



Inspired by Beatitudes, L'Arche is refuge for adults with developmental challenges

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By



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During art time at the activity center of L'Arche Mobile, David Stuart pauses to give staff member Valerie Lawson a hug. Stuart, 68, has lived in one of L'Arche's community homes for the last 19 years. (John David Mercer/Press-Register)

MOBILE, Alabama -- On a bright, winter's day, members of L'Arche Mobile — a residential community for adults with mental challenges — gathered for a lunchtime prayer service.

From Peggy Sirtin, 72, a L'Arche resident for the last 32 years, to Jamie Magnon, 21, who joined the community two years ago, the group sat on couches, some with prayer books, others with tambourines.

Repeating after Valerie Lawson, a staff member, Magnon slowly recited a simple prayer into a microphone:

"Give to me a heart of love that I might loving be./Fill me with compassion that

others might see."

Then Barbara Jean Brantley, 65, who is blind, took the microphone and led the group:

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine ..."

Brantley's sister, Annie Pearl Brantley, 61 — the sisters have lived at L'Arche nearly six decades between them — nodded and shook a tambourine.

A faith-based, nonprofit organization founded in France in the 1960s by Jean Vanier, L'Arche has communities all over the world.

L'Arche Mobile, which opened in the 1970s, houses approximately 20 adults in four residences. Other participants live with their own families and visit L'Arche during the day.

The activities center — where members meet up for art projects, celebrations, and prayer services — is in Midtown.

On the wall of the center is a poster that explains the name's origin: "L'Arche is French for The Ark: A Place of Refuge."

L'Arche, says director Marty O'Malley, was an innovation in its time. Too often those with mental challenges were "warehoused," he says — put into institutions with little care.

The philosophy of community homes, and loving attention, for the developmentally disabled, he says, was essential progress.

Even in times of cutbacks in public support, he says, L'Arche has managed to survive.

The nonprofit, says O'Malley, is approximately two-thirds dependent on support from the Alabama Department of Mental Health. The rest of funding it generates with fund-raisers like First Light Marathon in January, and a college football preview banquet in May.

Auburn coach Gene Chizik was the guest speaker in 2010, Alabama's Nick Saban last year.

The spiritual philosophy of L'Arche, says O'Malley, is based in The Beatitudes, which were delivered by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount.

Among those prescriptions, found in the fifth chapter of Matthew, are "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," and "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

O'Malley says that the person-to-person relationship between staff and volunteers, called team members, and residents, called core members, speaks to the essence of faith.

"We try to look at the gifts of each person," O'Malley says, "and enhance those gifts."

If core members are capable of work, L'Arche finds them part-time jobs.

Magnon, who loves sports, helps with equipment for the football team at the University of South Alabama. Sarah Houseknecht, 25, a resident for the last four years, makes beautiful artwork sold in local shops.

"We make a life commitment to community members," says O'Malley.

Indeed, during art time at the center, Harry Reber, 64, sits coloring big sheets of paper next to Willie McGehee, 62.

The paper is laminated and cut into strips for book marks, one of the products made by L'Arche.

As older members pass on, younger, special needs adults come in to the program. Thus, the generations live and work alongside each other.

For staffers like Lawson, there is personal as well as professional meaning in the day-to-day.

While she used to go to a Primitive Baptist church, she now finds her faith renewed in her workplace.

"It's a true calling to be here," says Lawson, a former nurse. "L'Arche is my church. This is where my spirituality draws from."

Michelle Bornhoft, 22, a staffer through Jesuit Volunteer Corps, says her spiritual experience is learning to see the adults not as "disabled, but as my friends."

Although its offices are housed at All Saints Episcopal Church in Mobile, L'Arche is ecumenical, says O'Malley,

In addition to All Saints, says O'Malley, L'Arche has "special relationships" with a host of Mobile area churches, including St. Ignatius Catholic, St. Paul's Episcopal, Government Street Presbyterian, Springhill Presbyterian and Westminster Presbyterian.

Pastors from an array of denominations come to give talks at prayer meetings.

Mission groups from the University of Mobile and other institutions have also spent time at L'Arche.

Worldwide, O'Malley says, L'Arche communities are administered by — and include — non-Christians and Christians alike.

"We don't evangelize to anyone," he says.

There are pastoral ministers on staff, Sister Janet Ahler, Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Agnes, and Dennis O'Keefe, a former Paulist Father.

O'Keefe explains that the religiosity of L'Arche resides in "the affirmation that each person is made in the image of God."

It is critical, O'Keefe says, "to recognize the dignity and value of each person.

"All humanity should live this way."

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