Vanier’s keynote address to the United Church’s 25th General Council in Saskatoon. “Begin where you are with tenderness and kindness, with those who are your neighbours,” he urged. “And as the spirit grows, it calls you forth, further and further. Let it grow so that we become people of compassion, tenderly, quietly, wherever we are, opening ourselves up, listening to people. We can’t do this without the spirit, and that’s why we need prayer.”

Following Vanier’s death earlier this year, Mandate asked several United Church people who have been involved in L’Arche what they carried forward from that experience and how it has affected their ministry.

The Rev. Patricia Gale-MacDonald, Minister Emeritus of Burton Avenue United Church in Barrie, Ont., was active in the United Church as she was growing up, but moving to L’Arche in France in 1971 opened a new world of spirituality to her. “I really encountered Jesus

Remembering Jean Vanier

*Mandate* asks people in the United Church to share their memories of the Canadian theologian and L’Arche founder.

*When I moved to* the L’Arche Daybreak community in 1990, three of my four housemates with intellectual disabilities were members of nearby Richmond Hill United Church in Richmond Hill, Ont. One of them, Gord Henry, often listened to tapes of Jean Vanier’s talks. Vanier, the well-known Canadian philosopher and spiritual leader, was the founder of L’Arche, which was by then a federation of communities around the world where people with and without intellectual disabilities share their lives together. Many of our evenings were filled with Vanier’s gentle voice. Henry, who had several decades of experience in L’Arche, explained, “He talks about Jesus. It’s good for my heart.”

Henry wasn’t alone. Many other members of the United Church have had a similar hunger for Vanier’s voice, spanning decades. For example, in 1972, hundreds of tapes were sold of Vanier’s keynote address to the United Church’s 25th General Council in Saskatoon. “Begin where you are with tenderness and kindness, with those who are your neighbours,” he urged. “And as the spirit grows, it calls you forth, further and further. Let it grow so that we become people of compassion, tenderly, quietly, wherever we are, opening ourselves up, listening to people. We can’t do this without the spirit, and that’s why we need prayer.”

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for the first time, moving from my head to my heart, and Jesus became as real to me as any person I’ve ever loved,” she remembers.

For the Rev. Carolyn Insley, minister at North Gower United Church and Carsonby United Church in North Gower, Ont., arriving at L’Arche in France in the 1990s immersed her in a new kind of prayer that was new to her: joining with others to sit quietly with Jesus. “It has stayed with me all my life. Without prayer, there is no ministry that is relevant,” she muses.

Shannon MacLean, a candidate for ministry through Woodlawn United Church in Dartmouth, N.S., realized that “there was little to no literature found on what people with intellectual disabilities have to teach the church. The church has focused on ministering to people with intellectual disabilities instead of with them.” As part of her master of divinity degree, she decided to interview L’Arche members who have a particular gift of prayer. Through these conversations, they “revealed how the church can be transformed by creating time and space for the richness of the gifts of all people.”

Former L’Arche Hamilton community leader and United Church minister the Rev. Lynn Godfrey explains, “When I preach about L’Arche, I usually tell people if they don’t remember anything else about what I say, remember the word ‘with.’ It expresses the mutually transforming relationships as well as anything else.”

When L’Arche dance troupe the Spirit Movers performed a dance titled “The Face of God” at Richmond Hill United Church, people were moved to tears. Then the troupe invited people to join them. The Rev. Linda Butler emphasizes that she couldn’t have told people to dance, “But it was the Spirit Movers, and the congregation just did it.”

“Each person has gifts to offer the church,” says Insley, and she weaves that conviction into all aspects of her ministry. Trying to replicate programs that were successful elsewhere rarely works, she believes, because “programs that work grow out of the specific gifts and love.”

The results will be imperfect, but if done with love—trusting the particular gifts in the church at that time—they will be fruitful.

BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE HERE. When I set out to ask United Church leaders what they have carried with them into ministry from their L’Arche experience, I was thinking of heartwarming stories. Godfrey points out, “I always talk about how people can get hurt in L’Arche. It is an important part of our message of brokenness, vulnerability, and humanity.”

Gale-MacDonald remembers bicycling through the woods in 1972 on her way to a L’Arche meeting when she was assaulted. She managed to escape without serious injury but was deeply shaken. When she shared her traumatic experience with members of the community, “I remember Monsieur Vanier, as we called him back then, looked away. Monsieur Vanier looked away from me. At first I was devastated by his response, but with time I have come to understand, and indeed find comfort in the truth that sometimes even the best of us is not able to be present to, or supportive of, a person who is hurting.”

In other words, even Jean Vanier, so profoundly attentive and compassionate about many kinds of suffering, could be distracted or insensitive. I suspect that each of us has points where the pain of others is so uncomfortable that we would
you don’t have time to meet people.” When we take time to discover each other’s gifts, then there is time to have fun together. Gale-MacDonald remembers both the loneliness of her L’Arche work and also the fun: “Friday night community parties, stories, food, laughter, after-dinner gathering in the parlour—so much fun! I learned that relationship is at the heart of everything we are called to do, relationship with each other and with God.” She adds, “Something about Jean Vanier’s ability to be present, his faith, his laughter, challenged me to my core, giving me a whole new way of understanding the world.”

The wisdom of L’Arche is that fun reaches outward. Vanier often emphasized the power of simply having fun together, wasting time, “belly laughing” as he liked to say. Perhaps, he speculated, we could transform the world by learning to have fun. Likewise, in the church, Insley points out, “Community is for outreach, so that we can do something together. We have something to offer the world even in small ways of loving our neighbours.”

Today the United Church is discovering ways of becoming an intercultural church. Like L’Arche’s experience, sometimes this is painful and sometimes this is fun. Gord Henry, who listened to so many tapes, offered wisdom that I have found works in every circumstance: “Open your heart,” he would say.  

**Carolyn Whitney-Brown’s** 2010 McGeachy study was published recently as *Tender to the World: Jean Vanier, L’Arche, and the United Church of Canada* (McGill–Queens University Press). This article is not part of that book.