

"Not a solution but a sign"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I like Michael Gerson's writing, and sometimes I even agree with the things he says. This week he wrote [a sensitive and heartfelt column](#) about one of the houses in the DC-area L'Arche community—a place I feel some small connection to, as my wife was once part of a different house in the same community.

I don't know L'Arche like some people do, but I think this passage suggests Gerson understands the place more deeply than many observers:

L'Arche's goal is not primarily the provision of services. The prevailing professional model of social services involves the setting of emotional boundaries. L'Arche exists to cross those boundaries — to strive for a friendship of equals. The saintly founder of L'Arche, [Jean Vanier](#), argues that generosity is offered from a position of power. True communion, in contrast, involves the loss of power and a willingness to be “transformed by weakness.” Assistants approach core members as teachers.

The result is a deeper, riskier relationship. The challenges of dealing with the intellectually disabled should not be sentimentalized. A core member at a L'Arche home recently became threatening and needed to be hospitalized. (“God holds that person,” says John Cook, the executive director of L'Arche in the Washington area, “but we can't.”) Some volunteers burn out. More typically, however, assistants report being stripped down to emotional essentials and opened to something larger. “My job, what I make, meant nothing to her,” says one assistant of her core member. “She loved me, without any accomplishments, without anything I thought made me lovable. It is how God loves me.”

Later Gerson brings up a more common observation: “Those interested in the most efficient provision of social services would probably not design L'Arche — a program that lavishly invests a single life in a single life.”

He doesn't leave it there; he affirms the place and its work anyway. So I'm writing not to quibble but to footnote: the fact that L'Arche isn't particularly *scaleable* as a social services model is an objection the group has anticipated from the start. Here's a passage from [the international org's charter](#), a passage I've heard many a L'Arche assistant reference:

L'Arche knows that it cannot welcome everyone who has a mental handicap. It seeks to offer not a solution but a sign, a sign that a society, to be truly human, must be founded on welcome and respect for the weak and the downtrodden.

In a divided world, L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be signs of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation.

Signs of unity, faithfulness, and reconciliation—among other things, this is a powerful witness for all our blessedly inefficient covenant relationships. If you don't know L'Arche, learn more about it [here](#).