

“It’s a slow process becoming a bridge”: Jean Vanier, L’Arche, and the United Church of Canada

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This paper was delivered from Cowichan Bay on Vancouver Island, on land where the Coast Salish people have lived for more than 10,000 years. The theme of Congress 2020 was “Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism,” and this paper was part of a session titled “Influential Individuals.” I had the rather unique and dubious pleasure of presenting a paper about a *disgraced* influential individual.

In January 2020, I was excited to propose this paper. After a decade of work, my two books had both been published the previous fall: *Tender to the World: Jean Vanier, L’Arche and the United Church of Canada* (McGill-Queen’s University Press) and *Sharing Life: Stories of L’Arche Founders* (Paulist Press).¹ But at the end of February, L’Arche International announced the results of an external investigation. Over nearly four decades, Jean Vanier had manipulated at least six women without intellectual disabilities into coercive sexual relationships, using disturbing theological justifications.² The title of my paper was designed to echo the theme of Congress 2020, quoting Vanier at the United Church’s 25th General Council in 1972: “It’s a slow process becoming a bridge.”³ By June 2020, it was clear that while it might be a slow process becoming a bridge, blowing up a bridge can happen fast.

Even though the panel was about individuals, this paper is about the shared history of Vanier, the United Church, and L’Arche communities. What intrigues me about church history is that it always, somewhere, links to deep human yearnings for the divine or at least something bigger, for

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transcendent connection, for community, for a vision of society. Church history is full of imagining and dreaming a better world – and then that gets lived out in all the messy confusions of embodied social life, and the contradictions and complexities of a historical moment.

L'Arche began in 1964, before group homes or community living for people with intellectual disabilities existed, when Canadian philosophy professor Jean Vanier began sharing a house in a French village with men from a nearby institution and called it L'Arche – French for The Ark, a reference to Noah's floating community of rescue and mayhem. The L'Arche idea was timely – so much so that within twelve years, more than forty new L'Arche communities had opened in eleven countries. Today, L'Arche has more than 10,000 members in 175 communities in 38 countries on five continents.⁴

L'Arche in France was exclusively Roman Catholic, but L'Arche in Canada was ecumenical from its beginnings. October 2019 marked fifty years since five Protestants began L'Arche in Canada by moving into a large home for tubercular sisters given to L'Arche by Our Lady's Missionaries that faced the nearby Loyal True Blue and Orange Home on Yonge Street in Richmond Hill. Anglicans Steve and Ann Newroth were the first community leaders. As Steve Newroth explained:

As we began L'Arche Daybreak, our vision could be expressed in two words: "Live with"! [. . .] "living with" was the work of L'Arche, it was the therapy of L'Arche – sharing life! When you have been born into a world that rejects you, when you have been shuffled to the fringe of society and someone says to you "I would like to share my life with you," that is the most life-giving therapy that can happen.⁵

The Congress 2020 Theme "Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism" and the Curious Case of a 1960s United Church New Curriculum Book

In 1967, United Church member and filmmaker Peter Flemington filmed Vanier in his original community in Trosly, France for the Canadian ecumenical "Religious Television Associates." At one point in the interview, Flemington, in a voiceover, says, "I mentioned jokingly that Canada's largest Protestant denomination now featured his life story as part of its church school curriculum. Did that make him feel like a kind of contemporary saint?" Vanier laughs and says: "Yeah, well, sanctity is shown after, eh? And there's a word in the gospels – Beware you who are

considered prophets in your own time – the idea being that the ones who are considered prophets and saints during their life are not normally the ones that are the real saints.”⁶

Distracted by the problematic question of saintliness, it’s easy to miss how Flemington introduced his question, telling Vanier “that Canada’s largest Protestant denomination now featured his life story as part of its church school curriculum.” That set me on a quest, and it turned out nobody – not even any United Church theological colleges or archives – remembered that Vanier had been included in any United Church New Curriculum materials. It took more than a year of scrounging church basements and asking everyone I knew to find the material to which Flemington referred.⁷

United Church minister Frank Morgan’s Intermediate-age church schoolbook, *God Speaks Through People* was published in 1964, coincidentally the year that Jean Vanier began L’Arche. It had an initial run of 50,000 copies. Chapter 12 of the original version is titled, “It Happens Today: The Story of Two Modern Christians.”⁸ It includes short biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr, though that chapter actually begins with Rosa Parks, and Dr Mary Verghese, a surgeon and disability activist who was a member of the Syrian Christian Church of South India, in a wheelchair after an automobile accident left her paraplegic while she was in medical school.

The third printing of 42,000 copies was in 1967 and here the original chapter 12 was replaced with “Fox Hole Christian: The Story of Robert McClure,” followed by chapter 13: “The Ark: The Story of Jean Vanier.”⁹ In other words, the 1967 version of *God Speaks Through People* replaced two women and one man – Black American civil rights activists and an Indian disability activist – with two able-bodied white Canadian men. This is interesting in light of the themes of Congress 2020: “Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism.” I am observing, not judging. Both Vanier and McClure did commendable work building bridges between cultures and across various kinds of difference. I also note this for any fellow church historians – if you are ever researching the New Curriculum, find copies of every printing because there might be no indication of changes. I do not know whether archival records exist of discussions around the decision to change the content. I have never found a copy of the second printing.

More L'Arche / United Church Connections

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Jean Vanier regularly came to Canada to give public talks and lead retreats. In 1972, Vanier spoke to the 451 commissioners who comprised the 25th United Church General Council in Saskatoon (General Council is the highest “court” of decision-making in the United Church). UC General Secretary George Morrison got misty-eyed just anticipating it, according to an *Observer* article before the GC.¹⁰ He wasn't disappointed. The December 1972 *United Church Observer* published a summary of Vanier's talk, prefaced with an introduction that began with the extraordinary sentence, “If you don't worship him, you don't know him.”¹¹

Vanier had arrived in Saskatoon from an interdenominational, interracial Jesus People “happening” in the streets of Cleveland.¹² Through his talk at the 1972 General Council, he connected the United Church members not only to L'Arche, but also to people marginalized by poverty, disability, racial discrimination, violence, and imprisonment, evangelical Christians of all denominations, the charismatic movement, the Jesus People who delighted him in Cleveland and elsewhere – as well as linking through his own person and heritage to the Roman Catholic Church and French culture. Vanier suggested that bridging social divides is not easy, saying,

It is so difficult to bridge the gap. For myself, it is difficult. All my needs of security, all the values of my society, all my education – and then I discover that maybe the spirit of God is very different from the culture of our time [. . .] It's a slow process [. . .] becoming a bridge between these two cultures of those who have too much and those who have too little.¹³

The United Church responded generously to this new L'Arche vision. L'Arche began in Vancouver in 1973 because of a huge gift from the United Church: their newly-built home for unwed mothers in Burnaby. That community's first director, Judith Leckie, had grown up in the United Church before becoming Roman Catholic.¹⁴ Soon afterwards, L'Arche expanded to Toronto when George Morrison rented to L'Arche a big house on Avoca St. behind the United Church offices downtown.¹⁵ While initially part of L'Arche Daybreak, the Avoca House marks the beginning of what is now L'Arche Toronto.

Vanier's early “ecumenical retreats” had a quota of 400 Roman

Catholics and no more than 40 Protestants. These sometimes featured strange and painful misunderstandings, especially around the Eucharist.¹⁶ But they also shaped leaders, such as future United Church moderator Bob Smith, who was a young minister at Richmond Hill United Church when L'Arche Daybreak began. Smith was asked to help plan one of the more genuinely ecumenical retreats, and was very excited because, as he said, this was big league with Vanier and all the "important people!" Then Vanier insisted that Smith make sure that people without money could afford to come, and that people marginalized by society had to be invited. Smith recalls that the sharing times on the retreat were the first time he had really seen the world through the eyes of people so different from himself, and it changed him for the rest of his ministry. Moderator Bruce McLeod was also profoundly affected. He found the retreat freed him to speak with and about Jesus in more intimate ways.¹⁷

The sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches took place in Vancouver in the summer of 1983. For two years, United Church minister Gordon How worked as the local organizer for the opening celebration, which featured Jean Vanier as speaker – it took place in the 15,000-seat Pacific Coliseum with a choir of 1,000 and a welcome from the Governor General, along with readers, liturgical dancers, and special staging. Lois Wilson welcomed Vanier to the stage. The event was televised nationally by the CBC, and although How had carefully timed Vanier's talk during a rehearsal, on the actual day Vanier spoke for so long that frantic CBC producers had to scramble to delay coverage of a football game. How laughingly says that the CBC never forgave him.¹⁸

Over the years, many United Church members, both with and without intellectual disabilities, have been part of L'Arche. A current example is Mary Hillhouse of L'Arche Vancouver. Hillhouse is a published poet, although she does not read or write. She is an active member of Jubilee United Church in Burnaby, and has served on the L'Arche Canada Spirituality Commission, whose members are selected from across Canada. Hillhouse believes that L'Arche could learn from the United Church, saying, "Definitely! We can learn to serve in the church and in the community." She further suggests that the United Church can continue to discover from L'Arche ways of "praying together, singing, and just being together."¹⁹

To sum up, although L'Arche is often assumed to be Roman Catholic, the United Church and L'Arche share ideals of social justice and inclusion with similar social imaginaries. Over the years, the United

Church has supported L'Arche with houses, people, property, and practical support. In turn, L'Arche has offered the United Church inspiration, counsel, committed members, retreats, prayer, and friendship. Sometimes painful mismatches have caused hurt and even ruptured relationships, with marginalized Protestants experiencing the kind of well-intentioned but oblivious exclusion that people with disabilities have often experienced.

As Church Historians Thinking about Bridging Divides, What Can We Make of the February 2020 Revelations about Jean Vanier?

In 2015, Jean Vanier received the Templeton Prize, an award given to influential spiritual leaders. As you already know, Vanier's reputation went up in flames at the end of February 2020. Although I considered cancelling this presentation and returning to my previous identity as a Shakespeare scholar, I decided there is still much to discuss, especially issues relating to an "influential individual." In the spring of 2020, is the whole idea of the "individual" and putting people on pedestals becoming increasingly problematic?

L'Arche International's public letter dated 24 February 2020 expressed appreciation to those who participated in the inquiry: "If the words of those who testified bring to light a troubled part of our history, their efforts give L'Arche a chance to continue on its journey, to become more aware of our history, and, ultimately, better able to face the challenges of our time. We understand that this was also their intention, and we are grateful for it." This was a striking response. I suspect few organizations facing news like this have been able to say they are grateful. L'Arche International added, "What we learn today is a huge blow and a cause of great confusion, but what we lose in certainty, we hope to gain in terms of maturity."

Around the world, people have been grieving the loss of the Jean Vanier they thought they knew. Denial, anger, depression, bargaining – responses have run the gamut. L'Arche offers the intriguing possibility that a loss of certainty could lead to greater maturity.²⁰ Pushing through my own circling anger and distaste while preparing this paper in May 2020, I suggest at least seven possible directions for future scholarship regarding Jean Vanier as an "influential individual." Given the problem at hand, I suspect any approach would benefit from a feminist lens.

1. Move beyond Jean Vanier as swiftly as possible. I am not talking about *cancelling* Vanier but recognizing instead that he had his moment

for more than five decades, and now it is time to pay closer attention to other voices and experiences.

2. Vanier's life has been revealed as much more messy and complex, but he was a friend not only of church leaders, but also artists such as poet Robert Lax.²¹ Vanier admired Etty Hillesum, who in the 1940s wrote confidently about her sexual abilities, and had ongoing sexual relationships with both her psychoanalyst and her landlord. Might Vanier's life make more sense if seen in a wider context of other counter-cultural thinkers, writers and community experiments from the 1940s to the 1960s, especially in their exploration of sexual and spiritual connections?

3. What did people see and experience or project onto Vanier at particular historical moments through his long public life?²² One could explore what about him moved so many people over many years before 2020, tracking how he was perceived, described, where he was respected, whose attention he caught and why, and how that changed over time. That would include how and why he continues to be put on a pedestal, whether that's to adore, critique, or revile.

4. Recognize that Vanier's sexually manipulative behaviour did not happen in a vacuum. This is a particular story of gendered power, of a leader revered to the point of cultishness, of the confusing ambiguity of consent, the manipulation of people at the point of their spiritual and personal vulnerability, the silencing of questions. Year by year, we gain more capacity to understand and hopefully transform the social conditions that allow for this kind of hurt.²³

5. Acknowledge and explore that the influence identified as "Jean Vanier" was never purely individual. In 1964, Jean Vanier had been drifting around working on his doctorate until his mid-30s, supported by his parents, without becoming famous for his sense of fun or playfulness. The new companions who began living with him, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, had lived in both family and institutional settings without transforming their surroundings with joy. The founding of L'Arche's unique character was not due to any of the individual players, but rather the unexpected surprises of their lives together. Another direction for scholarship would be to consider what the collective, the women and men around Vanier, drew out of each other through sharing their lives.

6. The seemingly singular authorial voice of "Jean Vanier" includes insights of other writers and the community. Most of Vanier's books were not written solely by Vanier: many were works of collaboration with others, often women.²⁴ To discard Vanier's writings risks losing this

collective wisdom. His charisma and reputation overshadowed other contributors who didn't possess the narrative power given to Vanier, but he was never the sole author of L'Arche spirituality and philosophy. There are thousands of stories around the world of people taking up his compelling vision to reconfigure structures of privilege and celebrate diverse communities in a way that bridges every kind of divide.²⁵

7. Although Jean Vanier influenced both the United Church and L'Arche, those two organizations now have a half-century history of their own. Many members of the UC have been involved in disability justice through L'Arche, developing ever more complex understandings of what the Manual calls "inclusive Christian fellowship." In the last section of *Tender to the World*, I analyze the remarkable closing session of the 43rd United Church General Council in 2018, when proceedings came to a standstill for nearly three hours as racialized commissioners stepped up to the microphones and told their fellow commissioners their painful stories of exclusion even at that event.²⁶ The United Church perseveres in its struggle to become a genuinely intercultural church: how could that identity continue to be enriched by its long alliance with L'Arche?

Endnotes

1. Carolyn Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World: Jean Vanier, L'Arche and the United Church of Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), and Carolyn Whitney-Brown, *Sharing Life: Stories of L'Arche Founders* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2019). Since presenting this paper, *Tender to the World* has been favourably reviewed by Alan Hall in the *Canadian Historical Review* (September 2020), Madeline Burghardt in the *Journal of Disability & Religion* (July 2020), and Michael Higgins in the *Literary Review of Canada* (June 2020). These reviews somewhat allay my fears that disgust with Vanier himself will eclipse the significance of many other worthwhile stories and experiences. See further endorsements on the McGill-Queens University Press page: https://www.mqup.ca/tender-to-the-world-products-9780773559127.php?page_id=73&
2. See L'Arche International News, "L'Arche International announces findings of Independent Inquiry," https://www.larche.org/news/-/asset_publisher/mQsRZspJMdBBy/content/inquiry-statement-test.
3. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 24. Excerpts from Vanier's speech to the General Council of the United Church in Saskatoon, SK, 19 August 1972 were published as "A Gentle Hallelujah: Jean Vanier Tells What the Good News Could Mean to You," *United Church Observer*, December 1972: 23-5,

48.

4. For more information about L'Arche around the world, see www.larche.org
5. Whitney-Brown, *Sharing Life*, vii, 38-39. See also Stephen Newroth, "Daybreak, Jean Vanier, and L'Arche" in *A Selective Overview of Jean Vanier and the Movement of L'Arche*, ed. Wolf Wolfensberger (Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation, 1973) 1-9.
6. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 30-32.
7. My thanks to Megumi Saunders, who was retiring from First Metropolitan United in Victoria, BC and came across a large box of New Curriculum books. Her only condition was that I take the entire box, and thus I have a nearly complete set of New Curriculum materials. I thought seriously about a project exploring the impact of the New Curriculum on the generation of us who were raised on it – at the younger end people like me, and bit older, former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynn, Kingston writer Bronwyn Wallace and thousands more. Might the New Curriculum have been more successful and influential than has been recognized? Thousands of Canadians in public service, education, ministry and the arts were formed by the New Curriculum. I wondered also whether the New Curriculum was used in the residential schools. But when I tried to reread the books that I remembered enjoying as a child and teen, I found them simultaneously deadly boring and dishearteningly sexist, so I gave it up. I hereby offer this bright idea, along with a box of books, to any reader who needs a new project.
8. Frank H. Morgan, *God Speaks through People*, 1st ed. (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1964). Frank H. Morgan, "The Ark: The Story of Jean Vanier," in *God Speaks through People*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1967), 225-33.
9. I offer a detailed analysis Jean Vanier's inversive humour in this early interview in *Tender to the World*, 26-30.
10. This article in the Summer 1972 issue of the *United Church Observer* interviewed Morrison as he looked ahead to GC25. I cannot determine the precise reference due to current library restrictions during the pandemic.
11. J.T. [James A. Taylor], Introduction to "A Gentle Hallelujah: Jean Vanier Tells What the Good News Could Mean to You," *United Church Observer*, December 1972, 22; cited in Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 16.
12. Vanier had arrived in Saskatoon from an interdenominational, inter-racial Jesus People "happening" in the streets of Cleveland. See Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 21-24.

13. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 24.
14. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 62-65.
15. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 60.
16. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 45-47.
17. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 56-60.
18. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 34-37.
19. Whitney-Brown, *Tender to the World*, 174-177.
20. I explore this in Carolyn Whitney-Brown, "'What We Lose in Certainty': Re-grieving Jean Vanier," *Critical Theology* 2, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 7-8.
21. The long friendship between Vanier and Lax is mentioned in Michael N. McGregor, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 186, 379.
22. The adulation immediately after Vanier's death was enormous. I comment on it in "Jean Vanier: Remembering an Icon, Not an Idol," *Sojourners*, 20 May 2019, <https://sojo.net/articles/jean-vanier-remembering-icon-not-idol>.
23. Soon after the news broke, Madeline Burghardt offered some pointed insights and questions in "Jean Vanier was revered, but revelations of abuse and manipulation should not come as a surprise" *The Globe and Mail*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-jean-vanier-was-revered-but-revelations-of-abuse-and-manipulation>. Since then, Jane Barter, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and others have also published feminist analyses of Vanier's behaviour.
24. For further discussion of Vanier's collaborative writing, see Carolyn Whitney-Brown, "Too Chicken to Cross the Road? Jean Vanier and Getting to the Other Side," *Critical Theology* 1 no. 4 (Summer 2019), and Carolyn Whitney-Brown, "Introduction to the New Edition," *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2019), 10-11.
25. Both of my 2019 books, *Sharing Life* and *Tender to the World*, explore how people with and without disabilities took up the challenges and complexities of L'Arche as both a lived experience and as an ideal. I hope that stories like these do not get dismissed or overlooked because of deep disillusionment with Vanier himself.
26. I commented further in an online interview with *Broadview* magazine, 26 February 2020, <https://broadview.org/jean-vanier-abuse-report>.