

**L'Arche Belfast**  
**END OF YEAR REPORT**

**Presented by the Community Leader and others at the A.G.M- 2008**

**HOME**

Looking at our community gathered together here tonight I am reminded of the early days when L'Arche was no more than a whisper of God's dream for Belfast and a longing in the hearts of a group of people, some of whom are still here with us at our 7<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting. Thank You - Imelda, John, Gerardine and Consillia. When I came here over 8 years ago you longed for a community that would feel like home to all who came, a place where people, irrespective of their, colour, creed, age or capacity could find their place and offer their gifts. When you look around this room tonight at the people gathered here for our A.G.M. you must surely feel proud. Your actions and your faithfulness have supported the fulfilment of your longing. **L'Arche Belfast is truly a place that many can call home.**

**ANGELS or MEMBERS!**

One winter's evening at the beginning of our community I remember sitting on the bottom step of the stairs in The Ark, faced with the desperation of my own incapacity to do everything. That night I prayed for Angels. A few days later Murray and Jim came along out of the blue and none of us could have imagined that they would still be here today and have made such a difference along the way. Since then there have been many Angels - The youngest one, although very present in Megan's world - is due to come into our lives very soon. In June Maureen and Malcolm welcomed baby Andrew into their little family and by extension into the community. As well as the little ones we also welcomed 8 '*bigger ones*' who offer their gifts in the daily life of the community. We often talk in the community about membership, belonging and commitment but it dawned on me lately that those who seem to come to us as Angels just when we need them are actually community members with wings!

**Gabriella Sadho.** A German woman with Lebanese origins is currently our one and only volunteer 'live in' assistant. In our part of the world, volunteerism has been adversely affected by the risk aversion that is paralysing much of our life today. Gabriella stands for the possibility of choosing L'Arche as a life sharing experience. She holds the hope alive in us that long term volunteering is possible and worth fighting for. Gabriella you are a living reminder that - 'YES WE CAN'. - Thank You.

Others who joined us in support roles during the year, both Care and Administrative, are **Jana Kubatova** from Czech, **Faythe Aiken** from America (newly married to James Adams), **Neil Mullan** from Hollywood, **Heather Torney** from Ballinahinch, **Ruth Kennedy**, **Henri Harpur** and **Lesley Gould** from Belfast.

The extra-ordinary gift of having so many people join us is that the community is emerging in Belfast and beyond like a spiral growing in bigger and bigger circles. At the heart, as always, are the core members and the daily life relationships that they call us into that transform our hearts. Around them we have the stability of people who have local roots and the breath of diversity that comes with those who bring other cultures and other experiences. We are grateful and delighted. It is amazing that the statutory requirements, which often feel like a challenge to our identity, are also re-creating us into a community bigger than we could ever have conceived of ourselves.

#### **GIFTS:**

Advent is a time when we think of the gifts we have received and those we plan to give. It's a time of gratitude and expectation. Gratitude is easy when we get what we want and when our plans are fulfilled. But it's not so easy to see the gift in the times that are hard. Seeing the gift in the pain and the mess requires us to let go of our pre-conceptions, our ways of doing things and our plans and projects. In receiving these gifts we are stretched and through the stretching we are often transformed and see that we are much bigger than we ever imagined ourselves to be.

Helen brought us such a gift this year. The past two years have been a struggle to find her place in the community and offer her gifts. The space in 'The Ember' was too small and our way of being community was too hard. It was a time of great suffering for everyone especially for those who shared life with Helen in 'The Ember'. Finally, in June the struggle became overwhelming for everyone and Helen went to stay in Muckamore Abbey Hospital for a while.

Big storms normally leave a trail of destruction in their wake and for us the summer months were a time of exhaustion, relief, and despair. We were weary and had had enough. Everything in us was shouting 'NO' to the thought of welcoming Helen back and starting over. Yet, in this space of desolation a tiny whisper of 'Yes' began to break through. As the 'Yes' in

our hearts grew so did a new possibility that allowed us to create a new way for Helen - a space big enough for her to live in - 'The Ark' and a programme of activities that gives shape to her days.

There are many people in this room tonight who have supported Helen through different stages of her journey from family to community. Your commitment to our 'Yes' allowed us to transcend the pain of the past and give of our very best to create the very best for Helen. That's our kind of loving - a wee ember hidden in the ashes holding the possibility alive for new fires. On November 24<sup>th</sup> we welcomed Helen back offering her a new beginning and a future that allows her to be free of her past. Thanks to each and every one of you for your love and for holding us true to our longing to welcome all those who come. In saying 'Yes' to something that seemed impossible we opened up for ourselves and for Helen a new possibility that was beyond our horizon. We have become a community that we are proud to be part of and bigger than we could ever have imagined ourselves to be.

Many others have come bearing gifts during the past year. In recent months, **Larry** has regularly thanked God for his T.V. licence. Today he prayed 'Please God send me more bills'. What an extra-ordinary prayer in a time of global recession. What graciousness - to see the gift in being able to pay our bills. Larry we thank you for being the gift of seeing clearly and simply what is often invisible to many of us, Thank you for not taking anything for granted and for being always grateful.

**Thomas** has taken up his place and offered his gifts more than ever in our locality over the past year. He now works in the Orchard Restaurant on Tuesdays and Fridays and volunteers in Common Grounds Café on Wednesday evenings. He is also a faithful and valued member of Holy Grounds, a church group who gather every Sunday evening.

**Jillian** continues, as always, to reveal the gift of beauty in the world.

### **CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP ANF FAITHFULNESS - ADIEU!**

**Father Joe Rooney** has been a faithful friend of our community for 6 years coming regularly to feed and to nourish us in many different ways. In January 2009 Fr. Joe is off to the Philippines to continue his ministry in a new way. We thank you him and we gift him with new life for a little blind boy - Georgie who lives in Bethlehem. He is Palestinian and his education in a special school costs \$1,000 each year. As you know, our

Noah has a dream that all children in the world will have what they need and he started the Noah's World Fund so that we can fulfil that dream. In your name Joe and in Murray's name we have contributed £500 from the Noah's World Fund towards Georgie's education and his Mom Nuha has embroidered you a stole. We have sewn pockets into the stole and put little messages into them to let you know that we will always be thinking of you and to remind you to pray for us and for Georgie and his family and for Murray, who shares your gift of vision and generosity, each time you celebrate the Eucharist in the Philippines.

**Murray Hunter** - Though you are not leaving us you are now offering us your gifts beyond any working role and we are grateful beyond words. You are one of my angels and 'Our Murray' and always will be and so we have made an 'Our Murray' Book for you to remind you that you are part of us and we are part of you. Pam too is deeply connected to the heart of this community and we thank her.

**Maeve McKeown** - nick named by Murray as 'The Tornado'. You came all through the Summer and left no corner of the Ark un-scrubbed or un-painted so that Helen could come home. Can any 'Love' be greater than that? To give so much for someone you have never met. - Thank you Maeve in Helen's name and in the name of all those who are unknown to us but are in need of our loving.

**Billy Hirst** We bade a fond farewell to Billy last June when he retired from his role as Company secretary. During the good and the bad times Billy was like a touching stone on the Board and for me as community leader. His wisdom and his experience were a huge gift not to mention his wife Margaret who often found her way into our hearts through the wonderful food that she prepared for us. We really miss you both.

## **HOW COULD ANYTHING SO SMALL EVER BE SO BIG?**

As we come close to the end of another year I look around at all of you to whom we are connected and I am deeply moved. There are so many communities present in this space and we are truly - **A Community of Communities** - connected through friendship and our very human need for love and belonging.

Gathered together in this way we transcend and challenge the labels and identities that are often de-humanising in our world. Here in this space we get to celebrate our commitment to relationships that transform our hearts and we have the audacity to believe that we can transform our neighbourhood, our city, our island and our world one heart and one room at a time.

**The Field** - L'Arche Belfast is a community drawn together around those who have visible needs for care and support but once we come in we start to belong to one another through our universal and human need for friendship. Each one who comes, even for a brief time, has a gift to offer and a need to fulfil and each of us, in our own way, stands for the possibility of a world where everyone has a place and can contribute their gifts to make a difference.

Today in L'Arche Belfast, we are clear that our 'real work' is not providing care to Adults with Learning Disabilities but rather creating opportunities for our 'Core Members' to offer their gifts and care for others. We long to have a place where we will be able to offer welcome and hospitality to all those who come. In this place strangers will not be seen as a danger but as friends in the making and people from all walks of life can come, exactly as they are, and know that they are welcome.

There will be opportunities to experience joy and possibilities for people to participate in ways that enable them to contribute their gifts, and know that they matter. We will be a soft and human space and a community founded on the 'Geoffrey Bunting' principle of sharing a 'wee cup of tea' at the kitchen table. You and your communities will have a place to come when you are weary and in need of rest and we will offer you opportunities and activities that can re-connect you with your own dream and the possibilities that give meaning to your lives. We want to build a 'gathering space' that you can call home where you will be welcomed in your strength and in your moments of weakness. We will serve you and care for you as you gather around your own dreams and meet about your own business. And when you leave we hope that you will be ready go back out again into the big possibilities that you stand for - renewed and re-created knowing that you are always enough, that everything is as it should be and that you are not alone.

This is the longing and the purpose that gives meaning to our lives which we call - 'The Field'

Finally, Matthew's Dream - Matthew came into our lives a few years ago when he was longing for friends. Today he is a member of our community and Thomas is his best friend.

Four years ago having said an unexpected and final farewell to our beloved Geoffrey and having seen the hopes of a 2<sup>nd</sup> home come to nothing we were bereft as we welcomed in 2005. At midnight as we crossed over the threshold from the past into the future Matthew told us that if nothing were impossible and he could have his dream come true he would be a builder - building houses for people like himself who would like to live independent adult lives in adult homes outside of their parents homes. Matthew would love to live with his friend Thomas in his own home that he had helped to build. In the early hours of 2005 we promised Matthew that we would help him to make that dream come true - no matter how long it took.

Alone we are too small to fulfil our promise to Matthew or our dream to be a soft and human space at the heart of Belfast offering hospitality to all who come. We need your help and the help of all of those who are connected to you so that we can be who we want to be and support you to be who you want to be. Together with you we will dare to realize the dreams that we dare to dream.

One thing I am sure of - as long as you are with us we are not alone and what we will do together will always be greater than anything we could ever hope to do alone.

I guess that is how something so small can also be so big! Thank You.