

L'Arche Edmonton says Vanier's legacy of integration will live on

Sadness. Gratitude. Determination to continue an enduring legacy.

It's with these deep emotions that L'Arche Edmonton is mourning the death of Jean Vanier. The Catholic theologian and humanitarian founded L'Arche, a worldwide network of people with and without developmental disabilities who live, work and share their lives together.

Vanier died on May 7 at age 90. He had been suffering from cancer and he was receiving care at a palliative care hospital in Paris.

"We are saddened but grateful for all he has given us and to the world," said Pat Desnoyers, executive director of L'Arche Edmonton. "L'Arche has grown to be a great model of life sharing – people with or without disabilities sharing life together."



Jean Vanier

Desnoyers said L'Arche Edmonton members learned of Vanier's passing early in the morning. He was top of mind just hours earlier at the community's monthly prayer night. L'Arche Edmonton plans to honour Vanier in some way. What that will look like is still to be determined.

The son of former governor general Georges Vanier, Jean founded L'Arche in 1964 in response to the treatment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in institutions. The L'Arche movement grew quickly across France

and the world, and continues to welcome people of many faiths and cultures.

Jean was educated in Canada and overseas, served in the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy, studied theology and philosophy and taught at the University of Toronto. It was a visit to psychiatric hospitals in France that led Vanier to establish the first L'Arche ("The Ark") community in Trosly-Breuil, near Paris in 1964. It will also be the site of Vanier's funeral.

From a simple idea, that people with and without disabilities could live and learn from each other, today, L'Arche includes more than 150 communities including 29 Canadian communities and two projects in nine provinces. In Edmonton, L'Arche runs day program and has six homes that accommodate 23 people with disabilities and 20 assistants.

"It's a place where you can and you're accepted and not judged. I think his legacy is that L'Arche created a sense of community and of belonging," said Wendy Wharry, whose 26-year-old daughter Sally has been living at La Creche House for more than four years. Wendy's brother Jeff Fidelak, 47, has lived at Noah House in Edmonton for about a decade.

"Yes, it's a sad day. Jean Vanier has done a wonderful job creating communities around the world," Wharry said.



Jeff Fidelak, right, has been living at L'Arche Edmonton for about a decade. At left is Vinh Le. Courtesy L'Arche Edmonton

"The L'Arche Edmonton community is so full love and it seems like they always have more love to give. Our own immediate family has grown exponentially since we've been involved with L'Arche. We've met people from all over the world."

Desnoyers recalls meeting Vanier personally in 2009 at a L'Arche conference in Calgary.

"I was touched by his ability to be present with everyone he met. Compassion poured out of him. His strength comes from his humbleness and his vulnerability."

Four decades ago, it was a visit and a retreat at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Sherwood Park – led by Vanier himself – that began the path of creating what would become L'Arche Edmonton in 1972.

The late George and Doris Meyers, a Camrose couple with 12 children – many of them adopted – established L'Arche Shalom in Sherwood Park. It still operates today.



Sally Wharry

Wharry said it's the social interaction in L'Arche communities – even parties, galas, events and other activities – that benefits everyone, and she can see it in her own daughter. Sally Wharry herself was centre stage in L'Arche Edmonton's annual Christmas pageant at St. Thomas d'Aquin parish.

It was Vanier's goal, L'Arche members and supporters say, to break down barriers between people with disabilities and those without – even if it can't be eliminated entirely.

"Among some people there will always be that stigma," Wharry said. "Some are uncomfortable with those who are different, so we need to educate them."



Pat Desnoyers

A humanitarian, Vanier was the recipient of numerous awards including the Order of Canada. And he had a deep Catholic faith that, Desnoyers noted, has been guiding him throughout his life – from enlisting in Navy, to serve his country; studying and teaching philosophy and theology; and later starting L’Arche.

Almost immediately after his passing, there have been calls on social media for Vanier to be made a saint of the Catholic Church.

“He was truly a holy man,” Desnoyers said. “But one can be honoured or have saintly attributes whether the Church canonizes him or not. The legacy of what he accomplished will be known throughout the world.”

Desnoyers noted that more than a decade ago, Vanier passed on the leadership of L’Arche International to the next generation – which is both a privilege and a challenge. The big question is what does the future hold for creating community between people with disabilities and those without?

“We’ve been responsible for the transmission of what he started, but what does integration look like today locally and globally?” Desnoyers said. “We are the heirs of his legacy.”