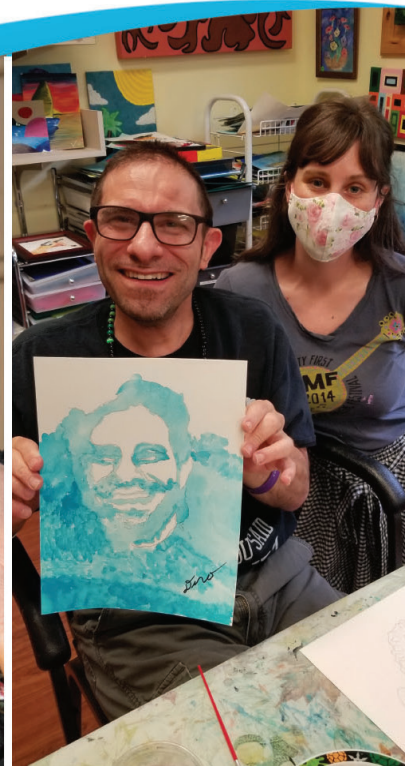




Project Impact Reports



L'Arche



L'Arche Greater Washington D.C. Impact Report

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Introduction

L'Arche Greater Washington, D.C. (GWDC) is a community of people with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) sharing life together. We celebrate the unique value of every person, recognizing and accepting our need for one another, and building relationships that transform all of us. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit, L'Arche GWDC provides housing and support services to adults with intellectual disabilities. We serve hundreds of people in the wider community, of many different backgrounds, by offering a place of belonging and growth. Our community life centers on relationships led by our “core members,” who are the adults with intellectual disabilities who live in L'Arche homes. People come from all over the country and the world to visit L'Arche and learn from our core members, our mission, and our model. Along with providing housing and support services, we provide education and outreach, leadership development, and opportunities for spiritual formation.

We have four homes, two in Washington D.C. and two in Arlington, Virginia, where we eat, play, learn, laugh, grieve, and pray together. We do “with” and not “for”, meaning we grow and support one another in a mutually transformative way. We are an inter-denominational Christian community that welcomes people of all faiths, or none. L'Arche GWDC is part of the international federation of L'Arche communities; committed to making known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities all over the world.

What we seek to impact:

- *Impact 1.* Members develop awareness, sensitivity, and curiosity for others, especially across differences in gifts and abilities.
- *Impact 2.* Members experience personal transformation in fundamental aspects of their lives.
- *Impact 3.* Members create meaningful relationships and find belonging in community with others.
- *Impact 4.* Members approach vocation and life-purpose in a holistic and human-centered way.
- *Impact 5.* Members critically engage societal values of accessibility and inclusion and advocate for social justice.
- *Impact 6.* Core members identify and live-out their choices.
- *Impact 7.* Core members have full, healthy lives.
- *Impact 8.* Core members exercise positive influence in the lives of others.

Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact our L'Arche Greater Washington D.C. community is having on our community members. Our community members consist of core members (adults with intellectual disabilities), assistants (staff who support core members), additional staff, volunteers, and board members. To increase our understanding, we explored the eight impacts listed above through qualitative inquiry by conducting interviews with our community members.

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators of impact with other L'Arche communities, (b) designed qualitative interview protocols and conducted interviews, (c) identified findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

We conducted 36 interviews focused on 28 people. We interviewed 12 core members - two of whom we interviewed a second time accompanied by another team member. We interviewed 24 non-core members - six of these were proxy interviews for core members (we asked interviewees about impacts on core members, not on themselves) and two non-core members accompanied core members in an interview (per the core member's request).

We used the protocols created in tandem with two other L'Arche communities, but we modified a few interview questions for core members in order to increase their comprehension and comfort in the conversations. Interviews

were conducted predominantly by three team members who know L'Arche GWDC well - two staff members and one board member. Three interviews were conducted by a volunteer who had no knowledge of L'Arche GWDC.

The qualitative interviewing was followed, almost a year later, by two quantitative surveys. One that was sent to L'Arche GWDC staff, board members, and select friends, volunteers, and former staff members, and one that was tailored to core members. A L'Arche GWDC virtual volunteer at one of the homes went through the survey with the majority of the core members. The surveys received 41 responses for non-core members and 11 core member responses

Limitations in the interview process and methodology

The interviews took place after the Jean Vanier inquiry results were published, with the inquiry uncovering that Vanier had sexually abused several women. This timing may have impacted people's responses, as we were in a time of change and inner turmoil. Many interviews took place during the initial months of the coronavirus lockdown. The situation was changing rapidly and it was hard to schedule interviews when needed. Safety protocols for COVID-19 also resulted in many of the interviews being video calls or phone calls, rather than in-person interviews. We encountered a few technological and logistical challenges, as some interviewees, particularly older people and core members, were still adjusting to using video chat as a way to communicate. The coronavirus lockdown also meant that three members of the original evaluation team left and we brought in one new member to the team. The three people who departed included a team member with the most experience in evaluation work and a team member who was a core member of the community, which was a loss of two important perspectives in our analysis.

We did not interview people who had left L'Arche earlier than planned (whether staff, volunteers or core members), such as staff who had been asked to leave. Our data may look different than it would have had this specific group of former community members been part of the interview process. Former staff who had left after a planned period of time or on good terms were included.

As a predominantly white organization, we did not have many people of color to interview generally. We also had limited participation of people of color due to our stipulation in selecting our sample population that participants "must have been part of the community for one year." Our community is becoming more diverse, but unfortunately, we did not receive responses to participate from the two people of color who were contacted to be interviewed. All of the interviewers were also white.

The quantitative surveys were deployed almost a year after the qualitative interviews and during a tumultuous time for the L'Arche GWDC community. The volunteer who conducted the core member survey found that it was not accessible to the core members, as they would not have been able to read it themselves (except for 1 core member, who thought the questions were repeating themselves).

The interviewer said, "The nuance within each section was too subtle and seemed a bit repetitive to me too. The only accessible part of the survey was the cluster of stars to represent [that represented not at all, some, or a lot]. But, because I was sharing my screen it wasn't easy to see that and for the core member to understand how that related to the possible answers."

Findings

Finding 1. Now We Know: Increased awareness of the challenges people with intellectual disabilities face and the way they should be treated

Key Insight

Increased awareness but lack of speaking up for inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Discussion

A majority of non-core members interviewed said that due to L'Arche they were more aware of disability issues, ranging from physical accessibility to government involvement in the lives of people with disabilities, to churches being more inviting to people with disabilities. However, only about one-third of the non-core members interviewed said they were more likely to speak up to include people with disabilities.

All six volunteers interviewed said that L'Arche increased their awareness of the circumstances (and often challenges) that people with intellectual disabilities face. Only one volunteer said he was more likely to speak up about these issues or go out of his way to include people with disabilities, by sharing that he strives to promote inclusion in different environments. Another volunteer noted a defining moment of awareness that his voice mattered through being at L'Arche when discussing voting with a core member. He was considering if the core member should be able to vote or not. Quickly he came to the conclusion that people with intellectual disabilities should be able to vote. He realized it was “a slippery slope when you start making lists of who can or can't do something... then at some point I could be off the list!” One volunteer said that for them L'Arche reinforced that personal relationships “should” be the frame through which to see justice issues, but they did not note being more likely to speak up about these issues.

Most of the current and former staff members interviewed said they were more aware of disability rights issues, but only a few said they were more likely to speak up about these issues or go out of their way to include people with disabilities. One staff member became more aware of how accessibility inhibited her housemates from attending events at their church. While she named these issues out loud to church members, she hadn't done advocacy in the larger sense. One respondent said that in her early years in the L'Arche community she wasn't as aware of accessibility issues because L'Arche itself is so inclusive. Advocacy for her is now a “growing edge.” Another staff member said, “Physical accessibility is something I think about constantly now and it makes me very passionate.” She considers herself a “champion” for people with disabilities now. This mindset was the result of her “being invited into really intimate sacred spaces with core members.” A former staff member said, “I now have not only the responsibility but the inclination to talk to people with disabilities, especially when I see them not being included because I have had such wonderful experiences sharing my life with people with disabilities.” Both board members interviewed said they were more aware of the issues people with disabilities face and are more likely

to speak up about disability issues or to intentionally include someone with disabilities.

The quantitative data show that non-core member's sense of responsibility to advocate for others, skills to critique injustice, and confidence to discuss disability rights all rose through their time in L'Arche. The majority (58%) of non-core members responding to the survey reported they raise awareness about disability rights quite a bit or very much as a result of being a part of the L'Arche community. 66 percent (an increase of 36%) of respondents reported that they actively advocate for a more just society quite a bit or very much as a result of being at L'Arche. This was different from the qualitative findings, in which only a minority of non-core members said they actively advocated. Nonetheless, the quantitative findings related to advocacy were rated lower than other items, showing this is still a weaker area. The quantitative survey was deployed many months after the qualitative interviews, and after a summer of anti-racist activism, much of which occurred right in the heart of Washington, DC. This timing may have also impacted the responses.

Core members: It was noted for almost half of the core members interviewed in proxy interviews that they became more aware that their voice mattered through being at L'Arche. Being at L'Arche allowed them to speak up for themselves and others. One core member is very passionate about advocacy work. He shared that L'Arche has given him more opportunities to do this type of work. Being in a community where people valued them, listened, and encouraged them to share, seemed to help core members find their voices or continue using them. A proxy interview found that one core member showed outsiders how people with disabilities deserve to be treated by the way he lives and by his charitable activities.

It is ironic that data showing core members growing in speaking up for themselves came from proxy interviews. While core members might explain how they reach out to others, how they help their homes, or how they have more independent opportunities, they did not say that they now speak up for themselves more. The quantitative data validated this, showing that 100% of core members believed they spoke up for themselves before coming to L'Arche,

as well as now that they are living at L'Arche. This is an interesting difference in the interviews done directly with core members and those done by proxy. One interpretation is that others see things in us that we do not notice in ourselves. Another interpretation is that core members always spoke up but no one was listening.

The quantitative data show that core members did experience a change in speaking up for others, with 80% reporting that they spoke up for others some or a lot before coming to L'Arche and 100% reporting that they speak up for others some or a lot after living at L'Arche.

Significance

The majority of non-core members interviewed said that they were more aware of how people with intellectual disabilities have been and should be treated. This awareness situates the mission of L'Arche in context. If one is unaware of past and present injustices that people with intellectual disabilities face, our mission - to make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities - may seem unimportant. Through being in relationship with adults with intellectual disabilities at L'Arche, people without intellectual disabilities become more aware of systemic discriminatory and ableist structures. Additionally, those in relationship with core members may become aware of their own biases and discriminatory ideas and behaviors.

The best speakers for people with disabilities are people with disabilities. Nothing can change without their voices, and their gifts will not be known without their ability to make them known - including to themselves.

It seems that some people at L'Arche (especially non-core members) while growing in their awareness of the unjust treatment of people with intellectual disabilities are not being compelled to take action outside of an internal or sometimes interpersonal level. Part of the L'Arche mission is to “engage in our diverse cultures, working together toward a more human society.” While working toward a more human society can look like many things, one way is through advocacy.

Possible Responses

Teaching advocacy:

- L'Arche GWDC may wish to review our existing orientation materials for volunteers and staff in order to see how we are framing the bigger picture of rights and challenges for people with disabilities, and the ways in which things have changed and could change.
- L'Arche GWDC may want to teach some examples of advocacy in faith formations or other spaces. While not all people need to become advocates, knowing that there are advocacy opportunities available could be useful and interesting to many.

Finding 2. Demystifying Differences

Key Insight

Greater comfort and appreciation for people who are different.

Discussion

Most core members said they enjoy being with people who are different from them. For many, however, this was a trait that they've always held rather than one they learned at L'Arche. One core member said it is important to be around people who are different from you. They said, “Getting to know people helps you to love them more.” One proxy interviewee said a core member had “learned to adapt” because of many different people coming and going. Another proxy interviewee noticed that a core member had grown in her ability to interact with different people and follow her curiosity. The quantitative data validated this, showing that core members came in with high acceptance, curiosity, and comfort with disability, all of which rose slightly through being at L'Arche.

Most volunteers interviewed said they were more comfortable with different people due to time spent at L'Arche. One volunteer said L'Arche, in conjunction with AA, has helped her become more open and accepting of people in her family with whom she disagrees. She is more willing to “accept people as they are” since being at L'Arche, which is something she learned through her relationship with a core member,

and her relationships and observations of assistants and their interactions with core members.

When interview participants were asked about being aware of and appreciating differences between people, some responded with an emphasis on similarity, not difference. Three current and former staff members said that people are not so different, including people with disabilities. One of the staff members emphasized that L'Arche helped her focus on how we are the same; specifically, L'Arche spirituality (along with relationships with L'Arche community members) was what encouraged her to see all people as sacred and any differences as good. A current staff member said, "Being at L'Arche is what allows me to see, oh, we are not so different. We are human." Another staff member said they are now more aware of, and appreciate, the socio-economic differences that impact people's employment; and the way they approach accompanying people with disabilities in their job. One assistant said her willingness and openness to engage people with differences has increased since coming to L'Arche. Before L'Arche, the assistant engaged in fairly homogenous groups, now she is learning to see "difference as a gift, not a barrier."

Several people (non-core members) specifically said they were more comfortable with people with disabilities, with all mentioning relationships with core members as a driver of this increase in comfort. The quantitative data on non-core members validated these findings. Non-core members had high levels of curiosity and value of differences. These levels rose during their time with L'Arche. The biggest change for non-core members taking the survey was in their levels of comfort being with and confidence in communicating with people who are different from them.

Subpoint 1: Greater comfort specifically around people with disabilities. Several people (non-core members) specifically said they were more comfortable with people with disabilities, with all mentioning relationships with core members as a driver of this increase in comfort.

Subpoint 2: Individuals now appreciate the gifts and shared humanity of people with intellectual disabilities in a more

deep and holistic way. Several staff members (current and former), both board members interviewed, and several current volunteers said that due to L'Arche they now recognize the gifts and capabilities of people with disabilities and see them in a more whole way. One volunteer said that before L'Arche he was not attracted to engaging with people with intellectual disabilities and had never before interacted with someone who had an intellectual disability. Since coming to L'Arche he has spent years getting to know core members as individuals and has developed true friendships with them. Participation in L'Arche "totally" expanded his knowledge of issues affecting people with intellectual and other types of disabilities. His attitude toward the importance of inclusion for people with disabilities has changed. He said, "Developmentally disabled persons contribute significantly to a well-functioning community." As one assistant said, "Inclusion of people with disabilities makes shared spaces better for all involved."

Significance

Most (a small majority) of non-core members now have a greater appreciation for, and comfort with, people with disabilities from spending time at L'Arche. Non-core members who did not answer in the affirmative mostly felt they entered L'Arche already comfortable with people with disabilities. The mission of L'Arche is to make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities and to do so we must reach people who might not be comfortable with people with intellectual disabilities, or in fact are not comfortable with people who are different from them. We do so by inviting people into the community (such as for dinner) and going out into our city to share.

At L'Arche, there are many opportunities to engage and form relationships with people of different backgrounds and experiences of life—from core members welcoming assistants from all over the world to assistants and volunteers having the opportunity to form close relationships with people with intellectual disabilities in a more intentional way. Observing how others interacted helped people notice similarities and appreciate differences. We also strive "to build a more human society" - that means a society that is inclusive, where people

with all sorts of differences (abilities, disabilities, ethnicity, race, faith, etc.) can live together. To reach that goal we want to model inclusivity. If we do our job well, people come away from encounters with L'Arche more open to differences, and members of our community continually grow in our ability to be with each other in our differences.

Possible Responses

Influence on L'Arche GWDC's Diversity Commission work:

Interviewees came to the same conclusion of appreciating differences and having greater comfort around people with intellectual disabilities through two different routes- either they said they were more likely to see what they had in common, or they were more open to celebrating differences. Knowledge of these two routes is valuable information for L'Arche GWDC's diversity commission as they sculpt language and training. Do we want people at L'Arche to focus only on our similarities, only on our diversity, or do we want people to hold both of these as truth? A volunteer provided additional insight for us to ask our members to consider- when does the change in accepting people different from us need to happen in ourselves, and when does it need to happen externally?

A consideration:

As listed in the "Limitations" section, the people interviewed were predominantly white. Could their whiteness, considered the "mainstream" and dominant culture in US society and at L'Arche, influence how they interact with those different from themselves? Would someone of color, who is used to being the "other" in society, report something different?

Finding 3. Being Part of a Whole

Key Insight

Individuals see the value in belonging to a community.

Discussion

Relationships and community were mentioned in almost every single interview. Several current and former staff and volunteers said that L'Arche reinforced or grew how they valued community or changed (in a positive way) their

view of community. Some people changed their ideas about what community could look like. One participant was more aware of how L'Arche communities can integrate themselves into the neighborhood. Another interviewee learned that a community experience doesn't have to be geographically bound - that one could connect with L'Arche communities all over the world. And another now thinks of community as a space where members are more equal, rather than a part of a hierarchical structure. Other interview participants changed how they saw themselves in relation to community. One said she began to see her life as part of a home and a community, part of a broader experience rather than an individual one.

All core members mentioned that relationships with community members were important to them, mostly mentioning one on one relationships. There was a sense of belonging to each other and caring for one another, but it did not always expand outside of the home. A parent of a core member said that L'Arche is like his family, and she has witnessed that "he likes being part of a whole." One core member said that the L'Arche community is important to her- it takes care of her, and she cares for it. Another core member said she knows she is an important member of the L'Arche community, because other members help her, and she helps them. One core member had a very expansive understanding of family that spanned the globe; she named that she had a big family before L'Arche and now that she is in L'Arche she has an even bigger family: "I have a big family wherever I go, right now I have a big family at L'Arche."

Several people mentioned belonging in community in their interviews. One person said L'Arche has helped him be able to sense when belonging isn't there, after experiencing how everyone values community interactions and the importance of being in a community. A community member shared: "What I appreciate so much about L'Arche is the sense that belonging isn't earned, instead [it is a] fact of life by virtue of being another human."

Subpoint: L'Arche models intentional community in a way that individuals recognize an ongoing desire to be part of something bigger than themselves. As a result of living in the L'Arche community for four years, one core member's mother shared how she has witnessed her daughter's goals

shifting. Before moving into L'Arche her daughter's goal was to live independently in an apartment, as this is what she saw others doing after they left their parents' home. Her mom says now this core member seems to understand and value community life more, and she no longer wants to move to an apartment where she would live with less people and outside a community.

One volunteer said his original life plan was to move back to where he grew up once he retired. Now that he is retired, he shared that he desires to remain where he is currently. He listed many communities, including L'Arche, that made him want to stay in the area. An assistant shared that she would have gone back to school to get her Master's in Social Work, but being a part of the intentional community at L'Arche is so life-giving that she has chosen to stay. She said,

My experiences and the relationships that I've been able to build have been what have kept me here and guided my path. I don't know the answer as to what's happening next, but I think I can't envision my life without some kind of connection to L'Arche.

One person shared that being part of a community like L'Arche "seems like a really important thing for me in the future." Sticking with community, even when it is hard, and being intentional in community, were two key reasons cited for growth in how participants felt about valuing community. Community attributes cited in the data include: community is based on your presence rather than actions, and a community draws out people's gifts.

Significance

L'Arche GWDC identifies itself as a community. The findings show that our existence as a community is experienced by many who come through our doors. A common understanding of L'Arche is our offering of homes of belonging for people with intellectual disabilities. We learn that the sense of belonging extends beyond the home to the wider community of people. We also find that the feeling of being in a community at L'Arche GWDC is attractive enough for people to make lifestyle changes to remain engaged and connected. Being a part of a L'Arche community is an

alternative way of thinking about what one needs to be fulfilled. Instead of valuing traditional markers of success, such as higher education, or moving to a home for increased independence, people in the community at L'Arche seem to be fulfilled by their belonging and relationships.

Possible Responses

Recruitment and hiring:

Creating a warm, committed community experience is a point of employee retention. Advertising L'Arche GWDC as an intentional community of people may be an appealing tool to attract and retain assistants. The data indicate that assistants will likely experience a sense of community while working at L'Arche.

Spreading the word:

People with intellectual disabilities and their families might not be aware of L'Arche GWDC's model of inclusive community homes for adults with intellectual disabilities as an alternative to independent apartment living or other group homes. While L'Arche's capacity to create more homes is limited, increased awareness of L'Arche's model of residential services and quality care in a community-based setting could help fuel interest in more L'Arche homes, as well as other places for people with and without intellectual disabilities to experience community.

Finding 4. Evolving Spiritual Practices

Key Insight

Many people's spirituality changed by spending time at L'Arche (half of the people interviewed), with most people changing in what can be characterized as a positive way.

Discussion

Some core members identified that being at L'Arche fostered their spiritual practices of prayer and engagement in local faith communities. Some core members named that they have taken on a leadership or participatory role in a faith group since coming to L'Arche- from leading a L'Arche prayer night to joining the choir at their church. One core member explained, "We're a faith community and we help

each other. Love our neighbors as thyself, and that's really good." However, another core member said she experienced no change in spirituality while at L'Arche. Several core members shared that prayer was an important practice in their spiritual life. One core member's parent said that she has witnessed a growing spirituality in her son since coming to L'Arche- specifically blessing people and praying for them, and more involvement at his church: "He goes around blessing people. If he sees someone in distress he'll put his hand on their shoulder or head and say a prayer." She attributed this to L'Arche being a faith community.

Subpoint: A more daily, practical faith for assistants.

Several assistants said their faith changed to be one of seeing God in daily life and acting faith out in practical ways. One assistant said prior to coming to L'Arche she was more "heady" in spiritual practices. Her mindset changed in seeing God around her rather than seeking God in a morning or evening reflection. Now she recognizes God's presence in the big and small. Another assistant has a more meaningful spiritual life now, and "lives daily in the kingdom of God." She now finds God in her relationships with others, their gifts, and needs, and not just in Catholic worship practices. She has discovered a more personal God. A former assistant said that due to L'Arche, and specifically to the L'Arche teaching that everyone is loved by God, he moved from "an intellectual or head based faith to a more practical hands-on faith" and now prioritizes relationships. To him, the L'Arche spiritual teaching about everyone being loved required a practical response. A current staff member said L'Arche spirituality helped her to see how all people are sacred. Daily relationships with core members, L'Arche spiritual teachings, and the act of naming what they are grateful for around the dinner table were all cited as causes of spiritual changes. Two community members converted to Catholicism. One cited how L'Arche introduced him to Catholicism and said L'Arche also helped him focus on things that matter to him. However, two people said they were less spiritually engaged while at L'Arche- one citing the busy schedule of being part of the L'Arche community, and another the stress of working in community. Some volunteers also do not feel like their faith has changed as a result of being at L'Arche.

The quantitative data reveal that non-core members increased how much of their spiritual life they integrate into decisions about their future. 64% of non-core member respondents reported that they integrated their spiritual, mental, emotional life into their decisions about their future quite a bit or very much before L'Arche and 92% report the same as a result of L'Arche.

Significance

Generally, core members seem to have more spiritual opportunities and support in engaging with these opportunities at L'Arche than they had in prior living arrangements, which has led to increased external spiritual practices and engagement. In contrast to connecting to larger groups, it appears that some assistants find more spiritual growth in close relationships with individuals and their community- in the daily moments of the day, as opposed to attending an event or participating in a group religious activity.

People with intellectual disabilities historically were not included in the church. L'Arche has connections with churches in the area that are welcoming to people with ID. L'Arche has helped make these churches safe places for people with ID by showing up, building relationships, and advocating. Meanwhile, people without ID may already be familiar with corporate church life, and instead, find newness and growth in building relationships with people with ID. Conversely, people without ID may not have been welcomed or had the chance to participate in spiritual or religious settings, and are now doing so with the support of the L'Arche community.

As a faith community, L'Arche seeks to be a place where everyone can grow spiritually, wherever they may be in their faith journey. While only two people cited being less spiritually engaged, it could be worth looking into whether or not the community allows mental space and scheduling space for people who are very involved to grow. For example, if assistants support core members in going to their churches on Sunday morning, they may miss the opportunity to attend a church service they prefer at the same time.

Possible Responses

Questions to ask:

- How can L'Arche GWDC assistants become more engaged in church life? Is this something they want? What at L'Arche may be inhibiting assistants from engaging with religious/spiritual communities of their choosing?
- Why are community members not mentioning the numerous spiritual activities that happen regularly in the L'Arche communities in interviews? (For example, dinner prayer, prayer night, faith formation, Cchat and Cchew/faith and sharing, retreats.)

Finding 5. Freedom for Core Members to Discover, Deepen, and Lead

Key Insight

As a result of living in the L'Arche GWDC community, core members make more choices, communicate more freely, and serve as leaders.

Discussion

Most core members expressed that they make more choices in their life now than they did before coming to L'Arche. During one interview a core member said that she wanted to go to a medieval festival, and then promptly said that she'd put it on her "MAP" (annual planning meeting). The same core member's parent said that she has noticed L'Arche is a place where life can also happen naturally for her daughter. The core member can invite someone out to ice cream, and the people in the community make it happen and join in. Another core member shared that before coming to L'Arche she had to share a bedroom. Now that she is at L'Arche, she is happy to have her own room with a wall color of her choosing. A long-time core member explained that L'Arche, "changed me to be a grown-up woman," which included being independent, making her own choices, having a job, and having her own money. A guardian of a former core member said the core member was given the freedom to make his own decisions, which allowed him to develop himself. The core member felt "entitled" to make decisions and act as he wished because "he knew he was loved" by

others at L'Arche. The quantitative data validated this finding. There was a major change in what core members reported from before they came to L'Arche to after being in L'Arche in their knowledge of their life choices, knowledge of how to do things for themselves, and feeling in control of their lives. 60% of core members reported that they knew the choices they have for their life, 71% reported that they knew how to do things for themselves, and 60% reported that they felt in control of their life before coming to L'Arche. After being at L'Arche, 100% of core members reported the same in all of these areas.

Several core members speak up and communicate more at L'Arche. Two core members' proxy interviewees shared that the core members communicate and speak more at L'Arche because they learned that people wanted to know them, and they mattered to others. Three other proxy interviewees said the core members are now bolder and more assertive, and more likely to express emotions and reach out to others. Core members may become bolder in communicating since assistants value what they have to say, and show them through listening, talking, and asking questions. Core members are supported in communicating and L'Arche is a safe place of trust.

Many factors contribute to core members' freedom and decision-making. Assistants that live with core members model freedom and autonomy that core members may not have recognized before. Assistants and the L'Arche community encourage and name gifts of core members, along with asking them their preferences. L'Arche also generally has the resources to respond to the needs and choices that core members make— enough staff, money, and space. Over half of the core members named developing new and deepening existing gifts/passions at L'Arche. In a proxy interview, a mother shared that since her son came to L'Arche to be a core member, he had developed a passion for flowers and gardening that never existed before. Another core member's mom said that her child's ability to make friends and connections has grown through L'Arche's support. For one core member, living at L'Arche has enabled him to exercise his creativity and express himself through his artwork, and – of great importance to him – he earned money selling his art

in order to give to those in need. He has had the freedom, opportunity, and support at L'Arche that he needs to be able to help fulfill this deeply felt desire to assist others.

Subpoint: Core members leading at the point of their gift(s) in their relationships, homes, and community. Many core members shared that they invite people to go out to eat, hang out, or come over for dinner. This shows initiative and leadership, as the core members are the ones extending the invitation. A few core members mentioned that since coming to L'Arche, they have joined more committees and taken on more leadership roles than before they were in L'Arche. One core member is on multiple L'Arche GWDC committees, including his place at the L'Arche GWDC board meetings. Another has started hosting talent shows at her house for her housemates. She has even welcomed volunteer groups and led them in participating in the house talent shows and presentations sharing about L'Arche. She names ideas for future house activities and ways to improve the home, such as starting a garden. One proxy interviewee shared a story of how a core member was typically more reserved at events at the beginning of her time at L'Arche. Over time, this core member began using the microphone at events and leading others in activities. One core member shared how she is taking on more responsibilities in the home, such as taking out the trash, preparing dinner, setting the table. Her mother shared these were tasks said she did not do often while living with her at home. Core members' leadership appears to stem from feeling a sense of ownership and belonging in their home and in friendships. Other community members express a desire to be led by core members. Core members consistently have their gifts affirmed by those around them, along with witnessing and being emboldened by each other's gifts. The quantitative findings showed that core members felt they did more to help others, were listened to more, and know how to have a positive impact on others more now since they have lived at L'Arche.

Significance

In society, many people assume that people with intellectual disabilities need to be helped and served. What people often don't realize is how much people with ID have to offer and

give back. In line with L'Arche's mission of making known the gifts of people with ID, core members at L'Arche lead at the points of their gift in their homes, in the greater L'Arche community, and in their neighborhoods. It is a beautiful thing to witness core members leading the community, and important in L'Arche's work of modeling inclusion.

Historically, the voices of people with intellectual disabilities have been shut out, ignored, and not sought after. Fortunately, core members at L'Arche reported that they feel they have the freedom and opportunity to make their own decisions, use their voices, and discover themselves and their passions. The findings indicate that L'Arche is turning the tables and creating a space where people with ID are valued and taken seriously. This is directly tied to our mission of making known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities and meeting the needs of our members.

Possible Responses

Communicate:

Many people outside of L'Arche might not realize the significance of core members having choices, or they might not realize how core members lead us. We should make a point to communicate this as a way to model inclusion to others! This could be folded into our existing communications and outreach efforts, efforts which L'Arche GWDC has a dedicated staff person to support. We could include a slide about our committees – all co-led by core members – in our usual presentation. We could also include more about the deinstitutionalization movement in our presentations and perhaps a personal story from a core member about life before coming to L'Arche.

Finding 6. Building Real Relationships That Last

Key Insight

L'Arche GWDC is a community where enduring relationships are formed.

Discussion

“Almost everything I know about love and relationships I learned from L'Arche.” - *former assistant*

All core members shared about important relationships they have made at L'Arche. Many core members said they keep in touch with these close friends, including former assistants who are no longer in the area, through visiting them, calling them, and inviting them back to visit. One core member signed about another core member he lived with who passed away a few years ago. This core member also shared about a new assistant at his house, as one of his first new friends as he listed out people he cared about. on the list of people he cares about.

Every non-core member interviewee specifically mentioned friendship with core members as part of their L'Arche experience. A few people realized through L'Arche that relationships were the most important aspect of their lives. One person said L'Arche helped him realize "I am most myself and most human and I experienced the most happiness and the most growth when I'm giving priority to other people." One current staff member fully identifies with the community and does not think about herself as separate. Her relationships with others in the community are what is most important to her. She entered L'Arche with a strong desire to learn about other people and cultures. At L'Arche, that interest developed into a commitment to grow in relationship to other individuals in the now more proximate community to which she belonged. Relationships at L'Arche present the opportunity for meaningful growth, as L'Arche practices approaching people as equals in mutual relationships.

Subpoint: Relationships as a way to learn or means to another impact. While many people mentioned that L'Arche either taught them or revealed to them that relationships were their priority, relationships were often spoken of as a means to an end, or a cause of significant change, rather than an end in and of itself. Many community members explicitly pointed out how relationships with Core Members caused a specific impact in their life. These impacts included relationships that caused members to appreciate differences, be more comfortable with different people and people with disabilities, be more aware of the gifts of people with disabilities, lead them to speak up and advocate, aspire to be a better communicator, seek to be a better person, and

more. Some people were especially moved or changed by witnessing the relationships between core members and assistants (or other staff).

Significance

L'Arche seeks to "Make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, revealed through *mutually transforming relationships*." The data reveal strong findings around relationships- every person mentioned relationships when interviewed about the impact of L'Arche. This signifies that L'Arche GWDC's efforts to build "mutually transforming relationships" have been successful and are a cornerstone of the L'Arche experience for community members. Through living in the L'Arche community, core members meet many people and share their stories. It is likely that bonding activities such as vacations, celebrations, dinner time, and other ways that people share their lives, their feelings, and their time together, contribute to the ability for core members to build relationships (though this wasn't directly named).

Possible Responses

Potential Further Research:

We know many people with intellectual disabilities are segregated, and people with disabilities generally might not have friends with whom to build relationships. How are relationships a specific need in the larger ID community? Can L'Arche GWDC showcase ourselves as leaders in the relational space? Open Future Learning has some interesting work on the social lives of people with ID that could be a useful jumping-off point in thinking about how we discuss segregation and friendships. We could make videos interviewing core members about their friendships. These videos could be included in recruitment materials and outreach events.

Finding 7. Outer Experiences Leading to Inner Growth and Internal Character Development

Key Insight

Most community members experienced internal character change through being at L'Arche, including staff, volunteers, and core members.

Discussion

The data reveal that internal changes experienced while part of the L'Arche GWDC community included being more open to people; being more empathetic and resilient; and being more gentle, patient, and sensitive. One person said that as a result of living daily life with core members they cared less about what others thought about them and felt free to be silly. One former staff member said that through L'Arche he became more sympathetic and compassionate, and learned to love people how they wanted to be loved, not how he wanted to love. Another non-core member reported they had developed empathy and expanded to say, "I have really developed a fierce loyalty to people with disabilities." One person said L'Arche helped them believe that they themselves have a lot to offer. A volunteer said he learned to make his "love for people more tangible and more practical" and "less a sense of love as a notion and emotion, but like something that you actually enact with your hands." Another volunteer said when he began volunteering at L'Arche, he felt gratitude, and the longer he remained, he developed contentment with the gifts of his life. Most non-core members said the changes came through relationships with core members, as well as witnessing how assistants practically care for core members. Some people who worked at L'Arche also mentioned personal growth in terms of job skills, including time management, flexibility, and anticipating needs.

The quantitative data show that non-core members came in with a strong sense of knowing themselves and their beliefs, and were practitioners of personal reflection. This sense of self grew as a result of living at L'Arche. 47% of survey respondents reported that they know their personal strengths and weaknesses quite a bit or very much before L'Arche and 88% reported the same as a result of L'Arche. 65% of respondents reported that they had quite a bit or very much clarity about what they believe in before L'Arche and 77% report the same as a result of L'Arche. 65% also reported that they practice personal reflection quite a bit or very much before L'Arche and this increased to 82% as a result of L'Arche.

Core members have grown in leadership, setting boundaries, and acting on empathy. Core members have also experienced increased friendliness, adaptability, and assertiveness. Much of this growth is attributed to the support they experience at L'Arche. One core member had grown in her belief that her desires and needs mattered, and she was more comfortable in her own skin. Another core member became more aware of himself and his feelings.

The quantitative data was clear on core member personal growth, showing marked increases in knowing "what I'm good at in life," knowing "what I need to work on to improve my life," and "I'm excited about growing in my life." That last one - excitement about growing in life - showed the largest increase of any of the core member quantitative data points, as it started out quite low with 40% of core members reporting they were not at all excited and only 20% reporting that they are a lot excited about growing. This rating jumped significantly higher with 100% of core members reporting they are a lot excited as a result of their time at L'Arche.

Significance

L'Arche seeks to be a community where we encourage and experience inner growth. We have been called a "school of the heart." The data indicate that L'Arche GWDC has created an environment where people are able to grow in personal ways and engage in mutually transformative relationships.

Possible Responses

Communicating:

Character development tends to be a widely understood part of the L'Arche mission. People come to L'Arche seeking character development. Spiritual leaders Henri Nouwen and John Vanier (though we no longer read the latter) wrote about inner character development. Yet we do not always explicitly state character development when communicating about L'Arche GWDC. Do we want to name character development and inner growth in our future communications and outreach efforts?

Finding 8. Interacting with People in a More Positive Way

Key Insight

Many people mentioned that they have learned how to live and work with different personalities due to being at L'Arche GWDC.

Discussion

Two staff members and one volunteer said being at L'Arche helped them appreciate and be able to work with people who have different personalities or communication styles. A volunteer mentioned L'Arche has taught him to not want to control a situation or a conversation, but instead to be “really trying to hear people where they are.” One volunteer said being in relationships with core members has made him more empathic and able to accept the shortcomings of others. One current staff member and one core member mentioned learning strategies for working with or living with people who are angry or upset. One core member learned about respecting people’s boundaries and working at relationships. He learned that each member of the community had something to offer, even if he personally did not like them. He is dedicated to growing his friendships and spending quality time with people. Two staff members also specified that L'Arche reinforced or taught them that people are generally good and trying their best. Both staff members specified that they learned this through relationships. One staff member mentioned specifically learning from relationships with core members.

Sub-point: Better communication skills. Individuals at L'Arche reported improved communication skills, including better listening, more confidence in addressing conflict, choosing to interact with kind words, and being better able to interact with people who communicate in ways that are different than their own. Some core members improved their communication skills. One core member improved her ability to disagree with others and learned to find healthy alternatives to address conflict. Many big personalities in her house make this skill helpful. Assistants modeled and practiced this skill with the core member. One core member lived in other group homes, but people did not

engage with him. Ever since coming to L'Arche, over 12 years ago, people have been speaking to him and listening to what he has to say. As a result, this core member now speaks much more than before, as reported by his mother. Another core member reported that L'Arche has taught her to “speak nicely” and given her an opportunity to share “kind words” and positivity with her housemates and community members. On the whole, being in a L'Arche community has given core members more opportunities to interact with others— as there are many people and social gatherings— than their lives before L'Arche, thereby giving them more opportunities to increase their communication skills. People at L'Arche also actively value what people with intellectual disabilities have to say. When core members experience that others have a genuine interest in them, they open up and share more of themselves.

Some volunteers reported that being at L'Arche has increased their patience and listening skills. One volunteer said he specifically learned to relate better to people with disabilities by listening and not “just taking over.” One assistant shared that L'Arche has made her a better communicator, listener, and better at addressing conflict (despite being conflict-avoidant before L'Arche). L'Arche challenged her to communicate with many different people in culturally diverse settings including in Spanish and American Sign Language. She has grown in her ability to address conflict, through other community members naming this as an area of growth for her and encouraging her to lean in.

The quantitative data show that non-core members arrived at L'Arche with a (self-reported) fairly high sense of how to get along with other people, and this sense increased as a result of time at L'Arche. The biggest change was in how non-core members were able to resolve conflicts with others, which was the lowest-rated (mean rating of 3.17) of their interpersonal skills and rose to be the highest rated (mean rating of 4.19) after spending time at L'Arche.

Data from the quantitative survey show that core members also had an increase in their ability to know what makes people sad and to feel close and connected to people.

Significance

The mutually transformative relationships at the heart of L'Arche are not possible without the ability to communicate and interact in positive ways. L'Arche provides a space and the support for people to grow in those skills. Examples of space and support include yearly training on giving and receiving feedback, counseling and mediation sessions, and simply the opportunities to be around people who are very different in affirming atmospheres. The ability to communicate and interact in positive ways speaks to the ethos of L'Arche - a place of belonging for people of many different backgrounds.

Possible Responses

While L'Arche GWDC provides many structured spaces for community members- particularly employees- to learn and practice positive interactions, these spaces were not named by employees or community members in interviews. How can employees grow to incorporate naming these trainings as assets that build valuable skills learned at L'Arche? Should they? Would incorporating core members into leading these trainings make them more notable and meaningful?

Communicating:

Should L'Arche GWDC communicate more about the impact of providing spaces for positive interactions? This could be included in outreach presentations that GWDC regularly holds, including to student groups and churches.

Finding 9. To Simply “Be”: Be present and be yourself

Key Insight

L'Arche GWDC is a place where people learned to “simply be” - be present and be themselves. Members of the L'Arche community realized they did not have to constantly be accomplishing something or be perfect.

Discussion

One community member shared that she lost the need to achieve and lost some interest in stereotypical success through her time at L'Arche. Other members mentioned not

needing to always “do things” and instead they were able to sit in companionable silence with core members, without a task, just being present. One member said that L'Arche made her less worried about fitting in because the community “reminds me that I am a person worthy of love every day, and I don't have to be nervous about trying to fit in somewhere.” She cited relationships at L'Arche as her means for learning.

The data show that core members are able to lean robustly into being their full selves and they model this for the people around them. This attribute was captured generally in the interviews with core members often noting what external opportunities became available for them to use their gifts. One core member was able to overcome a barrier of only being able to practice her gift of dancing at her day program. With assistants' encouragement and support, she extended her dancing to her home. Eventually, this core member shared her gift of dance by leading her community in dancing together. Another core member's parent said that her daughter is more comfortable being called on to lead a group than in the past. The core member is now aware of her gifts and belonging in the community.

Two volunteers described coming from backgrounds of being in control and in charge- through being a parent and in their jobs. They both expressed that L'Arche was a place where they did not have to fulfill that role. One volunteer learned that she could and needed “to take a back seat.” Through relationships with core members, conversations with assistants, and observations of the two groups interacting over the years, she learned that she is not in control: “I don't have the right to change them [core members]. It's up to each person to change themselves. It's not up to us to change others.” She also recognized that any change that needs to happen is within herself. The other volunteer shared that he values being able to “do” things in community and to contribute, but he has learned: “It's just about being there, showing up, eating dinner- it's enough.” Another volunteer now takes time to be able to listen to others express their authentic selves. He “slows down” and takes the time necessary to be present for others. One interviewee said she now knows that internal workarounds being your genuine self is what is most important, thanks to the urging of core

members to “be herself.” She is now more aware of her strengths, is more comfortable with vulnerability, and is more inclusive. A former staff member said, “Many of them [core members] are a walking invitation for someone to be themselves - for me to be myself. Because they are themselves, and they’re not trying to put on any pretense.”

Significance

As we work together for a more human society, we want each person to be accepted for who they are - and to accept themselves as well. This finding shows how L'Arche is a place where people can be who they are, where they are accepted not for accomplishments or credentials but simply for their humanity. We could not be a community of belonging without the ability to accept ourselves and each other.

Possible responses

Volunteer changes:

After learning about the volunteer experiences, one can be left with mixed thoughts. On one hand, volunteers at L'Arche GWDC were able to focus on building relationships because there wasn't much for them to be actively accomplishing. On the other hand, one might argue that it is important for L'Arche to provide meaningful engaging volunteer opportunities that allow volunteers to use their gifts. Here are two recommendations:

- L'Arche GWDC can change the title of “volunteer” for those who are there to build relationships with core members instead of engaging in a specific activity or task.
- L'Arche GWDC can create more volunteer activities or structures that allow volunteers to share their gifts and build relationships with core members at the same time.

Finding 10. Welcomed Home: Finding family and belonging at L'Arche

Key Insight

Many core members, or their proxy interviewees, named that L'Arche was their family and/or that they experienced belonging at L'Arche.

Discussion

One core member exemplified how he operates from a place of belonging in his home- recruiting assistants, naming an assistant who he thinks should be Home Life Leader, cooking great food, inviting everyone to visit, and calling everyone in L'Arche brother and sister. Another core member said: “I have a big family wherever I go. Right now I have a big family at L'Arche.” A friend of a core member observed that through their time at L'Arche the member seems more joyful and they are able to invite people into the home and “hold down the house.” One core member, when asked how they knew they were loved by other people in the community, answered: “Because we are a united family.”

Several volunteers feel a sense of belonging and grounding in their role as volunteers, though not necessarily as “members” of L'Arche. Some staff members mentioned commitment to L'Arche and finding belonging. For example, one assistant named L'Arche as family and the commitment to relationships as central, and their primary focus, before the commitment to the “mission.” They are committed during imperfect times and joyful times, having created a “family of choice.”

The quantitative data reveal that core members' sense of safety, stability, and happiness all increased from being at L'Arche, with happiness making the biggest leap. 40% of core members reported that they were not at all happy before L'Arche and 100% reported that they are “a lot” happy as a result of L'Arche.

Significance and Possible Responses

L'Arche seeks to offer lifelong homes, not just a residence, so it is encouraging to hear core members and others name L'Arche as home and family. This signifies that we are doing our job and accomplishing our goal. We can fold the theme of “simply being” into our presentations to groups that would be interested in this topic, such as churches and Jesuit volunteer groups.

Finding 11. Redirecting Future Plans

Key Insight

Community members made major life changes due to spending time at L'Arche GWDC.

Discussion

A core member had the goal to live independently but changed her mind after experiencing community at L'Arche. Another person chose “downward mobility” and not to buy a house, but instead chose to stay in the L'Arche community with his family. One person chose to stay on as staff at L'Arche, rather than continuing to follow their former career goals. A volunteer stayed in the area instead of moving because of his L'Arche community. For others, their mindset shifted about their career or life choices. One former staff member said being at L'Arche made it feel natural to be a dad, and now he is a stay-at-home dad. Another community member is now interested in working in aging and end-of-life care. A current volunteer said that his time at L'Arche, specifically seeing how core members have very simple but very full lives, has encouraged him to be less anxious about having grand plans for his life. He is now more open to receiving the simple gifts of life and community.

Quantitative data show that non-core members already had a fairly high level of focus on human-centered, value-based service careers (mean rating of 4.07) when they came to L'Arche, a focus which increased somewhat (to a mean rating of 4.44) from being at L'Arche. This did not negate the qualitative data but revealed that there might not be as many

major life changes as the qualitative data suggest, but rather that L'Arche cemented a path they were already on. They came in with middling confidence in knowing their priorities in life and where life is headed, which also increased from being in L'Arche.

The quantitative data reveal that core members increased their knowledge of what they are good at in life and what they need to work on to improve their lives since being at L'Arche. Core members experience a significant change in being excited about growing in their lives.

Significance

It is a testament to the deep impact L'Arche has on people that some will choose to change their life plans, or their view on life, after spending time in the L'Arche GWDC community. L'Arche is able to introduce people to a new way of life- an inclusive, simple, joyous way to live that is often at odds with how we are taught to live in other spaces. People find the mission and model of L'Arche - seen in relationships and community living - compelling enough to change their own plans.

Possible responses

Recruitment:

Participating in L'Arche GWDC and the resulting reconsiderations of life plans could be an interesting angle to consider communicating when hiring and recruiting new staff. We can create communications materials around this point specifically, and how L'Arche supported career change generally.

Conclusion

Through conducting interviews we learned that time at L'Arche GWDC had a positive impact on core members, volunteers, staff, and other community members. One consistent thread throughout the interviews was the mention of relationships - especially relationships with core members. Having close relationships in an inclusive community setting seems to be mutually beneficial for people in all different roles. L'Arche provides opportunities for people without intellectual disabilities to build meaningful relationships with people with intellectual disabilities. These are relationships that they likely would not have experienced in such depth as they had at L'Arche.

Core members at L'Arche experienced opportunities to expand their social circles, spiritual practices, hobbies, gifts, and leadership roles. L'Arche provides a well-rounded place for people with intellectual disabilities to be treated as a full person.

During one's time at L'Arche, many people experienced significant internal changes that extended to impacting how they treated others and what they valued most in their lives. For some community members, these changes went very deep and L'Arche has been a catalyst for growth in many areas of their lives.

Possible issues at L'Arche GWDC:

- We have a limit to who we can support at L'Arche GWDC. Based on our model of small, family-style homes we simply cannot serve everyone. A current volunteer expressed how he was troubled that L'Arche can only house a limited number of people, as he sees the value of L'Arche and longs for more people to live there.
- Employees experience work stress. Two staff members said they have less time for their own spiritual practices. One staff member said they felt joy and belonging when spending personal time at L'Arche, but they felt very stressed while working there, which included working 12-hour days and responding to constant change.
- One person who had spent time in both the homes and the office felt that the office culture and decision-making were out of step with the values of L'Arche. They said: "...when it comes to the value, for example, of recognizing gifts within people, I didn't really feel like that happened at the office. I also felt some administrative decisions were made that were not remotely 'fully human.'"
- The data reveal mixed responses on whether or not someone would engage in advocacy or speak up for someone with disabilities. Many people did not seem moved to advocate for people with disabilities. If we want to model inclusion, it would be better to offer people some information on how to advocate with people with disabilities- on a personal daily level, by reaching out to their elected representatives or using other advocacy methods.
- L'Arche GWDC has a white dominant culture. We question whether or not we have cultural competency. The L'Arche community and leadership is predominantly white and Catholic. We need to ask ourselves, are we a welcoming space for people of color? We need to understand if there is higher turnover for staff members who are people of color, and if so, why?

Recommendations to apply:

Teaching advocacy:

As responses around advocacy - whether in personal life or in politics - were quite mixed, L'Arche GWDC could look at how to teach community members to take what they learn at L'Arche and how to apply it to their lives. It appears this isn't being taught in a systematic way, and it could be good to fold this teaching into already existing formations and workshops.

Communicating:

This impact evaluation revealed new avenues for our Communications and Outreach efforts, especially naming personal character development and how core members have opportunities for freedom, decision making, and leadership, and why this is important.

Further discussion:

L'Arche GWDC can look into the work-life balance of staff at L'Arche; especially within the context of a high turnover rate for direct support professionals generally.

Diversity Commission:

This evaluation is another example of how L'Arche GWDC is a white-dominated culture. Some of the findings and questions that came up in the evaluation could be useful to our Diversity Commission as they work to help us all engage in diverse cultures and make everyone feel welcome.