Preface

I come to this piece of work as someone who has always had an interest in the subject of spirituality and disability. I have a physical disability and was naturally drawn to literature and movements which seek to explore how we relate to God, as well as exploring the nurturing of this relationship and the spiritual dimension of disability in the context of the Christian faith.

The move to developing an interest in spirituality and learning disability came primarily from my work as a volunteer with an organisation called 'Mental Handicap' (a parent-based support and campaigning group). This, coupled with my role as a member of the clergy working with a special school in the parish, increased both my interest and experience. It is in the area of special schools that I feel a need arises to look at the possibility of improving the quality of services a chaplain provides to children within these establishments.

In my previous job as a social worker I came across a *L'Arche* community which drew me to the writings of its founder Jean Vanier. From this encounter I have come to reflect on the nature of these communities, the type of relationship they seek with the priests who serve them and the spirituality that characterises *L'Arche*. I began to ask myself if priests in a school setting could learn from this and draw on the model of *L'Arche* in their ministry to children with learning disabilities. This study is a result of that enquiry and highlights the potential that exists for drawing on the work of Jean Vanier and *L'Arche* communities.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1. Background

There has been a remarkable concern in recent decades amongst theologians and educationalists for the subject of spirituality in education. This interest has been brought to the fore by the high profile *Office For Standards in Education* (OFSTED) inspections of spiritual development in schools. However, little interest has been given to children in special needs schools; rather attention has been given to those in mainstream education.

Since the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, all English and Welsh schools have been required to assume responsibility for spiritual, moral and cultural development of their pupils. Part 1 section 1(2) of the 1988 Act states that a school satisfies the requirements of this section if it has a balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils.

Regulations are also given with regard to collective worship, namely that the required content must be wholly or mainly of a broad Christian character. Religious education in the classroom and collective worship in the assembly hall are all intended to play their part in the attainment of this spiritual, moral and cultural development.

Special needs schools have the same demands placed upon them to meet the pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development. Here, certain schools have sought to link spiritual and moral development with encouraging personal reflection as well as an awareness of the values of and feeling for others. Another approach to meeting the requirements of the curriculum has been to link spirituality and experience. This has been achieved in a variety of ways; one example is seen in the use of music and literature to produce a sense of 'awe' or 'wonder'. Christianity is a subject referred to in religious education and collective worship

but this is associated primarily with feelings through music and drama and encouraging a sense of responsibility with moral development.

1.1 Analysis of Problem

Clearly there exists a problem with the current provisions for seeking to nurture, develop and encourage the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities. It is this area which my dissertation will address, exploring ways in which our understanding of spiritual formation can be improved upon, looking primarily to *L'Arche* communities and models of good practice developed outside the field of education.

Hypothesis: The aim of this study is to address the proposition that the spirituality of L'Arche has a great deal of potential to offer people with learning disabilities outside its own community setting. For those seeking to nurture and develop the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities in schools, there exists the opportunity to draw out the fundamental characteristics of the spirituality of L'Arche and incorporate these into their own formation programmes.

1.2 Objectives of the study

Given the overall aims set out above, the objectives of this study are:

- To identify the fundamental characteristics of the spirituality of *L'Arche*;
- To identify the potential for integrating aspects of a spirituality grounded within a specific setting and adopting this within a wholly different context;
- To identify the requirements within the current legal provisions for education which state that spirituality is to be part of the curriculum and to examine the potential for integrating the models used within the *L'Arche* community into the school syllabus;
- To identify, from this research, methods that would seek to improve and develop programmes within schools which will nurture and develop the spiritual lives of their children.

2. Methodology

Qualitative methods are used for this study, for as Hodge (2001) and Carroll (1997) have suggested, spirituality; as an area of research seems better served by qualitative methods. Robson (1993) summarizes this perspective when he described qualitative research as being more intuitive, subjective and deep. The decision to embrace qualitative methods is not only based on their ability to allow the researcher to address more readily an area which is by its nature subjective, it also allows an openness and an opportunity for drawing on experience. Qualitative research values personal perspectives, giving an opportunity to voice an insider's view, both of the researcher and those being researched. Here there is lived personal experience as the centre of inquiry as opposed to statistics and objective descriptions. The specific qualitative methods used in this dissertation are direct observation and consultations with members of *L'Arche* community in order to seek points of clarification and analysis of written materials.

The strengths of the qualitative method can be seen in its ability to allow the researcher to examine problems and processes in a more flexible manner. Bouma (1997) has suggested a characteristic of qualitative research is that it is relatively unstructured, with the research strategy to a large extent left open. This method of allowing the researcher freedom to discuss and explore issues in an informal manner, coupled with the option of flexibility, is of value when considering the nature of the subject matter.

2.1 Scale of study and method of data collection

This research is of limited scope; therefore the nature of the problem to be addressed and the application of the recommendations proposed within a specific school setting ensure that a limited empirical approach is desirable. The primary method of data collection is the collection of published materials from *L'Arche* communities, which include reports, profiles of projects and the writings of and interviews with Jean Vanier. Also materials from other organizations and denominations working with people with learning disabilities have been used as well as four consultations. The opportunity to meet those working within the organizations used in this research was necessary to clarify aspects of the data collected. This was undertaken with two members of staff from *L'Arche* communities and two representatives of programs undertaken by the Catholic Church and Baptist Union.

The clarification required was straightforward namely an analysis of the priest's role within a *L'Arche* community. Similarly, with the two denominations, the opportunity to observe their work and seek clarification on aspects of their respective programmes was sought. The data collected, with regard to both *L'Arche* and the churches, only offered the theory of how such relationships and theories work, which left many questions unanswered. Consulting with those who work within the organizations offered a greater freedom to question the practical implications of their work. The semi-structured nature of the period of consultation was preferable to formally interviewing representatives from the organizations, for here there was greater flexibility with respect to the attention given to the different topics which needed to be covered. This was necessary in order to adapt questions to the prevailing circumstances.

2.2 Data Analysis

Throughout my work Robson's (1993) basic rules for dealing with qualitative data are followed. He suggests analysis of some form should start as soon as the data is collected, generating themes and patterns as the process develops.

2.3 Structure of the dissertation

Chapter One sets out the background, methodology and structure of this dissertation and a select literature survey of relevant works. Particular attention is given to the legislation which determines how disability is defined and the nature of the language to be used in the context of exploring disability and spirituality.

Chapter Two will explore the nature of spirituality, its definition and its place in the curriculum. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, all schools, including special schools for children with learning disabilities, have been required to assume responsibility for the spiritual, moral and cultural development of their pupils. This chapter focuses on the context for programmes which seek to nurture the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities.

Chapter Three will form the basis of the context for the study, exploring the spirituality of *L'Arche* and that of people with learning disabilities. During the process of

analysing, reflecting on and critiquing the available literature, I was immediately struck by the commonality of the desire to experience a sense of community in special schools and *L'Arche*. That desire for a sense of security, of safety and trust, exists in both environments along with the desire and commitment to see the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities nurture and flourish. The difference is seen in many ways in the relationships that exist within the communities and the particular role of the priest in guiding people with learning disabilities on their spiritual journey. Therefore it is important to address the nature of community, the model of relationships and the function of a spiritual guide in this study.

Proceeding from the need for community there is a need to explore the place of the church in the lives of people with learning disabilities. Chapter Four will explore what is for Jean Vanier the spirituality of *L'Arche*, rooted in the church, the body of Christ. Here he draws on the essential place of the sacraments in the life of people with learning disabilities, in particular allowing people with learning disabilities to encounter Christ in the Eucharist. This may appear to be stating the obvious, that the church and sacraments be open to all who are its members. However, for people with learning disabilities this is something of a challenge, both with respect to established practices and church attitudes. The role of the church in assisting the process of nurturing the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities will also need to be addressed.

Chapter Four will also tackle an area that *L'Arche* does not address in any systematic form within the context of spiritual formation, that is how to engage in any meaningful direction outside a one-to-one relationship or how to plan for a group of people who cover such a range of abilities. This is something I would argue is needed within the context of assisting people with learning disabilities on the spiritual journey in a school setting. Work continues to be undertaken in this area by the Roman Catholic and Baptist churches and I should like explore how this could be integrated into the work in schools alongside the model offered by *L'Arche*.

Chapter Five will address the role and function of a chaplain within a school for children with special needs. The current lack of clarity and focus for clergy in a school

environment offers them an opportunity to look to organisations such as *L'Arche* for inspiration. *L'Arche* community represents a residential setting however; the model of spirituality it encompasses has a universal appeal to all people with learning disabilities and its potential benefit can be seen for developing and improving the chaplaincy services. This chapter will explore the potential for a priest within a special school to adopt the roles of spiritual guide and friend encouraged in a *L'Arche* community.

In conclusion, Chapter Six will seek to draw together recommendations for school chaplaincies in addressing the curriculum requirements for spiritual development and the role and function of a school chaplain.

3. Terms of Reference

It is essential at this stage to determine what is to be understood by learning disability. Defining any form of disability is notoriously difficult, principally because each generation develops its own terms of reference and criteria. Historically, the established point of reference has been the World Health Organisation (WHO) which produced in 1980 an *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps*. It is because of WHO and others with a medical agenda that the world came to embrace the understand disability as *"Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function"* (WHO 1980: 47).

The *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA 1995 Schedule 1:1) authorised a new language and terms of reference for people with disabilities. This, I would argue, preserves an outdated understanding of disability, echoing WHO's definition of 'impairment' and 'inability to perform' which was established 24 years ago.

A preferable expression and understanding of disability could have been adopted from the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA 1990). This legislation covers people who are perceived as disabled, and thus tackles social discrimination. By way of illustrating the need to address social discrimination, the DDA (1995) does not include people who have no actual physical or mental limitations, thereby excluding people with severe disfigurements and those who are HIV positive who can find themselves experiencing discrimination from shops and services. In the United Kingdom people who exhibit no symptoms but face

discrimination have no recourse through legislation. Goodling (1996), in her breakdown of the British legislation, suggests that their definition of disability logically comprises components which must be satisfied if a person is to be protected by the 1995 Act:

(a) there must be a physical or mental impairment; (b) the impairment must adversely affect the individual's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities; (c) the adverse effect must be substantial; (d) the adverse effect must be long term (Goodling 1996:11).

The first set of criteria mentions mental impairment and this includes people with learning disabilities. Learning disability is the government-approved term for intellectual functioning that is more limited or has developed more slowly than is the case for most of the population. As with any disability, it is almost impossible to arrive at a definition of learning disability which will be true of all the people to whom it might be expected to apply. Standard definitions emphasise what people cannot do or be and tell us very little about their potential. Only in a minority of cases can the identity of a specific learning disability be given. Almost all forms of profound, severe or moderate learning disability are the result of some damage to or defect in the central nervous system, i.e. the brain, and almost all forms of damage or defect occur before, during or shortly after birth. However, it should be stated that some chromosomal or genetic abnormalities may occur at or soon after conception. The best known of these is Down's Syndrome, which affects around 1 in 650 babies. The extent to which a child develops, having one of these conditions, will be affected significantly by the extent to which he or she is accepted and nurtured. Where a community loves and supports individuals with learning disabilities their developmental prospects are substantially better than where they suffer rejection or estrangement.

It is estimated that two to three percent of the British population has a learning disability ranging from mild or moderate to severe or profound, namely 1,200,000 people in the United Kingdom. There are between 120,000 and 160,000 adults with a severe or profound learning disability and about 30,000 children under 16 with severe or profound learning disability. We are talking about one in 45 of the population, a significant number, who are now substantially visible in the community.

3.1 Language and definitions of disability

The Charter of the *L'Arche* Communities (Kearney 2000) is explicit from the very beginning in its description of those whom it welcomes into the communities as being people with a mental handicap. This is the term embraced by Jean Vanier throughout his writings and something which he has sought to defend. Vanier acknowledges that language has evolved over the last 30 years and terms such as 'mentally deficient' have for the most part been removed from the vocabulary. However, as late as 2000, Vanier has defended his use of the term 'mentally handicapped' to describe people living in *L'Arche* communities. This is something which I, along with representative organisations, disability rights groups and the government, would wholly reject, arguing that it is unacceptable in the 21st century. Vanier (1995:11) addresses this point directly discussing the language used with respect to disability. Here he positively affirms the fundamental importance of people with learning disabilities as individuals with unique gifts and experiences. However, Vanier argues that there is a need to retain the description 'handicapped' as this is a long accepted definition and suits the *L'Arche* community.

The appropriate use of language in this context has little to do with political correctness but rather with a desire not to reinforce negative images, incorrect assumptions and stereotypes associated with people with disabilities. All language is constantly evolving within the context of disability and there have been enormous moves over the last few decades to embrace positive terms for disability. The force for change has come from public attitudes, legislation and the disability rights movement. Historically, people with disabilities have been named by medical or scientific professions, who were concerned with definitions about disabilities rather than with a person's individuality or worth. The term 'mentally handicapped' is being regarded today with disdain because of all that it has come to represent. The word 'handicapped' has its origins in the phrase 'cap in hand' and the legacy of charity and begging with which it is associated. Just as the term 'handicapped' has been rejected by those with physical disabilities, the same counts for those whose disability lies in their intellectual development. As with other oppressed groups e.g., gays, lesbians and ethnic minorities, it is to the people with the disability that we should refer when looking for language and terms of reference. People with a disability with respect to intellectual

development, and their representative groups, both religious and secular, express the desire for the term 'people with learning disability'.

In this dissertation I will seek to use the term 'learning disability', unless quoting directly from Jean Vanier or the literature of *L'Arche*. I fail to appreciate the logic of Vanier's position in seeking to maintain the use of the term 'mentally handicapped', with all that it has done to stigmatise people with disabilities, particularly when so much else that Vanier seeks to achieve is groundbreaking, wholly positive and affirming to people with learning disabilities.

4. Literature Review

There is a considerable lack of literature and research in the area of spirituality and disability. I became aware of this some years ago when looking for material to assist in preparing a person with a learning disability for confirmation. Ashman & Selway (1998) have suggested that we can only speculate why there is such a dearth of information on the spiritual lives of people with disabilities. In their work on disability and society they sought to address the spiritual dimension of disability, concluding that the scarcity of literature may be in part due to the lack of interest on the part of researchers and the complexity of the topic itself. An example of this can be found when seeking to locate literature and resources for preparing children with learning disabilities for first communion. Both clergy and teachers have an abundance of material at their disposal for preparing children in mainstream schools to receive the sacraments. Literature on the subjects of prayer and catechism is produced for each school grade with a similar level of educational attainment expected for each child. It is a more complex task to produce marketable materials for special needs schools engaging with young people who do not meet expected standards of education and who have multiple physical and learning disabilities.

As mentioned, there is clearly a marked absence of general literature concerning spirituality and disability. What is available fails in the most part to offer any positive contribution to the discussion, only engaging with disability and spirituality in terms traditionally associated with a dependency culture and medical models of disability that

require healing. Such literature including the works of Cherry (1999), Dearing (1996), McKenna (1996) and Woolmer (1999) offer an image of disability in terms of suffering, miracles and charity, consequently defining people with a disability as those in need and perpetuating an image of sickness. This literature has not been written by and for those with disabilities, but for health professionals, ethicists and pastors. Much of what has been produced by these authors, representing the caring professions, has addressed the subject of seeking to find holistic approaches to the care of people with disabilities, integrating themes of body, mind and soul, with little reference to God. The literature to be reviewed will take into account the following: material dealing with body, mind and soul as offered by health care professionals; resources relating to *L'Arche;* spiritual guides; and special schools.

4.1 Body, mind and soul

Research generated by Muldoon & King (1995), Reid (1987), Hiatt (1986) and Nosek (1995) has sought to draw on the relationship between spirituality and people seeking to make sense of their illness within the context of health care. Such writers argue that this is an attempt to attain a holistic approach of integrating body, mind and spirit in an effort to encourage people to face up to and accept their illness. It is a reasonable enough assertion to state that medicine and spirituality share a common interest in human existence and the desire to make sense of birth, death, healing and ways of alleviating suffering. However, for Christians there is something lacking in these attempts to seek this integrative wholeness and make sense of disability: namely God. Much of what is advocated in this holistic approach has its basis in New Age practices, such as the use of crystals for healing and calling on the spirits of ancestors for guidance. As Hiatt (1986) emphasises, spirituality is a term which is attributable to every person, which connects to a universal force and which is distinct from any particular spiritual tradition or religious affiliation. "The spiritual dimension is that part of the person concerned with meaning, truth, purpose and reality" (Hiatt 1986 :736).

Here disability and illness are seen as providing an opportunity for people to re-evaluate their life and life style. The development of a person's spiritual life in this context is to be found in nurturing that sense of truth, purpose or meaning which can be harnessed to

assist in the process of achieving understanding in the midst of illness and disability. I would argue that for people with disabilities, spirituality is much more than a singular attempt to understand and accept a disability. For it also has to do with a relationship with God, nurturing this relationship and finding a spiritual dimension of disability in the context of the Christian faith.

For the last 25 years the Roman Catholic Passionist Congregation has worked on a commitment to consultation and reflection with people with disabilities. Through their journal *Stauros Notebook* they have produced some of the most valuable and important works in journeying with people with disability in their faith and spiritual lives. The theologian Nancy Lane, in writing of her spiritual journey with cerebral palsy, writes in Stauros:

> In classical spirituality the care of the soul was the essence of coming to know thyself. Caring for one's soul enables one to recover the sacredness of life and to live with the paradoxes of being broken yet whole (Lane 1993:1).

For Lane, any attempts to make sense of the reality of disability and to encompass this within the spiritual dimension of a person has to be achieved within the context of a personal relationship with God. In this dissertation I will draw on the work produced by *Stauros*, which is not only positive in its contributions but also comes directly from the experiences of those with disabilities.

General literature on spirituality and learning disability has to take account of the work of Webb-Mitchell (1988, 1990, 1996). For not only has he worked within a *L'Arche* community and written extensively about this, he has also sought to explore wider issues which are relevant to this study, such as the place of prayer and acceptance in accompanying people with learning disabilities. His writing often express a deep sense of anger at the injustice faced by people with learning disabilities:

> A scandal is occurring in American society. An injustice is being perpetuated in the church that few know is occurring and even fewer respond to. The scandalous injustice concerns the spiritual abuse of people with disabilities (1996:47).

Webb-Mitchell (1996) has relentlessly accused the church of such spiritual abuse. For people with learning disabilities this is seen most profoundly when they are denied their full humanity and treated as if they are somehow less than human. This evidence is drawn from his experience of working with people with learning disabilities who have found themselves identified as angels, with their disability either romanticised or demonised. Webb-Mitchell has been forceful in urging churches to accept people with learning disabilities as human beings who have the same rights as the able bodied to attend church and participate in the liturgy. All Christians should have the right of access to the church's liturgy, rituals and pastoral services.

4.2 Jean Vanier and L'Arche

In the area of learning disability one of the most prolific authors is Jean Vanier. His writings not only cover areas of spirituality but also engage with philosophy, theology and pastoral care. Vanier was born in Canada in 1928. After a career as an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy he graduated with a doctorate in philosophy from the Catholic Institute of Paris. In 1964 he met two men with learning disabilities who had spent much of their lives in institutions and Vanier invited them to come and live with him. He called this home *L'Arche*, after Noah's Ark – a place both of refuge and new beginnings. *L'Arche* communities developed and expanded across the continents, offering people with learning disabilities a place where they could live and develop their full potential. Vanier has written extensively on vast subject areas relating to all aspects of disability, community and spirituality. His most popular works include *Eruption to Hope* (1971), *Tears of Silence* (1974), *Community & Growth* (1989a) and *The Heart of L'Arche* (1995). In this dissertation I will draw on these works as they relate specifically to the area being explored and on the interviews Jean Vanier has given which offer an added insight into the spirituality of *L'Arche*. From his own writings one of the main texts to be referenced is *Community and Growth* (1989a). He argues that this work presents a starting point for reflection on the nature and meaning of community. This represents, in many ways, a core text for it not only gives insight into his understanding of spirituality, but also offers a systematic framework as to how the community is to be established. Nevertheless, *Community and Growth* (1989a) falls short

of giving much-needed insight into how people with differing levels of disability can be encouraged and into the challenge of meeting differing needs for those who act as spiritual guides in *L'Arche* communities. However, it does offer a framework for looking at the essential character of a *L'Arche* community and the principles which would need to be harnessed, if aspects of this model were to be encouraged in a school setting.

An important aspect of any attempt to explore the fundamental character of *L'Arche* will involve reference to its work and the vision encapsulated in its Charter. For it is in the Charter that principles of the community are to be found and that spirituality they seek to foster, as the following section highlights:

> That weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. Furthermore that it is often through weakness, recognised and accepted that the liberating love of God is revealed (Charter of *L'Arche* II .2 in Kearney 2000:212).

Here is found the recognition that people with learning disabilities have a right to a spiritual life, to see their relationship with God flourish and to come to know more deeply his love for them. And it is love that is at the heart of *L'Arche*, from its foundation to its spirituality and guiding principles. The spirituality of *L'Arche* draws us to the person of Jesus and a relationship of love grounded in his love for the poor.

4.3 Spiritual Guides

Central to *L'Arche* communities are those who act as spiritual guides. This is an area which is clearly linked to the work of school chaplains. For Jean Vanier the role of the spiritual guides and priests who work within a community is something quite removed from the traditional role and status so often given to those whose ministry is sacramental. The removal of a sense of hierarchy and status within a community, so necessary to many clergy for their own security, are abandoned here; sharing in the experience of people with learning disabilities is paramount, in a call to journey alongside rather than oversee and direct. This aspect of *L'Arche* communities is fundamentally about relationships and the opportunity to see these flourish based on equality. The spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities

within this context have a greater ability to be nurtured and flourish when the relationship with those assisting in this task is grounded in mutuality. For those who engage in school chaplaincy this discussion as to how relationships, roles and functions are established should be central to our work, for *L'Arche* clearly has much to offer in improving current practice.

In order to explore the subject of the spiritual guide in greater depth, reference is to be made to those who have written of their direct experience of working as a priest or spiritual guide within *L'Arche* communities. Here I will draw on the work of Webb-Mitchell (1990), Kelly & McGinley (2000) and Nouwen (1986, 1997). Kelly's contribution is of particular value in that he offers a practical guide drawn from his experience of how to offer retreats to people with learning disabilities. The model he uses is principally that of spiritual friendship, journeying alongside people with learning disabilities, as they come to explore and develop a relationship with Christ in the context of being shown unconditional love and acceptance. Webb-Mitchell (1990) and Nouwen (1986) offer their own reflections and theological insights, having worked in residential *L'Arche* communities. Both writers offer encouragement to chaplains, suggesting that experience shows that chaplains working with people with learning disabilities soon recognise the capacity for worship even in people who have the most severe disabilities. Whilst there is the recognition that they may not grasp the meaning of the words, there exists the fundamental and simple truth that people with learning disabilities can know and develop a relationship with God which can best be achieved through the committed friendship offered by a spiritual guide.

4.4 Special Schools

The central theme of this dissertation is school chaplaincy within the context of a special needs setting, seeking insight into how the priest can work to see the children's relationship with God nurture and flourish. Literature in this field is sparse and the texts most accessible to clergy come from Hamilton (2000) and his work in the Church of Scotland Department of Education. This offers helpful direction and instruction to clergy on all aspects of ministry from their role and function to the relationship between chaplain and school. Here important insights are offered on the nature of friendship, which will be cross-referenced with that offered by *L'Arche*. Unfortunately much of this material, whilst being of general use

to those engaged in the chaplaincy of special need schools, fails in many essential areas. The literature is written for a Presbyterian audience working within the Scottish education system. Therefore, it fails to address the challenges and needs of Anglicans working with the law and structures of an English education system. There is also an assumption that the main task of school chaplaincy is religious education within a teaching ministry, rather than addressing the spiritual needs of the children.

Within the Church of England, attempts are only now being made to explore the possibility of improvements of working within special needs schools.   Some literature is available. However, it is very generalised and offers only insights into what is meant by spiritual development in schools and meeting legal requirements. Brown & Furlong (1996) and Carr (1996) have sought to explore the recent upsurge of interest in spiritual education within the English school system, and they try to offer some clarity for those in schools who have to interpret what the law requires in the area of spiritual development. There has indeed been much confusion surrounding how the legislation is to be interpreted, as Carr suggests:

> I have previously complained that recent celebrations of a religious significance can hardly be meaningful to spiritual education in the absence of some attempt to identify precisely the curricular claims of the spiritual, as distinct from the moral or religious (1996:1).

The legislation, which introduced the requirement for schools to contribute to their pupils' 'spiritual development', is ambiguous in that it offers no definition of what is meant by the term. The problem with such vagueness is that it poses difficulties for those who have to put the requirements of the Act into practice in their respective school.

5. Conclusion

My own contribution to the current interest in spiritual education is to draw on the spirituality of *L'Arche* and the potential it offers to school chaplains working to improve the service they deliver in special needs schools. I am to show that the spirituality of *L'Arche* offers school chaplains an opportunity to abandon established levels of service and low expectations of people with learning disabilities. What is on offer in place of this is a

spirituality based on a profound respect for the dignity and sacredness of every human being and the means to develop a spiritual life, which deepens their union with God and love for Him and other people. This forms the foundation of the present work.

CHAPTER 2

Spirituality and Education

1. Introduction

> It is an illusion to think that theology and spirituality emerge from a timeless, context free vacuum or that there is a consensus as to how their insights should be used in education (Grey 1999:12).

Before exploring the spirituality of *L'Arche* and its potential for improving the provision of service offered to people with learning disabilities, it is first necessary to discuss the requirements placed by the Government on those working within special schools. This chapter will explore the 1988 Education Act, issues that emerge from the inclusion of spiritual development within the curriculum and how these impact on those working with people with learning disabilities.

Since the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, all schools, including special schools for children with learning disabilities, have been required to assume responsibility for the

spiritual, moral and cultural development of their pupils. Grey (1999) is correct in her assertion that the term 'spirituality' appears in the curriculum with little or no reference to what it means or consensus as to how it is to be integrated into schools. Within the dynamic of the relationship between children, the curriculum and spirituality, it is possible to interpret official criteria to fit just about any definition of spirituality that a school chooses. While, schools in England and Wales are required to undergo an inspection in which comments are made on their ability to promote spiritual, moral and cultural development, this is not always an area of priority. Furthermore, an inspection does not imply that there are commonly agreed criteria with regard to measuring development in these areas, like those found in subjects such as history or English.

Special schools can quite easily pass this inspection on the basis of providing assemblies complemented with music lessons, which give the children a sense of awe, wonder and transcendence, together with visits to parks which emphasize a relationship with God and created order. I would argue that there exists a danger that spirituality can be trivialized in schools when it is reduced to a welter of nice feelings and an excuse for a day's excursion. Clearly the potential exists for improvement and the opportunity to offer children with learning disabilities a better quality of service in this area than they currently enjoy. My desire to explore the spirituality of *L'Arche* communities and to glean something from their success first requires an understanding of the very nature of spirituality and what is required within the school context. As Grey (1999:12) asserts, spirituality is not something that has suddenly appeared from a timeless, context-free vacuum and thus some sense of the context in which both the Christian faith and education department defines spirituality today is necessary.

2. Spirituality Today

The term 'spirituality' as experience or field of study can no longer be connected simply with asceticism, mysticism or with the practice of following a particular tradition and its method of prayer. Spirituality has become a term increasingly used in both secular and religious contexts and encompasses a whole spectrum of practices from praying with crystals, colour therapy or astrology to various forms of spiritual channeling and witchcraft.

An added dimension comes from the British Humanist Association (BHA), which uses the word 'spirituality' in its vocabulary and terms of reference. The BHA is active in seeking to have its voice heard on issues relating to spiritual development within the curriculum. One education officer when offering a humanist perspective on spirituality stated:

> 'To me, spirituality is what you feel when you are uplifted by a piece of music or a beautiful sunset' This is the response of a humanist to a question about spirituality, and it would be echoed by most humanists, perhaps with different examples but focusing on our deep emotional and aesthetic responses to the arts or to the beauty and wonder of the universe (Mason 2000a:1).

For a humanist there is a clear understanding that this is a non-religious concept. The humanist argument is based on a belief that as a term 'spirituality' is in vogue or fashion, and as such covers a wider field and can thus be used within their terms of reference. The head of the BHA recently suggested quite scathingly that the term spirituality is for 'Those seeking acceptance of their allegiance to crystal healing, or other irrational props, it grants respectability while retaining an aura of mystery' (Ashby 1998:1).

He goes on to suggest that it is a term for those who feel squeamish about the world religions, because of their latter-day association with fundamentalism and war. Spirituality then becomes a good alternative for those who seek to engage in rituals and faith practices outside organised religion.

'Spirituality' is also a term associated with traditional or orthodox religious groups. However, such religions do not exist in isolation and cannot remain untouched by the effects of New Age movements, Celtic revivals, Eco warriors or the growing general interest in all things spiritual. The pick and mix mentality characteristic of the 21st century allows for a multiplicity of beliefs, practices and spiritualities. Individuals now see that they have the ability to take something from another religious tradition or movement and bring it to their own.

Social science can, I would argue, offer some possible explanation as to the rise in usage of the term 'spirituality', not only within New Age movements but also in its revival within traditional world religions. As Adams (1997:14) suggests, social science asserts that this popularity is a direct result of what it terms the de-secularization of the world, that is the decline of modernism, and the failure of quasi-religious movements such as communism and secular nationalism. In the face of decline and uncertainty what has emerged is a popular movement of people seeking new world views and a revival of religiosity.

2.1 Postmodern Thought

Allied to the rise in New Age world views is the influence of postmodern thought and its accompanying understanding of spirituality. Matzat (1997:25) has argued that an important characteristic of the postmodern condition is, that in addition to being the age of relativism, postmodernism is the age of spirituality. Here the experience of decline in society, involving a growth in separateness and consumerism, results in a people yearning for connection. Spirituality is offered as a means of healing, allowing individuals to incorporate into their life-style facets of sacred traditions, schools of wisdom, spiritual guides and the possibility of connecting with the transcendent. Postmodernism is a world-view, the heart of which is pluralism, a belief in multiplicity, implying that there are as many ways to understand and experience the world as there are people who experience it. The postmodern mind-set offers a unique challenge to traditional religions, for the concept of error has been removed from the vocabulary, with one exception: that it is wrong to say that someone else's world-view, belief, spirituality or experience is erroneous. Postmodernism with all its expressions offers a context to live a particular way. Here we are afforded the freedom to believe and practice that which we seek in order to maintain and connect us with each other and the world. Griffin offers a helpful definition of what is meant by postmodern spirituality,

> There are so many ways to describe Post-modern spirituality. You can say it's pacific, it's ecological, it's a spirituality of creativity, it's reenactment of the universe. A summary term would be pan-en-theism: The idea that the world is in God, God is something like the soul of the universe and God is present in all things. As some mystics have said we swim with God. (Griffin & Atkisson 1990:20)

As has been shown, it is a feature of the postmodern era that to understand spirituality is to reach beyond the conventions of the synagogue, temple and church. This is also clearly evidenced in the 1988 Education Act passed by the British Government, which conveys the importance of the spiritual development and well-being of children.   The Education Act, alongside the regulations securing the spiritual welfare of those hospitalized or in prison, is explicit in communicating the belief that spirituality is not synonymous with religion. Such a proposition offers equal status to groups such as the *British Humanist Association* and traditional religious authorities when instigating policy in the area of spirituality and welfare. I would argue that the Government is right in taking such a position, for in developing an understanding of spirituality, it is essential to appreciate that just as there are theistic and atheistic patterns of religious belief, so there are religious and secular forms of spirituality.

2.2 Spirituality and Morality

In offering an understanding of the term spirituality that is both religious and secular, an essential characteristic that is shared by the vast array of spiritualities is that of morality. Historically the connection between spirituality, morality and ethical decision has been given little consideration. McClenon (1994:23) has suggested that the content of the material in this subject has generally argued that religion and doctrine influence a person's morality, with no place for spirituality. Such a view presupposes that all individuals have to adhere to a particular world religion. This is not necessarily the case. The connection between spirituality and ethics is clearly an area which is gaining prominence, not least because of the growing interest in theological and education circles as to how spirituality can influence individual and communal morality.   Downey (1996:125) suggests that the two subjects be intrinsically linked:

> Since the quest is usually directed to the highest value in the individual's belief system, spirituality has direct reference to morality, though not necessarily to God.

Such a proposition is persuasive and indeed, has been formulated by those seeking to nurture the spiritual life of children through educational programs. In the view of those who interpret the implementation of education legislation, a developed spirituality ensures moral well-being. Emphasis is placed on nurturing a spiritual life that will inform beliefs, the quality of relationships and subsequent actions. This is stated explicitly by The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Spirituality, therefore is seen to be the foundation of morality (SCAA 1996:9).

Social science may prefer to offer the explanation that children are more likely to act in terms of what is deemed moral or immoral because of their cultural conditioning and experiences in the domestic sphere. However, what moves us, what is alive for us and makes us respond to that which we define as God/Good/Creator, will affect our relationships with each other and ultimately ethical and moral decision making.

The language adopted in finding a connection between spirituality and morality may suggest an individualized or privatized approach to the subject. This is not always the case, for within a Christian understanding of spirituality, a communal dimension is clear. For some types of spirituality, particularly of the New Age variety, there is a privatized approach to the sacred, which is devoid of any clear sense of belonging to a community and the implications that has for ethical and moral judgments. However, other types of spirituality such as Celtic or Christian have a clear sense of belonging to a community which carries with it a clear perception of social and ethical responsibilities.

The move to accepting a communal and ethical dimension of spirituality has promoted a rejection of many traditional interpretations of Christian spirituality. No longer is this to be the mere fostering of the interior life, seeking peace of mind, equilibrium or some sort of mystic oneness with the universe. Spirituality is no longer a private concern at the fringes of life, for it is now viewed in terms of a unity between the interior life and the life of the world and society. Such a view still holds that spirituality remains the domain of the spirit, with the belief that if the truth will set us free, the spirit will guide us into all truth and lead to complete freedom. Furthermore, that freedom is offered to give release from

everything that hinders us from becoming full human beings, and prevents us from loving God and journeying with God.

Gryn (1993:2) has suggested spirituality is like a bird: if you hold it too tightly, it chokes, if you hold it too loosely it flies away. His analogy offers a welcome and unusual definition of spirituality. He concludes that spirituality is a subject too broad to offer a simple definition, and like the bird in the analogy, a narrow description would not do justice to such an extensive subject. Likewise a failure to produce a definitive definition, particularly in an age of choice, could mean we lose sight of what is fundamental to spirituality. In offering an understanding of Christian spirituality, it is necessary to move away from classical interpretations to one which prioritises the importance of the Incarnation and the interconnectedness of humans, God and the world. Christian spirituality is not just defining the interior life of an individual. Rather it is a great deal more, for it is a communal reality which includes our relationship with society and one another. Spirituality, therefore, is characterized by the endless seeking for connection with the individual, society, the world and ultimately Christ.

3. Spiritual Development

The British Government, when attempting to define spirituality, is vague in both its understanding of the term and how the subject should be taught in schools. The politicians appear to have attempted to please everyone with definitions of spirituality which draw upon the language of secular humanism whilst at the same time ensuring worship is predominantly Christian. Difficulties also exist for schools seeking to interpret the Government's requirements for the promotion of a child's 'spiritual development'. The term 'development' is problematic, due in part to the various theories of child development. It suggests a clearly defined series of stages through which pupils should progress in a particular order and single direction. Whatever the merits of judging a child's physical and intellectual growth in this way, it is not a particularly helpful way of thinking about spirituality.

The Government's inspection of schools evaluates how a school has sought to integrate spiritual development into the curriculum and how its pupils have grown from this process. Both mainstream and special schools require little input across the curriculum to meet this directive. It is possible to meet the legal requirements by means of showing that elements of music, art and drama lessons inspire a sense of awe and mystery in a child, which has be developed through this process. This, coupled with a weekly slot of religious education and collective worship, covers the provision for spiritual development in the curriculum.

Although the term 'spiritual development' is enshrined in legislation, the lack of a clear definition, particularly for work in special schools, means interpretation can be quite wide ranging. I would argue that for special schools spiritual development is simply understood as a means of nurture and growth, seeing the spiritual lives of the children flourish at their own time and pace. The emphasis here is on progress at an individual level rather than through age-appropriate attainment targets and defined objective testing. Furthermore, spiritual development in school is also part of the process of facilitating children's growth in their relationships within the community in which they live, study and worship.

4. Conclusion

Spirituality, as an area of work within special schools, clearly lacks any real descriptive criteria and regulation, therefore offering many opportunities to develop creative and imaginative programs to meet the spiritual needs of pupils with learning disabilities. The government has placed spirituality on the curriculum, yet they have failed to offer any real definition of what they understand by the term or any significant directives on applying legislation in this area to special schools. The opportunity therefore exists, within the legislative framework, to implement and develop programs of spiritual development for pupils, which cover collective school worship alongside other initiatives across the curriculum.

It is because of this opportunity and the belief that spiritual development in special schools can be more than just striving to create a sense of awe and mystery in a music lesson, that I would argue that we need to look beyond the field of education for examples of good practice. *L'Arche* community will therefore be investigated to see if it is possible to draw on its spirituality and ability to see the spiritual lives of individuals grow and flourish within the school environment.

CHAPTER 3

Spirituality of L'Arche

1. Introduction

> Christian spirituality is founded on Jesus. We in L'Arche are called to live in
> a special way the mystery of the poor and weakness of Jesus, who came to
> be with the poor and weak (Vanier 1995:115).

The spirituality of *L'Arche* is a way of travelling towards God, of living the beatitudes and the Gospel of Jesus. Here we recognize Jesus who identified himself with the poor and weak, who demonstrates that he connects with all that is poor and weak in each human being. The spirituality of *L'Arche* is not principally about doing things for the poor, but about listening to them, a spirit of generosity, hospitality and living with them a new covenant. That new covenant is a relationship of love grounded in Jesus' love for the poor. Furthermore, the beatitudes are crucial to this new covenant, for they set out the main ethical

demands a Christian must meet, informing all who follow Christ that they must continually seek new forms of loving others.

The fundamental spirituality and teaching of *L'Arche* is not like other movements which strive to make people with learning disabilities as independent as possible, which for those who work in a secular arena is problematic. Rather, it is about developing relationships with each other and God. Here those with learning disabilities and those who assist them both seek to enter into a relationship of friendship. Through this there is belonging, transformation and growth together with the discovery of mutual value. To explore further the fundamental character of *L'Arche* and its potential contribution to chaplaincy in special schools, two areas at the very heart of its spirituality, namely the church and community will be given greater attention.

2. Spirituality rooted in the church

> The spirituality of *L'Arche* is rooted in the church, the body of Christ. Like all Christians we are called to live in hope. Like all disciples, we are called to receive God's gifts and to take part in remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Eucharist (Vanier 1995:85).

Vanier's assertion, namely that the spirituality of *L'Arche* is both rooted in the church and sacramental in character, appears only to be stating something most Christians would adhere to and certainly nothing new. The church and its theologians throughout history to the present day have expressed the opinion that all Christians are called to receive God's gifts. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was clear that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life and that the spiritual life of Christians involves the sacraments as a source of growth and as instruments of grace. Perhaps this is best summarised by Aquinas (McDermond 1998:305) when he reminds us that baptism is the gateway to the sacraments and the beginning of the spiritual life, with the Eucharist developing the spiritual life. Therefore, baptism is needed to start the spiritual life, with the Eucharist bringing this to fulfilment.

Statements about spirituality rooted in church and the sacraments may seem obvious within the Christian tradition, but for those with learning disabilities such a statement is indeed a challenge to the status quo. A number of people with learning disabilities have historically been excluded from the church's worship and denied participation in the Eucharist. Francis (1994) recalls in her reflections the plight of so many individuals tragically refused the sacramental ministry of the church, because of ignorance, prejudice and priests who misapply regulations relating to the conferral of sacraments. The refusal to admit people with learning disabilities to the sacraments has primarily been based on the assumption that they have a lack of knowledge and understanding of the liturgy coupled with an inability to pass through the appropriate programs of catechesis. Clearly, the action of *L'Arche* communities in seeking to nurture the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities within the sacramental life of church is something of a challenge to the established church.

With the aim of promoting the spiritual life of those in their communities within the body of the church, *L'Arche* has taken active steps to encourage involvement in the local churches in which they find themselves. That in itself is important as Prospects (1988) has sought to highlight. As an organization representing the interests of people with learning disabilities they argue that, by and large, their members are absent from church congregations. Prospects (1998:4) has suggested that even though they live in all communities and every parish, their absence often goes unnoticed as a matter of little or no concern to most and a relief to some. Prospects asks why, when the majority of the hospitals and institutions which formerly housed people with learning disabilities have now closed and people have been dispersed back into the community, they are not to be found in congregations (Prospects 1998:7). Whilst answers may be difficult to extract, Prospects along with Harrington (1992) Webb-Mitchell (1996) Wilson (2000) as well as Vanier (1997) has highlighted the way in which people with learning disabilities have been treated less favourably by congregations.

The demand for acceptance in the church and the need to be participants in its life and worship is an inherent right of all baptised Christians. Within the baptism service this is explicitly stated:

> We welcome you into the Lord's family, we are members together of the body of Christ, we are children of the same heavenly father, we are inheritors together of the Kingdom of God (Church of England 2000:344).

As the fullness of divine blessing is in Christ, all the signs and all the ways offered by the church through which we meet Christ and receive his grace must be open to all baptised. For Vanier, people with learning disabilities have the same need to grow in the life of the spirit, so that their relationship to God may flourish. In baptism they enter into a relationship with Christ; this also forms the beginning of the journey within the church. The church, therefore, must offer not only acceptance but also love.

Vanier (1989) takes up the theme of love, the God of love and the nature of his relationship to humanity. This seeks to draw human beings to an understanding that such love does not bring with it a requirement for people to have a certain level of education or intellect. All are drawn to Jesus, who becomes flesh, empties himself and becomes a child in need, a humble wounded person who did not seek power or admiration. God was revealed in love, in love for his creation and in the relationship offered to all of us. This is what he asks of those who bear the name Christian, to love God and each other. To grow in relationship with Christ and receive his freely offered gifts does not require intellect or even the ability to articulate his name.

2.1 The Eucharist & L'Arche

For *L'Arche* participating in the Eucharist is seen as linking communal and personal nourishment. No matter what the level of disability this is an intimate moment when each is transformed through a personal meeting with Christ. In the Eucharist all become sharers in the divine life, in that very communion which is truly and deeply mystical. That the sacramental encounter requires nothing of ourselves is attested too most clearly in the writings of Reid (1994:23). Reid recalls the Gospel stories to show that it is not a pre-

requisite to have a theological education or understanding in order to enter a graced encounter with Jesus. In the Gospels the initiative always comes from Jesus and the person can experience the sacramental encounter without needing to be prepared in advance graced encounters are free gifts. Jesus identified with those who were broken; he offered everyone access to himself and a relationship without conditions.

Vanier (1995:85) in his statement about the centrality of the Eucharist reminds us that people with learning disabilities are called to receive God's gifts and grace without hindrance. Such a challenge calls upon the church to recollect the centrality of the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity, in which all members are connected in faith, hope and love with Christ. As members of Christ and one another, becoming one body, one spirit in Christ, the Eucharist is God's gift of himself in Christ through the Spirit to all people.

The criticism levelled at the church is equally applicable within the school setting and clearly shows an area in need of redress. Clergy in special schools do not offer the same quantity or quality of service that children experience in mainstream education. This is particularly evident in the failure to invite children with learning disabilities to confirmation, which is so readily encouraged in other primary schools. This failure to include children with learning disabilities is often based on their inability to take part in mainstream confirmation classes. Furthermore, special schools rarely have an opportunity for worship which includes a Eucharist. The overall quality of collective worship in special schools has been subject to criticism for failing to provide adequately for the children's needs. Criticism levelled against churches and chaplaincy services for their failure to be inclusive and to provide the same level of opportunity that is afforded to the able bodied is wholly justifiable. There has to be a change within the chaplaincy service to acknowledge that children within special schools have the same entitlement as their contemporaries in mainstream education to collective worship and confirmation.

Haverwas (1973:132) sums up much of what has gone wrong in chaplaincy services in his criticism of contemporary Christianity. He condemns Christians for being individualistic and rationalist with an emphasis on education and catechesis. Haverwas is simply restating

the point that salvation does not come from knowing and reciting church teaching, but is freely given. Church congregations and special schools need to learn from *L'Arche* communities to abandon any constant dwelling on a person's ability to comprehend the nature of a service or doctrine. People with learning disabilities have the right to see their spiritual lives grow and flourish, through God's gifts and grace, which are freely given.

3. Spirituality rooted in community

> The spirituality of *L'Arche* is both profoundly human and profoundly divine. It is like a seed planted by God in the soil of human beings, the soil needs to be watered and fed (Vanier 1994:89).

The vision of *L'Arche* is to create a community where people with learning disabilities can live together with assistants whose relationship would be based on that of friendship rather than merely care. The vision became a reality and proved to be a successful formula for offering people with learning disabilities a community which offers them security and the opportunity for growth. *L'Arche* brings together people from all backgrounds, cultures and educational attainments to care for and journey with people who are some of the poorest and most marginalized in society. For those who live in *L'Arche* communities as assistants, it is recognised that they should have, along with those they care for, a spiritual guide/director to help them in their own spiritual journeys.

3.1 Spiritual Direction

The recognition that Christians should seek some form of spiritual direction to guide them in their knowledge and love of God and in their prayer life is nothing new. The Christian tradition has nearly always valued the place of the spiritual guide. More than ever it is a tradition which is currently regaining importance. The repeated emphasis throughout Jean Vanier's later work on the necessity for a spiritual guide for individuals and the community leads one to enquire further into his motives and reasoning.

Such a question arises because our understanding of the role and need for a spiritual guide has changed over time. Today it has become like so many aspects of contemporary

society, part of our consumer world something to be bought. People are seeking out guides, seeking to be informed, surrounding themselves with options and choices: all this is a product of our post-modern condition. This is not to argue that working with a spiritual director is a bad thing, rather to enquire what are the motives behind its popularity.

I find myself wholly in agreement with the sentiments of Douglas (1995:38) in her assertion that for many Christians spiritual direction is a fashionable commodity. Here she argues that it has become politically correct in certain circles not only to have a director, but to boast of the fact that one is able to acquire a director of the right kind, such as a vowed female religious from an established religious order. Here we enter a league of the super-spiritual; those rising to the top can not only produce a spiritual director from an Ignatian stable, but would have a Myers-Briggs indicator and engage with the Enneagram.

When spiritual direction becomes an item of fashion it has lost sight of its ultimate goal, for it fails to engage with our real desire, the movement of our lives towards God. Spiritual direction should have as its primary goal enabling those seeking guidance to grow in their faith.

> A spiritual guide is like a spiritual father or mother who in some
> ways bring the person to birth in their inner life and communion with God
> (Vanier 1989:241).

In some of his later works Vanier draws on a more contemporary appreciation of the need for spiritual guides. This challenges some of the traditional assumptions in the church that view spiritual direction as service needed only for those engaged in ministry. For Vanier spiritual guidance is there not only for the residents with learning disabilities, it is also to help the paid and voluntary assistants with their struggles and assist them to be rooted in the gospel values of *L'Arche*.

This is one of the most endearing aspects of *L'Arche*, the recognition that it is seeking to offer a place of spiritual growth not only to people with learning disabilities, but to those who will be with them on their journey. The spirituality of *L'Arche* and its vision are

based on biblical principles, and within the community there is the recognition that such principles are very much against the grain of a world which functions primarily to a non-Christian agenda. Because of this it is essential that assistants who live in *L'Arche* have a guide on their own spiritual journeys. Here they seek to make sense of the community they have been called to live and work with, and to grow in their own spiritual life.

3.2 The priest as spiritual guide

Vanier (1989) is clear that the spiritual guide may be lay or ordained, and he is meticulous is spelling out the characteristics of those who should be sought out as spiritual guides. Likewise he is specific about the role of the priest or ordained minister in the life of a community. Within *L'Arche* some spiritual guides are clergy from outside the community who play a part in the life of *L'Arche*. Also there are clergy who take sabbaticals from their parochial duties and live as assistants undertaking sacramental duties.

One of the most striking features of the role of the spiritual guide in *L'Arche* is that the priest is a first among equals. The priest is not to be seen as holier that those they journey with, for *L'Arche* is clear that the most holy are often those most broken, weak and vulnerable. The priest's primary responsibility is the sacramental life of the community and ultimately they are linked to the Eucharist. "As a community and as individuals we need priests, we need to put the secret of our hearts in the heart of God through the priest" (Vanier 1989:247).

The priest is to be a person without power or status, with gifts not always associated with those in holy orders. The priest is called in *L'Arche* to be a person of prayer, to be transparent and gentle; yet because of the nature of the work he needs to be able to be firm. The calling is to journey with and alongside rather than to direct and oversee. Traditional models of priesthood, which exemplify a pastoral objectivity and distance, are abandoned here. Furthermore, the priest has to abandon any sense of a role which is simply directive, for she has to be an active presence rather than a person of authority.

For priests who live in the community taking up the role of assistant as well as priest, they are first among equals, undertaking ordinary and mundane tasks as well as serving at the altar. The removal of all status and hierarchy which clergy so often need for their own security is abandoned here. Sharing in the experience of people with learning disabilities is not always easy. Kelly (2000) is a Catholic priest who has written on his experience of *L'Arche*. He discusses the change of attitude and philosophy required for a priest working within *L'Arche* community. At *L'Arche* all notions of power are abandoned and as Kelly describes it, this can have a profound effect on the priest:

> And in all of that I began to experience myself as very close to the six very
> disabled people at the heart of the house. And very close as never before, to
> the Jesus of Golgotha (Kelly & McGinley 2000:145).

Kelly develops this by reminding us that a priest is an icon of Jesus as shepherd. As with Jesus the priest becomes a true shepherd, only in so far as she allows herself to become identified with the victim, the lamb. To be a spiritual guide, companion and priest to people with learning disabilities involves the abandonment of privilege, it also means identifying with the broken, the vulnerable and marginalised. Whilst the place of the priest in providing a sacramental ministry within *L'Arche* is important, this does not mean the community is called to be self-sufficient or aloof from the wider community. On the contrary, Vanier and others who support people with learning disabilities have campaigned long and hard for their right to have a spiritual life nourished by the sacraments within the context of their parish church.

4. Friendship

The spirituality of *L'Arche* is a way of love and friendship with people who are poor and weak (Vanier 1995:94). As highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, fundamental to the spirituality and teaching of *L'Arche* is the development of our relationship with each other and God. Here, those with learning disabilities and those who assist them both seek to enter into a relationship of friendship. As Vanier asserts:

Opening ourselves to friendship means becoming vulnerable, taking off our masks and letting down our barriers so we can accept people just as they are. It means weeping with them when they weep and laughing with them when they laugh (Vanier 1995:30).

The writer of Proverbs (17:17) reminds us that a friend loves at all times, that love freely given can bring its own challenges as well as rewards. Ultimately, for *L'Arche* communities friendship is freely given whereby one intends the well-being of the other, with the recognition that this may bring conflict. Such conflicts can be manifested in many ways, from the experiences that Kelly describes in coming to terms with inner trials brought about through a loss of authority, to those who grapple with the exterior problems of battling with the church for equality.

'Friend' and 'free' came from the same Indo-European and Sanskrit roots meaning 'to be fond of' or 'to hold dear'. That is what friends do. Friends attempt to live out the qualities of equality and mutuality, love and justice in their relationship. Friendship is an equal opportunity relationship. As friendships deepen, there is an effort to change social and political structures that divide people and to build relationships of integrity. To be alongside someone on their journey, is to 'hold dear' that person's well-being, seeking to challenge any injustices they meet, so that they may flourish. There is a power in friendship to generate social change, to motivate people to build communities and to share; this is what makes the model of friendship so powerful. Vanier repeats throughout his writing that the spirituality of *L'Arche* is profoundly human and profoundly divine. He shows that through these communities God makes visible to the world the essential purpose of human life, namely, that out of love we have been created, unique, precious and sacred, with a gift to share the love we have been given. Growing in spirituality and humanity means sharing that gift of love. However, this does not have an air of sentimentality; it is about a love grounded in the reality of life for people who have experienced rejection, hostility and marginalisation.

Such an understanding of friendship does not avoid the reality of human nature and the conflicts that arise when people have to live and work together. In all friendships there

are dynamics, which include love and tension. However, friends seek to note and acknowledge rather than pass over these dynamics. Moreover, in seeking to pay attention to difficulties that arise, opportunities develop to enhance and deepen friendships through an ever-increasing openness.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I am convinced that within the model of friendship advocated by *L'Arche* communities, there is an understanding of a relationship to God and each other which could seek to build the community that exists in schools. This, coupled with the possibility of developing a role as spiritual guide for those engaged in chaplaincy services, can be seen as a way of further seeking to nurture and encourage the spiritual lives of pupils and staff. However, as I have sought to highlight in this chapter, the process of change can also bring with it challenges and areas of possible conflict both for the chaplain and school. The nature of such conflicts will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4

Spiritual Formation and Church Initiatives
For People with learning disabilities

1. Introduction

> Let all your creatures serve you, for you spoke, and they were made. You sent forth your Spirit, and it formed them; there is none that can resist your voice (Judith 16:14).

I am again in the pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4: 19).

This chapter will explore the process of spiritual formation, looking particularly at initiatives which have been developed by the Baptist and Roman Catholic churches to nurture the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities.

Spiritual formation is a process in which we co-operate with the Holy Spirit's action over the course of a person's life. That process seeks to nurture growth and development in Christian maturity coupled with a deepening encounter and relationship with God. Central to our understanding of spiritual formation is that all human beings, including people with learning disabilities, have been formed by the Spirit of God and are engaging in the process of transformation in Christ. Furthermore, the corporate element of this process has to be acknowledged, for the Spirit works not only in individuals, but also through the church. Christ is formed in us as a community, the community of the love of God formed to be the 'Body of Christ'.

Co-operation with this work of the Spirit is desirable for sustained growth and development. This is achieved through certain practices that make a person more open and responsive to the Spirit, e.g. prayer, silence, acts of justice etc. which nurture a sense of openness to God. Spiritual formation as a process of growth, of encountering God and deepening a relationship with him, has been for the most part a neglected if not forgotten element in chaplaincy services to children with learning disabilities, despite being enshrined in law.

The spirituality of *L'Arche* offers unparalleled insights into how spiritual formation with people with learning disabilities can be addressed, particularly through the facility of a spiritual guide and sacramental participation. However, much of what is drawn from *L'Arche* is within the context of a one-to-one relationship and small communities, rather than the group work situation experienced in a special school. In seeking to address the spiritual needs of children within the environment of special education, attention also has to

be given to providing resources and programs for nurturing spiritual growth which can be offered not only on an individual basis.

The Roman Catholic Church through its *Special Religious Education Development* program, SPRED, and the *Baptist Union Initiative with Learning Disability,* BUILD, have engaged over a number of years in developing spiritual formation programs which take place in a group setting. I would argue that elements of these initiatives could be integrated into schools, alongside the model offered by *L'Arche*, to create a range of opportunities for children to enable their spiritual lives to grow and flourish.

2. SPRED

The *Special Religious Education Development* program (SPRED) initiative developed in the 1960s in the USA, when a priest gathered parents and volunteers together with the intention of developing a program which would aid people with learning disabilities to integrate into parish life, worship and the process of education in the faith. What developed from this group was the model we know today as SPRED. Much of the work in formulating and developing SPRED was undertaken by Mary Harrington (1992,1994,2000). It is still primarily Roman Catholic, although the program has been taken up by other denominations including some within Judaism. SPRED is not universally available in all Catholic dioceses, but rather is found where volunteers have offered their services and undertaken the necessary training. Within SPRED there is a strong sense of collaboration between all involved in the project. It is not simply a matter of sending a person with learning disabilities to a local group; their parishioners from their home congregation, along with relatives or carers take a role in supporting the participant. Once a person seeks to join SPRED, the parish they belong to begins a process of familiarization and sponsorship. The aim here is to support their parishioner through the program and offer continuing encouragement when it has ended.

2.1 Three-stage model

The SPRED program follows a three-stage model, which ensures that each meeting has an element of continuity and stability for those taking part. Those attending the program

arrive at a designated centre and begin the three stages: a time of *preparation*, of *catechism* and *closure*.

> We work together to develop this movement toward God in faith, hope and love. In each of our sessions together, we want to enter into some aspect of the mystery of the triune God where the bonds of love are such that there is but one God. We build bonds of love and friendship as a witness to that mystery and as access to participation in that mystery of Trinitarian life (Harrington 1994:128).

The first stage of *preparation* exists to prepare the setting, which fosters a sense of belonging, well-being and concentrated awareness of self in relation to the others, and of the environment in which the program takes place. Once the participants arrive, they are welcomed and engage in activities to obtain a sense of calm and focused concentration. The room used in the preparation phase is prepared with well-defined areas for sensory-motor activities, art and everyday life activities. Such preparation is to create a sense of calm and concentration; this can take many forms, from for example, a volunteer simply quietly painting the nails of a participant to activities with sand. Experiences at this stage help individuals move from the noise and activity of travelling to the church or centre and begin the process of developing calm and silence in preparation for worship.

This commitment to a time of preparation may seem self evident before any act of worship or approaching religious instruction. However, in school, time is at a premium and it is the norm to engage immediately with those gathered for collective worship or study. The evidence from SPRED is that giving almost equal time to preparation as an activity in itself does, indeed, herald results. I would argue that whilst adopting such an element of preparation in schools would reduce the time available to active study or worship, it would in the long run be of greater benefit to the children. Beginning with a time of relaxation, developing a sense of entering sacred space and seeking a point of stillness may bring the participants to a point where they are more willing to engage with what follows. Furthermore, once activities are developed and repeated to achieve a sense of stillness, it becomes easier in time for children with learning disabilities to fall into this pattern. In

general, the method of catechesis used with SPRED is inductive, symbolic and liturgical (Harrington 1992:8)

The second stage of SPRED is the *catechesis*. This is designed to be appropriate to the chronological age, the mental and faith development of the members of the group. The catechesis begins with the life experience of its members evoked through symbols, using ordinary everyday objects and experiences to draw them in to a sense of the sacred. A popular symbol used at this stage would be a pictures and shapes of a heart so as to arouse experiences of love. This awareness is deepened through liturgical and biblical activities. The bible, for example is used in a special way. The leader gives a short bible reading depicting the theme to each participant personally, holding their hands, looking into their eyes and speaking the words with love. Silence and an expression of care such as holding hands close the main part of this stage two. However, it is not the end; rather it is a means to draw people into the closing liturgy.

One of the aspects of SPRED that is appealing is that, just as with *L'Arche*, it acknowledges the chronological age of its participants and develops an appropriate response. Historically, people with learning disabilities have been approached by the church as well as by other agencies such as social services as though they were children. Despite the fact that participants are teenagers or adults, materials often used with people with learning disabilities will invariably be child centred, with themes and images inappropriate to an older age group. As most special schools now place children in classes according to age and not to mental or physical ability, so using objects and experiences appropriate to their age should be manageable. Harrington is clear in her work with people with learning disabilities that they benefit from being grouped with people their own age. Futhermore, material aimed at adults is just as unsuitable for children as she states "Catechesis comes in many shapes and sizes. Like a garment of great value it has to fit each person" (Harrington 1994:116). It is the norm in this society for people to foster friendships amongst their peers who share an awareness of similar lived experience. Whilst this desire to bring people of a similar age together is to be welcomed, the reality of a parish situation is that it is seldom the

case that sufficient people with learning disabilities of the same age group are present in that community.

The third stage of SPRED is *closure*, an act of worship and participation in a ritual meal. The meal is used as a tool to help the participants appreciate what it means to come together in an act of fellowship and the sharing of food. (Great care is given to the detail of this stage of SPRED. The importance of such aspects as the cloths on the tables, the napkins and flowers are emphasised, so as to promote a special ritual.) The participants are nurtured in this environment to appreciate sacred time and fellowship centred on food on a table, thus preparing them to receive the sacraments, so that they may feel comfortable in regular parish worship and participating in the Eucharist at home. Before leaving the SPRED centre the participants and volunteers listen to music and begin their farewells with a definitive sense of closure and promise of a future meeting.

In the Eucharist, we are all blessed by God in and through Jesus Christ and people with learning disabilities are called to receive God's gifts without hindrance. However, along with all other Christians, the church expects a time of preparation and instruction before the reception of Holy Communion. SPRED offers a model of preparation which, I would argue, is imaginative and accessible to all regardless of ability. The use of symbols and creating a sense of the sacred around a table of food is a helpful means of both teaching and nurturing an understanding of the Eucharist.

3. BUILD

What we should not do is assume that people with learning disabilities have
no spiritual needs, or that those needs cannot be met. Rather, we must
reflect on how they can take their intended place in the church and each
make their unique contribution to its life (Bowers 1996:11).

The *Baptist Union Initiative with Learning Disability* (BUILD) is a specialist division of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, which has been in existence since 1984. BUILD came into being when a number of Baptists wished to address concerns about their inability to make known the love of Christ to people with learning disabilities and to allow them to take up their intended place in the church making a contribution to its life. Over the

17 years of its existence BUILD has developed a national and international network of groups drawing on initiatives from other Free churches. The primary aims of BUILD are fourfold: firstly, to develop an awareness amongst Christians and churches of issues relating to disability; secondly, to create strategies for congregations to respond positively to the gifts and needs of people with learning disabilities; thirdly, to prepare and provide materials which will enable people with learning disabilities to develop their own faith and Christian vocation; and fourthly, to provide support and pastoral advice for congregations as well as those who live and work with people with learning disabilities.

3.1 A resource for parishes

BUILD does not operate by taking people away from their church to specialised centres of instruction and worship; rather; through teaching materials and resources, it encourages groups to be formed within the church or to develop groups locally with another denomination. The ecumenical element of the BUILD programme is of great value, since work undertaken within their programs can be embraced by other churches and developed within their own locality. I would argue that such co-operation with churches can only benefit the work undertaken within a school context. Furthermore, this opportunity to build on what is offered in the school environment could also be offered to other churches in the locality, if they have parishioners attending the special school.

The materials and resources developed by BUILD are such that they can appeal to a group of mixed age and ability since the communication is largely through pictures. The materials developed seek to avoid the mistakes of congregations who have tried to use general church materials, as Potter states:

> How can they get to know Jesus if the methods used to communicate
> this good news actually compounded their disability (Potter 1998:18).

With BUILD, the emphasis is on groups of individuals meeting and working through themes such as 'What is God like', 'Knowing God' and 'Following Jesus'. This work is undertaken with the help of booklets especially designed to illustrate such topics and with a very limited use of words. The groups are facilitated by a mixture of interpreters and trained

parishioners called 'friends' for those with non-verbal communication. The material provided in the booklets is used in conjunction with other resources that relate specifically to prayer. Groups will learn through imitation and participating in collective activities.

The BUILD materials are unique with regards to the resources. They have been designed to generate an understanding of the relationship between each other and God, using a storyboard format which is very effective. The images used are age appropriate and do not require any use of language or written communication. One major drawback with the BUILD material is that it does not cover the sacraments. Since the material is from a non-conformist tradition it is naturally developed to suit their own requirements, therefore they offer no insight into preparing children for Holy Communion. However, their ability to draw children into working with themes such as 'What is God like', has a universal application and there is scope to adapt such a resource to meet the needs of other denominations.

Spiritual formation is simply the expression of a process of growth in Christian faith, identity and practice, that develops as Christ is formed in us. This process of learning, changing and growing into the likeness of Christ will be different for each one of us, as created uniquely by God. There are no slick formulae for guaranteeing spiritual growth and no program or initiative that would seek to provide a package of goods which would make such a claim.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to explore the initiatives offered by SPRED and BUILD with the aim of being able to draw on this expertise. Both programs offer valuable contributions in drawing people with learning disabilities into the life of the church and engaging in a process of developing and nurturing their spiritual lives. In particular Potter (1998) and Harrington (1992, 1994, 2000) challenge all seeking to work in spiritual formation to recognise the necessity for age appropriate activity and resources designed especially to communicate with people with learning disabilities. The work of BUILD and SPRED, along with what has been learnt from the success of *L'Arche,* can assist in the

process of developing ways of engaging children and young people in special schools in meaningful programs of spiritual formation.

CHAPTER 5

Chaplaincy in Special Schools

1.Introduction

At the beginning of this dissertation I drew attention to the lack of regulation, direction and assistance offered to clergy who undertake chaplaincy work within the special needs sector. The small amount of material available gives little reference to people with learning disabilities and that which is available simply gives vague suggestions as to the type of skills required for someone employed in a chaplaincy post. *The National Society*, which advises the Church of England, suggests that a chaplain should be

Energetic, creative, outgoing, organized, a good communicator, able to initiate and motivate, be able to relate to pupils, staff, parents and governors. Respond to education initiatives and facilitate acts of worship (National Society 2000:1).

There is no suggestion in this model of chaplaincy that the priest should be a person rooted in prayer, the study of scripture or one seeking to build a community of faith. Rather it presents a list of skills and a secular one at that. Whilst there is no specific mention of engaging in the process of nurturing the spiritual lives of individuals or the community, the fact that spiritual development is in the curriculum ensures that such requirements become the responsibility of a chaplain by default. Likewise, responsibility for facilitating acts of collective worship becomes an area of work taken on by the school chaplain but again with no specific instructions with regard to its style or format. Therefore, school chaplains in a special needs school find themselves with little direction in their work other than to guide their way to meeting the religious requirements of the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, focusing on spiritual development and facilitating worship.

1.1 Opportunities for change

Such a lack of clarity and focus for chaplaincy ministry results in no set standard or measurement for the quality of provision offered across the whole spectrum of education. However, this situation can be addressed with innovation and creativity in both the approach to and content of chaplaincy services. The role and model of chaplaincy, lacking official direction, can develop to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities in a new way. Although *L'Arche* community is in a residential setting, the model of spirituality it encompasses has a universal appeal to all people with learning disabilities. Its potential benefit can be seen in developing and improving chaplaincy services.

Throughout this dissertation I have drawn on areas in which special schools can learn from Jean Vanier and *L'Arche* in order that the spiritual lives of those in their care may growth and flourish. One aspect of *L'Arche* which offers a starting point for chaplains seeking to engage in the work of spiritual formation is found in the development of relationships. The nature and significance of the relationship a chaplain forms with those

being accompanied on their spiritual journey has to be explored. In seeking to nurture the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities in school, the approach adopted by the clergy will significantly impact on this process. Therefore, fundamental to the process of exploring spiritual formation is the relationship between the priest and school community, which this chapter will seek to address.

2. Relationships: The Priest and School

Theologians and clergy have grappled with the need to broaden the model of ministry and spiritual direction with respect to women and the gay community, in favour of that which reflects particular life experiences and needs. Likewise, in the area of disability, the specific needs and experiences of people with learning disabilities demand a relationship with their priest appropriate to their specific needs. *L'Arche* offers a significant contribution in this regard, with clear and developed models for clergy working in community. Here we have an example of how staff and residents in the community have a priest who seeks to develop a particular type of relationship based on friendship and spiritual guidance. Essentially, this is a model of ministry which could readily be adapted to meet the needs of a school community made up of staff, pupils and school chaplain.

Fundamental to the spirituality of *L'Arche* is the concept of developing a relationship with each other and God, people with learning disabilities and those who take up the role as spiritual guide with them. Here both priest and community seek to enter a relationship with each other and God, which is characterised by transformation, a sense of belonging and growth. Following this pattern priests would be guided into creating a relationship with those attending special schools, which abandons old models of chaplaincy characterised by authority, hierarchy and power. To abandon a traditionally accepted model of ministry is indeed a radical gesture. Notions of leadership and authority are at the very heart of the church's teaching with respect to the role and function of priests. The Catholic church in its teaching on the formation of priests for the 21st century repeatedly makes reference to their task as leaders of the community as opposed to living with other members as their equal.

Ministry demands of the priest an intense spiritual life, filled with those qualities and virtues which are typical of a person who presides over and leads a community, of an elder in the noblest and richest sense of the word (John Paul II 1992:70).

2.1 The priest as a friend

The model offered by *L'Arche* of the priest being an active presence alongside the community rather than leader is one of great value. Thus the priest in the context of a school community can help develop the spiritual life of children, not just in times set aside for worship or teaching, but also in the common tasks of every day. The priest being a first among equals assists in work which is ordinary and mundane. Kelly (2000) summarizes this when he states that it is by simply being a presence among people that a priest comes to know the joys and anxieties of those in the community. Furthermore, by being alongside those they live and work with, priests will find a thousand opportunities for sharing the light of God with members of that community in their everyday lives.

Opening ourselves to friendship means becoming vulnerable, taking off our masks and letting down our barriers so we can accept people just as they are. It means weeping with them when they weep and laughing with them when they laugh (Vanier 1995:30).

A relationship based on friendship and an active presence with others in their spiritual journey is also the model adopted by the BUILD initiative, namely that there should be no hierarchy between assistants and people with learning disabilities. As with *L'Arche* there is recognition that we are all equals in the eyes of God and need the keep the command of loving our neighbour as ourselves. However, it is important to recognize that such a move to embrace a new model of ministry and priesthood may not be easily adopted or endorsed.

Historically, Anglican clergy have seen themselves as autonomous leaders, holding dear to the familiar air of paternalism that characterizes their role as leading the established church in their parish. A priest from her selection, training, ordination and induction is given a model of priesthood which builds on a model of authority. The ordination service states that amongst the tasks entrusted to a priest is to "lead *his* people … to teach and admonish" (Alternative Service Book 1980:356). For priests who have been instructed by the church

to have an image of themselves as set apart for leading and admonishing their flock, a role which schools and churches have legitimated, any move away from this carries great risks for all involved. For their formation process and pastoral practice is based on a model which affirms that during contact with parishioners a priest should embrace a sense of pastoral objectivity, or in reality keeping a distance. Gordon-Brown (2001) has been particularly influential in advocating a model of pastoral work which stresses objectivity, arguing that priests can only be free to engage in their duties by being prepared to dis-engage. His work is critical of what he terms a pastoral cliché, namely seeking to get alongside people or meet them where they are. For those trained in this traditional model of priesthood, abandoning familiar patterns of ministry will involve change and risks. Vanier himself recognizes that the spirituality he seeks to embrace and share, with its emphasis on abandoning power and authority, is not going to be universally accepted as he clearly states.

> The spirituality of Nazareth or the spirituality of the circle, which implies littleness, love of little things and humility is not easy in our world (Vanier 1982:303).

However, the potential benefits for the priest and those whose spiritual lives they seek to nurture will outweigh the cost of abandoning a position of power and privilege.

3. Areas of challenge

When seeking to develop new working practices in a school, as with any other environment, the potential exists for conflicts to emerge. In seeking to adopt the core values and spirituality of *L'Arche*, which are not like those of other movements, it is inevitable that challenges will arise. I would suggest that the main challenges come in two areas: the resistance to models of care which are not based on independence and the need for flexibility in the use of the catechism.

Both government and parent based initiatives have over the last decade concentrated on enabling people with learning disabilities to be as independent as possible. However, the emphasis within *L'Arche* is on developing relationships with each other and God, and entering into friendships with those who work and live alongside each other. For those currently engaged in working in special schools the adoption of new models of

relationship may be problematic. Part of the push to encourage children with learning disabilities to prepare for independence has been the discouragement of dependence on staff and workers, with priority given to developing goals of self-reliance and individual rights. Fear of creating a climate of dependence is understandable for this model could, if not developed properly, be mistaken for what was formerly practised by those working with people with learning disabilities in the old hospitals and institutions.

The second area of potential difficulty lies in seeking to move away from the traditional value given to the catechism and the need to able to articulate abstract descriptions of faith, by memory, in order to partake in the Eucharist. People with learning disabilities are called to receive God's gifts and grace without hindrance; however, historically they have been unable to participate fully in Eucharistic services because it was believed that they were unable to understand the finer points of doctrine normally taught before first communion. In this chapter, I have argued that we need to be reminded as a church community that the position in which membership of the church is granted is by virtue of baptism. As a consequence of their baptism people with learning disabilities should be encouraged to share fully in the sacramental life of their community; to deny the sacraments to people with learning disabilities is a form of spiritual deprivation and cannot be excused. For those who are engaged in religious instruction both in schools and parishes, this may be a move which is difficult to embrace. Both institutions have long operated rigid points of entry to the sacraments, the consequence being the exclusion of people with learning disabilities.

4. Conclusion

Seeking to embrace a role of chaplain based on the *L'Arche* model of friendship does not remove all conflicts and situations where humans are in disagreement. Within a school environment there are always tensions, policy disagreements and personality clashes. The focus here is found not in the conflicts, as all friendships have their dynamics, including power as well as love. Friends however seek to acknowledge their differences rather than

ignore them. Moreover, by paying attention to these differences, opportunities develop to enhance and deepen the friendship through on-going openness.

To embrace the model of relationships exemplified by *L'Arche* is indeed a radical and controversial move for a school chaplain. Within a school the chaplain is for the most part the authority on matters of worship, doctrine and spirituality. Such a position, coupled with the parish role, can portray an image of strength and invulnerability, which is safe and secure. Taking Vanier's words and putting them into action, opening ourselves to be friends, becoming vulnerable, taking off our masks and letting down our barriers is a move that will involve risks and real change, but ultimately it will reap rewards.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

1. Introduction

The aim of this study has been to address the proposition that the spirituality of *L'Arche* has much to offer people with learning disabilities outside its own residential setting. For those who seek to nurture the spiritual lives of pupils in special schools, there exists the opportunity to draw on the example of *L'Arche* when developing programs encouraging spiritual formation. Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn on the fundamental characteristics of *L'Arche* and the writings of Jean Vanier, identifying the possibility of taking aspects of a spirituality grounded within a residential context and adapting this to a school environment. Furthermore, I have sought to demonstrate that this could be achieved within the legal requirements of the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, which regulates spiritual development in the curriculum.

The church and state schools have systematically failed people with learning disabilities, from the quality of chaplaincy ministry offered to blatant acts of discrimination. Within special schools the expectation for people with learning disabilities in the area of spiritual development is markedly low, with limited opportunity for teaching in this area or for quality collective worship. The legislative requirements for the provision of spiritual development can be met by providing minimal input by the chaplaincy service. Within special schools it is possible to meet all the criteria for providing spiritual development by simply asserting your students achieved a sense of awe and wonder in a music lesson. This would not be acceptable in mainstream schools. The latter have greater expectations as to what can be achieved in the development of a pupil's spirituality.

An incorrect assumption also prevails, namely, that spiritual growth requires a certain intellectual capacity and an ability to articulate faith. However, people with learning disabilities have the same rights as mainstream pupils to ensure that their chaplaincy service engages in formation programs that recognise their need to grow in the life of the spirit and to nurture their relationship with God. In order to address this failing on the part of the church and its chaplains, what is needed is a prophetic voice which offers a vision for what can be achieved and a challenge to the prejudices and failures of current chaplaincy service. Throughout this dissertation I have presented *L'Arche* as offering such a vision, giving to all who work with people with learning disabilities an opportunity to draw upon its fundamental characteristics to the benefit of those in their care. The Charter of *L'Arche*, which is its very foundation, reminds us that:

> Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognised and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed (Charter *L'Arche* II.2 in Kearney 2000:212).

The spirituality of *L'Arche* offers an opportunity to school chaplains to abandon established levels of service and also low expectations of people with learning disabilities. What is on offer in place of this is a spirituality based on a profound respect for the dignity

and sacredness of every human being and the means to develop a spiritual life, which deepens their love of God and other people.

In conclusion I should like to offer to those engaged in school chaplaincy a number of recommendations, drawn from this dissertation, as to how the spirituality of *L'Arche* can be adopted when developing formation programmes for people with learning disabilities. The recommendations presented fall into two specific categories, spiritual formation and collective worship.

2. Recommendations for Spiritual Formation of People with learning disabilities

In the area of spiritual development, the recommendations are threefold. They focus on the relationship between the chaplain and pupils, building on the model of priest as spiritual guide which is central to *L'Arche* and easily adapted to a school situation. They also reject traditional models of priestly ministry. The recommendations are as follows:

i. Develop a secure foundation for the chaplains' work focusing on their relationship with pupils. The model for this relationship is that of the spiritual guide as exemplified by *L'Arche;*

ii. Work to ensure that the school recognises that people with learning disabilities can encounter and respond to God and that they have a spiritual life which is able to grow and flourish. The quantity and quality of work undertaken to meet the legislative requirements must reflect this;

iii. Abandon traditional models of chaplaincy and priesthood based on objectivity and detachment in favour of a model of friendship.

2.1 Spiritual Formation

At the beginning of this dissertation I drew attention to the difficulties that exist for school chaplains seeking to define what the government means by the term 'spiritual formation' in its legislation. Although the term is enshrined within legislation, the lack of a clear definition, particularly for work in special schools, means that interpretation can be quite wide ranging. For special schools, an interpretation of spiritual formation can simply be understood as the means of nurture and growth, seeing the spiritual lives of the children

flourish. The emphasis here is on progress at an individual level rather than through age appropriate attainment targets and defined objective testing.

With this area of work in special schools, the lack of any real descriptive criteria and regulation ensures plenty of opportunity to develop creative and imaginative programs to meets the spiritual needs of pupils with learning disabilities. The government has placed spirituality on the curriculum but they have failed to offer any real directives on implementing this, other than the recommendation that more input should be encouraged. Here we can look to the spirituality of *L'Arche* to offer insight and experience with respect to the nurturing of the spiritual lives of people with learning disabilities, all within the requirements of law.

Against this background I would recommend that before school chaplains consider what can be practically achieved in worship and curricular activities, it is necessary to develop a secure foundation to their work by focusing on their relationship with the children. This I would argue can be achieved by reflecting and drawing on the spirituality of *L'Arche* and the insights it has gleaned from years of working to promote the spiritual development of those in their communities.

I would recommend that as a starting point in any process of engaging with the development of programs of spiritual formation, chaplains need to realise that people with learning disabilities can encounter and respond to God and have a spiritual life that can grow and deepen.

At the heart of *L'Arche* is a belief in the uniqueness and sacredness of all people regardless of their abilities. This statement is a recognition that all human beings are created in God's image. Because of this we are all born and nurtured in a relational bond that is reinforced in the Christian community. We perceive and understand this relationship in a unique way, as each of us is a new creation. People with learning disabilities are created in God's image and through his grace he touches their lives, building a relationship with them, even if they cannot articulate this in words.

In seeking to assist people with learning disabilities to grow in their spiritual lives and build their relationship with God, the chaplain can act as a spiritual guide. Such a role is seen in the planning and facilitating of worship, engaging in building a community of faith, the offering of individual direction and being an active presence within the community. The foundation for this work can be drawn from the spirituality of *L'Arche*, which is characterised by journeying alongside people with learning disabilities in a relationship of love and friendship. This is indeed a radical departure from the relationship a chaplain normally assumes in a school, but I would recommend such a move as beneficial not only to the pupils but also to the priests themselves. Henri Nouwen, who was a priest with a *L'Arche* community, challenges us to:

> Dare to love and to be a real friend. The love you give and receive is a reality that will lead you closer and closer to God as well as those whom God has given you to love (Nouwen 1997:69).

Vanier repeats thoughout his own writing that the spirituality of *L'Arche* is profoundly human and profoundly divine. Through these communities God makes visible to the world the essential purpose of human life, that is out of his love we have been created, unique, precious and sacred with a gift to share the love we have been given. Growing in spirituality and humanity means sharing that gift of love. This opportunity to share the gift of love can be achieved not only within the residential context of *L'Arche* but also within the community of a special school. This is to be achieved by drawing on the spirituality of *L'Arche* as the foundation to the chaplain's work and his other relationship to their community.

3. Recommendations For Collective Worship

In the area of collective worship it is recommended that the school chaplain build on the work of *L'Arche*, SPRED and BUILD to ensure that collective worship provides the opportunity for people with learning disabilities to encounter and respond to God. Part of this move to improve collective worship will be the introduction of Eucharistic services with

a liturgy developed to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities. The recommendations are as follows:

i. Examine the school's policy and commitment to collective worship, recognising that people with learning disabilities have the same right as pupils in mainstream schooling to worship God as a community. Encourage chaplains to be bold and imaginative in developing work in this area;

ii. In drawing up the content of collective worship offer the opportunity for a service of the Eucharist to the whole school;

iii. Draw on the experience of *L'Arche*, BUILD and SPRED to develop worship and instruction in faith that is appropriate for people with learning disabilities.

3.1 Liturgy

> Communal prayer is an important nourishment. A community which prays together, which enters into silence and adoration, is bound together by the action of the Holy Spirit (Vanier 1989:195).

Vanier, throughout his writing, is at pains to stress that the spiritual life of those within *L'Arche* communities is to be nourished not only through individual prayer and devotions, but also through communal acts of worship. Here Vanier seeks to remind us that God, in his dealing with humanity through history, has always been encountered on a corporate as well as an individual level. Furthermore, for people with learning disabilities, collective acts of worship have just as much meaning and offer as great an opportunity of encountering God as they do for any other Christian. It is in this area of collective worship that I would recommend that chaplains within the special needs sector examine their commitment to school worship and, through the example of *L'Arche*, reflect on what can be achieved in this area.

The 1988 *Education Reform Act* places a legal requirement on schools to hold daily acts of worship, although they offer little or no definition as to what constitutes worship. Such an act of worship is seen as providing an opportunity for collective reflection and learning, for fostering a sense of unity and for providing a space to meet pupils' spiritual,

moral and cultural development. What is meant by collective worship is questionable, the term being open to interpretation and flexible enough to encompass all manner of provision. The reality of special schools is that with children of such a wide range of abilities and disturbing behaviour patterns, collective worship is often disregarded. Furthermore, with little or no guidance available as to how to create and present an act of worship to children with learning disabilities, it is not surprising that teachers and chaplains feel unskilled in this area. However, the value of collective worship cannot be overemphasized and chaplains must be prepared to take risks and be creative when looking at developing worship for a whole school.

In recommending that chaplains draw on the spirituality of *L'Arche* and its commitment to collective worship as a means for people with learning disabilities to encounter and respond to God, I would further recommend that chaplains offer the provision for a Eucharistic service in their plan for collective worship.

The spirituality of *L'Arche* is rooted in the church, the body of Christ. Vanier calls on all chaplains and priests to end discrimination against people with learning disabilities. They should not be prevented from participating in the Eucharist. For, he argues, all who are baptised are disciples of Christ, called to receive God's gifts and partake in the remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection.

The Eucharist lies at the centre of the Anglican tradition; more than that, it is the focus and heart of Anglican practice, based on the command of Jesus "Do this in remembrance of me". The Eucharist links communal and personal nourishment;, it is the way by which both as a community and individuals we know, meet and encounter Christ. *L'Arche* presents a challenge to all who exclude people with learning disabilities from participation in the Eucharist, with the stark reminder that it is their right to participate by virtue of their baptism. In recommending that chaplains in special schools re-examine the content of their provision of collective worship and draw on the experience of *L'Arche,* I would argue that their program would go a long way to enhance their work in nurturing the

spiritual life of people with learning disabilities. Furthermore, this would also bring special school worship more closely in line with that offered in mainstream schools.

The provision of Eucharistic services in mainstream education has ensured that such services are now available in more user-friendly liturgy targeted at children. The new Eucharistic prayers in the Anglican Church (Church of England 2000) provide such a resource, which has its emphasis on children and family worship. Whilst material is available to create services for school children, however, for pupils with learning disabilities further attention has to be given to meeting their specific needs and it is to initiatives such as SPRED and BUILD that reference can be made.

L'Arche and SPRED both draw attention to the way people with learning disabilities generally become familiar with ritual, with form and pattern. Whilst they may not be able to participate in articulating the words of hymns or prayers, they can still encounter, respond to and be nourished by God, in receiving the body and blood of Christ. SPRED and BUILD offer recommendations for improving the quality of worship, emphasizing simplicity, clear uncluttered liturgy and the use of symbol to point to and carry beyond the concrete and visible. In the Eucharist the different gestures, objects, movements and sounds can all be emphasized to draw the pupils towards the mystery that is God.

Finally, the aim of this study has been to address the proposition that the spirituality of *L'Arche* has much to offer people with learning disabilities outside of its own residential setting. This I would argue has been evidenced and an opportunity exists for special schools chaplains to embrace the Spirituality of *L'Arche* in their work and encourage creative and inclusive programmes for the spiritual development of people with learning disabilities.

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