the heart of a L'Arche community. The different members of a community have a simple life-style, which gives priority to relationships.

Charter of L'Arche

All that our communities possess is the gift of God. Whatever we have, be it money or material possessions, we receive gratefully and share with generosity. We fundamentally believe in this spirit of abundance, that everything we truly need will be given. So we are each called to foster this spirit of gratitude and to be responsible for what is entrusted to us, individually and corporately.

spirit of abundance

In L'Arche we live the precarious balance of individual and community responsibility, with joint responsibility around resources. The individual has responsibility for his or for her personal finances but also supports the common life of the community through gifts of time, talent, money and self. The community has responsibility for gathering resources for the common life enjoyed by all its members, and for creating processes to foster mutual ownership of community finances. These individual and mutual responsibilities call for clear definition and boundaries.

individual and communal responsibilities

Open discussion of community finances foster greater understanding and ownership among community members. All members of a community can recognise how they personally contribute to good stewardship and healthy finances. Those who are invited to participate in the budget process will have greater trust when decisions are made. Ongoing dialogue with other human service providers, donors, government agencies, and other sources of support encourages the responsible use of the resources entrusted to us.

communication fosters good stewardship

We want our homes, programs, and offices to be beautiful spaces that reflect the value we attach to the people who live and work there. In our communities we strive to be sensitive to ecology and nature in very practical ways: consuming fuel thoughtfully, using public transportation when possible, recycling and composting, etc. We discourage waste and challenge each other to use wisely all the resources we have. This means taking care of our homes, vehicles, and other material things we use in sharing life together.

sensitivity to beauty and ecology

Solidarity with others is intrinsic to the mission of L'Arche. Community members appreciate knowing how they can and do financially support their own community as well as communities of L'Arche in other parts of the world. Likewise, community members must understand how they support the life of the L'Arche region and zone, as well as the International body of L'Arche.

solidarity

Financial contributions to the community need to be received with gratitude and personally acknowledged. In L'Arche we recognise fundraising as an important ministry that invites others to participate in our mission. We know that financial giving is a valuable way to contribute to the life of our communities. Whenever appropriate and possible, relationships of friendship between community members and benefactors are encouraged. People in the community's circle of support need to be regularly invited to further the mission of L'Arche by contributing financially.

supporters are important to our mission

Our communities strive for clear and just salary structures. These are most accepted when community members can participate in the development of compensation policy. For community members, role or function does not determine a salary. This is a radically countercultural view of compensation. All of us, individuals and families, need to be committed to living as people of modest means. While L'Arche communities are sometimes thwarted in this regard by societal norms or labour laws, creative solutions can often be found to integrate this radical vision into

compensation

the fabric of our community life. Salaries and benefits are best reviewed annually in a way that community members can participate. This complex area requires ongoing board attention on regional and zone levels to promote, as much as possible, just compensation policies.

Financial planning for retreats, renewals, sabbaticals, and retirement is a mutual responsibility of the individual member and the corporate body. It is important that there be a commonly understood system of how the community fosters that mutual financial responsibility.

financial planning

Questions for Reflection

1. What means exist in your community to form and educate community members in principles of good stewardship and include members in financial decisions, which affect them?
2. What accountability mechanisms are in place in the management of core members' finances?
3. How are people in your community formed in the care of homes, vehicles, and other property and resources used in common?
4. Are standard principles of accounting used to track and report community finances? Are financial reports to the board and to the community clear and easy to understand?
5. How are members of the community and of the boards involved in raising funds? How are donors and other supporters included in the mission of L'Arche in an ongoing way?
6. What financial planning systems are in place, and supported by the community's board of directors, with regard to retreats, renewals, sabbaticals, and retirement?
7. How do your community and board make decisions around compensation and benefits?

The exercise of authority

L'Arche communities are communities of faith, rooted in prayer and trust in God. They seek to be guided by God and by their weakest members, through whom the presence of God is revealed...All community members are invited to participate, as far as possible, in decisions concerning them.

Charter of L'Arche

Living in communities of faith, we are invited to recognize that all true authority is given by God and through the community. Together we are led to an acceptance of our vulnerability and to exercising our mutual gifts. Certain individuals will be given roles of leadership to enable all members of the community to live fully the mission of L'Arche.	<i>true authority</i>
All those in roles of leadership need to listen in order to receive the inspiration of the Spirit coming through the whole body: to those in agreement, as well as to the voices of dissent and especially to the weakest members.	<i>listening to all</i>
Decisions within L'Arche require clear processes that seek the truth through listening to one another. Whenever possible, all members are consulted about decisions that affect them. Authority in L'Arche is a service for the good of the community and the growth of its members. Servant leadership requires that the people who carry authority relate personally to those for whom they are responsible.	<i>decision-making</i> <i>servant leadership</i>
Clear lines of accountability, regular evaluation and supervision are necessary for all those in roles of leadership. Specific mandates are given for limited periods of time. Equally clear must be the specific bodies of support for all leaders. Leaders need safe places to bring their concerns, to seek wise counsel and to unburden themselves when necessary.	<i>mandates</i>
We are asked to accept, trust and support those in roles of leadership and acknowledge that all leaders have strengths and weaknesses. However, when those who carry authority misuse their power, there must be effective means of challenging them and safeguarding the dignity of individuals and the life of the community. All communities, regions and structures of L'Arche need clear grievance and conflict resolution procedures.	<i>misuse of authority</i>
All those in positions of responsibility must have attainable tasks and goals and the necessary training and preparation to carry them out. Formation and accompaniment will help each member participate more fully and effectively in their unique and distinct roles.	<i>formation and accompaniment</i>
Authority must be balanced and held accountable in such a way that no one person has unbridled power. We must make good use of boards of directors, board committees, executives and community councils in both supporting and holding accountable individuals in authority.	<i>accountability</i>
The board of directors is the body of governance and legal authority for a community. The board safeguards the mission of the community and holds the community leader accountable. The community council is a body of wisdom, counsel and support for the community leader. The formation and use of these two bodies is important for the healthy balance of authority in a L'Arche community.	<i>board of directors and community council</i>

Questions for Reflection

1. How are people in your community made aware of the lines of authority, the lines of communication and the lines of accountability within the community and within the Federation of L'Arche?
2. How is each member of your community assured of an annual evaluation and review?
3. Where are members of the community able to speak of their concerns and offer insights?
4. What processes are in place to ensure that each community member has a clear understanding of his/her role as well as the formation, training and support needed to effectively exercise that role?
5. How are the decision-making processes carried out in a way that ensures a maximum level of participation from those implicated in the decision?
6. How is the wisdom of the elders in a community invited and used?
7. Does your community have in place a grievance and conflict resolution procedure?
8. How does the board of directors review and evaluate the community leader?
9. How the Community Leader/Assistants' Coordinator formed with regard to labour laws and appropriate procedures for screening, hiring and firing assistants?