

# Letters of L'ARCHE®

A magazine published by the International Federation of L'Arche Communities

## Kolkata '08



**On the  
front page:**  
*Kolkata  
day by day*  
**HEATHER COOGAN  
AND ANNE CHABERT  
D'HIÈRES**

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Note: Respectful terminology to describe the people who are at the heart of L'Arche and for whom L'Arche was founded varies from one country to another. We invite you to substitute the terms used by our authors with those that are used and accepted in your country.



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## Point of View

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### In 2008, L'Arche is:

- 135 communities
- 36 countries on 5 continents
- 2800 people with an intellectual disability



## Portrait

*Kolkata '08 seen by  
Richard Keagan-Bull*



*What is striking here in India?*

Well, first the heat, I think. It's quite hot out here. And secondly, it's quite humbling seeing the children walking around the streets and all that. You see how lucky we are compared to where they have to go through and all that. It makes you feel how lucky you are really, you know. Sometimes you think all is not so happy but then you come here and it helps you to put all into perspective.

### In the streets of Kolkata

*Did you have a chance to walk around a bit?*

We went out to the festival last night, we did, yes, to the Pandals. It was quite nice to look at them all, yes. Just walking in the streets. All the children wanted their picture taken, they did. We had to keep stopping and take pictures, we did. It was quite fun.

*People here come to look at, but also to pray in the Pandals. Can we compare it to a church?*

O, I think it's just slightly different, yes. There are a lot of differences, yes. It's completely different, isn't it? Yes. It's a completely different religion, isn't it really?



*Could you describe it? What have you seen?*

Well, I've seen like big images of gods. I can't remember their names, no, there's hundreds of them. There's just one like an elephant nose.

### Ganesh

Yes, that's the one, Ganesh. It was just wonderful, just walk around. You know they're so spectacular, they are. And then later on they all went up in smoke, they did, yes. They started smoking in there, they did, yes. So I don't know what's going on there but they all went up in smoke, yes.

### Warm and welcoming

*There are many people in the streets in the evenings. All those families who visit the Pandals?*

Yes, and they wear nice new clothes now, don't they? They go and buy new clothes. This is something where I felt quite humble. If I was ever to be invited to one of their houses they would make sure I got food and they would go without food. That's what they do. I'm the guest so they make sure I'm well looked after. And then they go without, yes.

*So you've sensed a gift of welcome?*

Yes, a lot. You know, for all their pain and suffering they go through there's a lot of love there. They want to give you a lot, they do. They're so warm and welcoming, they are, yes.

### Big decisions are being made

*What do you think about the meeting in itself?*

I think it's very interesting, yes. But some of it is going

over my head a bit, like talking about all these elections and all that, you know, who people have got to vote for, yes. But it's very interesting to see how L'Arche is really done. This is where all the big decisions are being made and all that, for the future for L'Arche, yes.

*Do you have the impression that we are doing well here in the meeting?*

O, I think it's not going too bad. What I've seen is going ok. There's lots of things to discuss, there is. I think we'll take the right decisions, hopefully. I tell you the people who matter, the people with special needs, you know. As long as they don't forget, be forgotten in all the changes – I'm sure they won't be. It's their homes at the end of the day, it's them who join L'Arche, who come to L'Arche to say what it means to go to church and to be in families, you know, being in a family union. As long as it all works for their needs, you know.

*Ah, you're talking about this whole structure business?*

Yes, that's it. I mean, I don't understand it all myself really.

## Having a voice

*Do you think that you had your word to say here? We talked about inclusion yesterday. So in that aspect, how are we doing?*

I think we're doing not too bad, yes. Lots of people are getting included. I think some of the discussions are going over my head a bit, they are. They might go over a lot of people's heads, they might do. Some of the talking is a little bit... you know, you've got to know what you're talking about. I guess that can be a bit hard, you know, when you've got special needs. You know, to try to listen, to try to understand it all. As I said, I just leave it to all the people, all the community leaders and all them. They are all going to sort it out right, yes.

*Is there an issue on which you would have liked to take the floor and say something?*

Well, I was in a discussion group this morning and all



the people got a tough job in the communities. But I just wonder how much they... I hope they take their jobs seriously, do the best they can. But how long do they spend in their communities where they live? How many times a year do they go back to the communities where they live? When they get down working again, you know, which is all about looking after people. I mean some of them; it seems that their jobs sometimes overtake them. It would be quite nice to know how many times a year they go back to their community and just talk to the residents.

*So you have the impression that there is a gap between the people who do these jobs and communities?*

Well, maybe a little bit. I just hope they do go back now and again and get themselves involved in community life and find out what is all about, dealing with people, yes.

Food and the heat

*What does your body say today? The heat and the food have become issues, right?*

Oh, I'm dying now, you know. I'm feeling the heat and a few other things. We have to take care of the food and the water and all that. You've got certain things in your bag to make sure that if you need them they're there. That's what I'm saying about that matter, yes.

*You've been here now for 4-5 days. Do you get used to things or is there something new every day?*

O, when I started the week, o dear, I didn't know



where I was going if I took a bus. As the week goes on I'm finding my feet. I was quite nervous about coming here, I was. It is quite a big thing to come to another country. I've had some troubles but people are very good, just asking them for help and if they can they help you, yes. It does help if you can speak the same language, yes. Most people are very kind and help, yes.

## From around the world

*What about meeting people from the whole Federation, from other communities? Have you had the chance to talk to other guys?*

Yes, I have. Yes, that has been great, it has, yes. There is a man here whom I met in New Zealand last year and it was quite nice to talk to him again, it was, yes.

*Do you talk to people who don't speak English? How do you get along with the language issue?*

Well, it hasn't been too bad but I have bumped into a few people who can't speak English, yes. The bad luck is I can't speak French; it would be an interesting conversation, yes.

## Jean, a top geezer

*It's the pilgrimage day today. What's the programme for the rest of the day?*

Well, we come to listen to Jean Vanier speaking, yes, and to listen to one of Gandhi's relatives, yes. So that's going to be quite exciting, yes.

*What do you expect of Jean's address?*

I don't know but I think it's going to be even more important today because I think it will be the last time that we really all do hear Jean speak. I think he looks alright but he's looking his age now, yes. God bless him, yes. I think he actually did some of the walk today, didn't he?

*He did the whole walk, actually.*

Did he do the whole walk? Alright, yes. I'll take my hat off to him, yes.

*He's been brave.*

Yes, very brave he is, yes. He's a top geezer, he is, yes.

## Walking with Gandhi

*We are standing here in the birthplace of the poet Tagore. How did you get here?*

We walked here, we did, yes. We were supposed to do the same what Gandhi did all those years ago, yes. Gandhi came back to Kolkata and fasted for four days because he wanted to bring an end to violence and all that, yes. He thought the fasting might just help to bring an end to the fighting and all that. He just wanted everyone to get on with each other, yes.

*So how did you live the day up until now?*

It has been quite hot. It has been quite emotional really, because we're living what Gandhi went through and we're supposed to do all what Gandhi did. You know, we're going along the streets of Kolkata and have seen people out in the streets and all that. It feels quite humble, you know, to see how they live, how lucky I am living really, yes.

*It's the first time that we've been going out in the streets all together. Describe a bit for the people at home what you saw.*

Well, I saw a lot of poverty, I did. And people, even

though they are quite poor, they've got a lot of love there, you know. They want to share with you, they do, and they want to come up to you, hold your hands, they want to be friends with you, they do. I mean, I saw a man washing himself today. But not only was he just washing himself in the street. He was doing his laundry at the same time. At the end of the day I got a nice apartment and a washing machine to do my washing in. I guess I'm really quite lucky, yes.

*It's true that the street can be bathroom, kitchen and living room for them.*

Yes, and the smells, you know. Some of the smells are nice smells but some of them are not so nice smells. We saw some chickens and I think they were waiting to be turned into curry.

*You don't have these smells in the UK, do you?*

No, that's it. At home you're going to shops, you do, and everything is all a bit more clean and tidy. There's a lot of differences, yes.

## So much going on

*Yesterday, you didn't feel that well. Were you sick?*

Oh, no, I wasn't a bit sick, I was just not feeling very good, you know. You know, with all the talks that have been going on I just felt it was going over my head a bit. I wasn't sick or anything. I think it's just there has been going on quite a lot and all that but I just needed some time for myself, I think. That's it, yes.



*Time to take everything in ...*

Well, that's it, yes. Because there is quite a lot of big topics going on about the future for L'Arche and all that. There's just so much going on, you know. It just takes time to take it all in and all that, you know. I saw all the wide decisions that will be made at the end of the day, yes.

## Going home

*We're getting to the end of the week. Are you looking forward to going home?*

Well, I'm looking forward to a nice bacon butty, I am, yes, with lots of brown sauce on it, yes. And I'm looking forward to the pilot saying the words: "It's freezing in England, yes." I think we're all going to the stage now but we're all a bit tired, but this is the highlight today, listen to Jean Vanier speak in a minute. I like to hear him speak but it would just be nice to go home then, you know, back to nice warm beds and all that.

*Is there anything else that comes up to your mind that you want to share with communities at home?*

I would just like to tell them that it's very hot, it is, and it has been a busy week, it has. There have been lots of things going on. The thing I really would like to say is that not last night but the night before, the Indian service, the drama they did. The Indian people in this community were fantastic. The drama was, it was fantastic. I hope a lot more people can see that, you know, because that was really quite a show, really, yes. It was really good, yes.

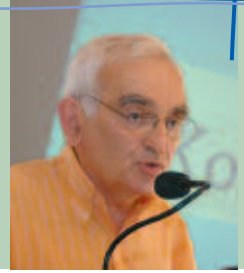
*What will you do when you go back to your community?*

We'll go back and talk about what's been happening here and all that and put it down into plain English, you know, so people can understand it easily and know what has been going on and all that, yes. Because it's quite a big meeting, this is.



## Another Look

*I needed time ...*  
JACQUES MACABÉO



Jean Christophe asked me to talk about the difficulties I have encountered at L'Arche and how I have evolved. I had already shared my thoughts on this in Swanwick in 2002.

What I have to say is not easy to express... They were painful times for my wife, Chantal, and I.

Many people here are connected to some of these events, as witnesses or spectators, and sometimes as participants. I certainly do not wish to hurt them, and I ask for their forgiveness in advance if that is the case. But even less do I want to come across as a victim... or as a hero...

In our journey of commitment there were several episodes of great suffering that we have overcome today and are partially healed.

We arrived at L'Arche in 1974 and lived at La Merci for 19 years. We learned a lot and received much, most often with great joy and enthusiasm. Due to the personal relationships forged and the roles and responsibilities entrusted to me, this was a special time for us, a period of education and happiness. Above all, we discovered that the covenant of L'Arche was directly connected to our marriage sacrament.

Things began to change when I gave up the community responsibility that I had taken on for 11 years; I entered a new phase. The reference points had changed and the situation gradually became more and more uncomfortable for me, my family, as well as for the community. We truly felt that things could not continue that way.

It was too difficult for us to consider leaving; we felt like we were being unfaithful. La Merci was our home; L'Arche had become our family.

That was when the call came to take charge of Levain in Compiègne. This call made it easier for us to leave La Merci without having to leave L'Arche. It was still very painful, but there was balance, as we had a new project to take on.

We arrived at Levain in 1993, full of joy and intent on serving and building. There were many challenges for us and for the community. After the initial enthusiasm, the difficulties started to crop up. Reality slowly came to the surface: I was not comfortable with this mission, the community had no confidence in me, and I did not meet the needs and desires of Levain. After three years of hard work and effort, the graft did not take. That conclusion was bitter and very painful.



It was impossible to consider staying; we had no roots at Levain. Nor was it appropriate to go back and return to La Merci. Leaving seemed inevitable yet unbearable! So the big question for us became, where will we go and what will we do?

We had several meetings with L'Arche leaders in France. For us, this was the most painful period. We came to understand that there was no place for us at L'Arche... We had to go elsewhere! There was no calling, no project; I felt like an enormous failure. We felt we were a burden and not recyclable. We were being let go, abandoned by our family, L'Arche.

We went through a very painful period, some months of great despair with very strong feelings of betrayal and anger: Whose fault is it? Why do I have to be the one to pay the price for this failure? We felt excluded! During this time we both cried and prayed a lot. We felt deeply uneasy, as people with disabilities sometimes do

- injured and agonized. At the same time, we felt much closer to certain friends who had had to leave L'Arche under similar circumstances...and very angry!

Chantal and I went over our history with L'Arche. We needed to go back to the beginning, and especially back to the source to rediscover the deep-seated reasons why we had come to La Merci. They had not changed! We were certain that our calling was with L'Arche.

Slowly, little glimmers appeared - phone calls and comforting words. Friends tried to understand and support us, and around us we heard voices being raised about our situation.

That was how we found out that the community of L'Arche de la Vallée was looking for a family that was already committed to L'Arche. We contacted the community and felt that a hand was being extended, that a welcoming home was possible that could erase some of our pain and repair the shattered image that we had of ourselves.



We arrived at L'Arche de la Vallée in 1997. We had been humiliated, disfigured and knocked down, but were energized by a desire to lift ourselves up. The community welcomed us with gentleness, giving us time to get back on our feet, learn how to walk again and trust.

Slowly we rediscovered our identity. The individuals with disabilities with whom I shared the workshop life for three years helped me enormously. Peace slowly returned. I had to fight feelings of resentment and anger, recognize reality, accept my limits and weaknesses, and above all work on myself.

I needed time... a lot of time... and more time still!

Chantal and I make this journey in faith and in prayer, listening to the word of God... and also speaking at retreats and conferences... that was very therapeutic for me!

We were fortunate enough to meet people who have

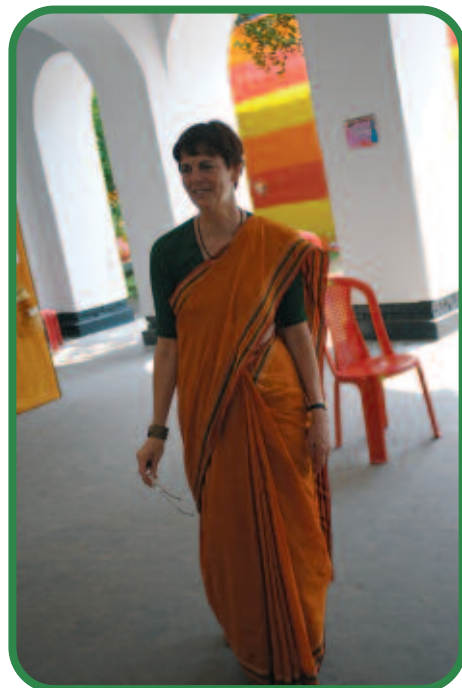
helped and supported us and have learned to share the burden and find the right and true words.

Little by little, we were able to get over past events and feelings. We moved forward seeking to restore connections, trying to find friendship again, especially with those with whom things had been difficult.

And then life continued and still continues... sometimes with setbacks...ups and downs...

Three years ago, a serious conflict with the community leader brought me to the brink of collapse. His leadership bothered me - he could not stand my words, my thoughts... The trials of the past helped me to understand what was happening. A glimmer of hope appeared, a desire for reconciliation, and we were able to engage in true dialogue, helped by others. In truth, true reconciliation swept away our insecurities and our fears. We found a collaboration that delights us!

Chantal and I, soon to be "early retirees", give thanks to God for having watched over us, for lighting our way,



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