

Jean Vanier

Influential Canadian humanitarian who founded L'Arche communities in which people with disabilities live in equality with their carers

When Jean Vanier visited an asylum for 80 men with learning disabilities in northern France in 1964, he found the residents walking around in circles and doing little else. They were enclosed by high concrete walls; some were screaming. Suddenly, one man came out of his reverie, looked at Vanier with hopeful eyes and asked: "Will you be my friend?" In the moment that it took him to smile and nod, Vanier's life was changed.

As a young man Vanier had struggled to contain his restless soul until it became rooted in the idea that those with disabilities could become the teachers of their carers. Both would heal the lives of the other. "Those people who society typically considers the weakest enable the strong to recognise and welcome their own vulnerability," he later wrote.

After this epiphany, Vanier tested his beliefs by buying a stone cottage in the village of Trosly-Breuil, 60 miles north of Paris, and inviting Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, two men who lived in the asylum and did not have any immediate family, to live with him.

There was no plumbing or electricity, but Vanier did own a small, battered Citroën, in which he planned to take Raphaël (who could only speak 20 words) and Philippe (who talked continuously about the same things) for drives. "I thought we might have fun," recalled Vanier, a tall man with an open, simple face and a habit of clapping his hands together in glee when making a point. The three men did have fun — cooking, cleaning, washing up and gardening together. Their life was centred on communal meals around a



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Vanier in 2004 and, below, on a march in France for people with disabilities. He also started Faith and Light communities

big wooden table. "They brought out the child in me," Vanier wrote. "I began to live from my heart."

As the years went by, Vanier founded more communities that he named L'Arche (The Ark) to signify inviting people in pain to take refuge. In each L'Arche house, people with disabilities live in equality with their carers. His vision was that every resident would be involved in decisions about the running of the community. Many of the young people who volunteered to be carers at L'Arche houses ended up living in them permanently. There are 154 L'Arche communities throughout the world, including 12 in the UK.

Jean Vanier was born into a devoutly Catholic family in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1928. He was the fourth of five children of Major-General Georges Vanier, who fought with distinction in the First World War, lost a leg, became a diplomat and ended up as governor general of Canada from 1959 until his death in 1967. His mother, Pauline, née Archer, would become a renowned humanitarian and was later appointed one of the first Companions of the Order of Canada.

As Jean's father moved between diplomatic posts, their son studied in Canada, France and Britain. He was educated for a time at St John's Beaumont, a Jesuit prep school in Old Windsor, Berkshire. At the start of the war, Jean's father was stationed at the Canadian embassy in Paris. Hearing about the persecution of Jews in Germany, Georges Vanier pleaded with the Canadian government to loosen immigration laws to make it easier for Jews to

emigrate there. He was rebuffed, but he and his wife worked privately to help Jews to escape.

The Vaniers escaped to London before the Nazi occupation of Paris and then sailed back to Canada. However, it was not long before the 13-year-old Jean was making the treacherous transatlantic crossing back to Britain to train as an officer cadet in the Royal Navy. Jean asked for his father's permission to sign up. His father took him aside and said: "I don't think it's a good idea, but I trust you." Vanier later wrote that his father's trust inspired him to listen to his "inner voice" for the rest of his life.

"The weakest enable the strong to recognise their own vulnerability"

Georges returned to France immediately after the war to become the Canadian ambassador, while Pauline worked with the Red Cross in the city. While on leave, Jean worked with his mother to help receive survivors from the Nazi concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück. He never forgot his first sight of the refugees as they emerged from trains at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris, still wearing their blue-and-white striped uniforms. Their emaciated faces contorted with fear became seared in his memory.

Vanier went on to serve as a midshipman in several warships, including HMS *Vanguard*, which accompanied the royal family on their tour of South Africa in 1947. In 1949 he joined the



Royal Canadian Navy and served in HMS *Magnificent*, but resigned his commission within a year. On the long voyages he had begun to pray more and increasingly viewed his role as a naval officer as that of a "technician of destruction".

Vanier became increasingly aware of what would become the dominant postwar values in western culture: the pursuit of individual success and status, driven by capitalism. "On one side, it was beautiful, the sense of the person; but on the other, we fell into a trap, we forgot that the person is part of the human family," he recalled.

The next 14 years were spent studying philosophy, starting with the writings of Thomas Merton, an American

Trappist monk, pacifist and social activist. Vanier was sympathetic with the incipient civil rights movement and became good friends with Daniel Berrigan (obituary, May 2, 2016), the American Jesuit priest and counter-culture activist later noted for his opposition to the Vietnam War.

He moved to Paris and joined L'Eau Vive (The Living Water), a community led by Father Thomas Philippe, whose mission was to help the poor. Philippe, who became Vanier's spiritual mentor, would later become embroiled in the clerical abuse scandal. During this period Vanier decided to train for the priesthood and studied at the Catholic Institute in Paris. In 1962 he published his thesis, which challenged

Aristotelian notions of happiness. Vanier ultimately realised that he did not, after all, have a religious vocation. He secured a post teaching philosophy at the University of Toronto, but his heart was elsewhere and he soon resigned. Feeling lost, he went to stay with Philippe, who was working as a chaplain in a home for people with disabilities.

When Vanier set up the first L'Arche house not long afterwards, those closest to him thought he was crazy. However, he began to feel a deep inner peace. After founding his first L'Arche community, Vanier spread the word by leading retreats and began to receive offers of help from students. The community at Trosly-Breuill eventually grew to 12 houses spread around the surrounding villages.

Vanier's elder sister, Thérèse, a consultant at St Thomas' hospital who worked in palliative care with Dame Cicely Saunders, founded the first L'Arche community in the UK in 1974

Every resident is involved in deciding how the community is run

at a vicarage near Canterbury, Kent. The latest UK L'Arche community opened in 2013 in Manchester. After several years, Vanier had experienced enough to know that not everyone was suited to living with others, so in 1971 he started **Faith and Light with Marie-Hélène Mathieu**. The idea was to create communities that met once a month for worship, fellowship and mutual support. There are now 1,800 Faith and Light communities in 81 countries.

Vanier stepped down from his operational role at L'Arche in 1981, but continued to write books and lecture all over the world. He remained a loyal Catholic despite his dislike of the church's hierarchical structure and a natural instinct to want to break down walls of religious orthodoxy in the same way that he had effectively broken down the walls of many institutions for people with learning disabilities. Vanier was proud that L'Arche was a movement of all faiths, with Muslims, Jews and Hindus as well as members from all Christian denominations.

In 2015 he was awarded the Templeton prize for an "exceptional contribution to affirming life's breadth of spiritual dimensions". When he was invited to lunch with the Queen at Buckingham Palace, he realised that he had never worn a suit and was not even sure that he owned one. He eventually found one that his father had once worn and had it altered. Vanier, who also spoke at the House of Lords, was praised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, for "turning society's assumptions about the strong and the weak upside down".

Vanier admitted that he hated having praise lavished on him. "I feel that people are saying, 'You're doing beautiful work'; and that doesn't interest me, because what they are really saying is, 'I'm glad you're doing it, not me.'"

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, was born on September 10, 1928. He died of thyroid cancer on May 7, 2019, aged 90