



Being and Becoming an Assistant in our Community



L'Arche Chicago is a community in which adults with and without intellectual disabilities share life: their presence, faith, activities, joys, and sorrows. In our community, *assistants* come to live for a year or more with *core members* (adults with intellectual disabilities) in family-style homes on Chicago's west side. They commit to maintaining a respectful, life-giving and welcoming environment in the homes as well as providing necessary supports to the core members.

Our Identity (Who we are)

We are people, with and without intellectual disabilities, sharing life together in communities of faith. Each community member (core member, assistant, volunteer, etc.) is invited to a journey of transformation, grounded in friendship.

We recognize the value of every person, making us a community that is inclusive of people with different abilities and disabilities, coming from different backgrounds, cultural heritages and religious traditions, each one valued in his/her uniqueness.

As a faith community, the spirituality that inspires our life together is grounded in trust in God. We support each core member in their faith tradition and encourage assistants to grow in theirs. We seek to make our homes places of human and spiritual welcome. For example, prayer after meals is a time of solace and rest, and religious celebrations are a time of thanksgiving and remembrance.

In our community we have members from different religious traditions - Christian (Catholic and Protestant), Jewish, Muslim, etc. - and some that don't identify with a specific tradition.



Our spiritual vision is nourished by the lived experience of our community members and, being part of an international federation, that of members from other L'Arche communities across the world. It is also informed by the writings of L'Arche founder Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen. Both Vanier and Nouwen, grounded in the Christian vision, have powerfully linked the community experience to a spiritual encounter - showing how the history and presence of persons with disabilities is closely connected to that of Jesus, whose thirst for friendship and love endured rejection and marginalization - and to a growth opportunity - in which embracing our vulnerability and fragility helps us "become human" and grow in community.

Assistants: Invited to a journey of transformation

At L'Arche Chicago, ten core members live together with assistants who commit to a year or more of shared daily life with them. Assistants build mutual relationships with core members in a spirit of friendship and also provide practical assistance in daily tasks: cooking together, cleaning, praying, traveling, etc. In L'Arche the emphasis is not so much on "doing for," but "being with."

Because every relationship is unique, there is no "rule book" for building these. Being present, "being with," sharing life - it is through simple things that each relationship grows. Jean Vanier says that "to love someone is to be prepared to *waste time* with them." Sometimes stopping to "waste time" with the core members can be more challenging - and more transformational - than scrambling from one task to the next!

The relational emphasis of L'Arche makes the assistant role not merely a job, but a life-touching experience. Some of the terminology you will hear in our community reflects that: we speak of "sharing time" instead of "working shifts" or having "time away" instead of "time off." This is a simple reminder of the primacy of personal presence and mutual relationship in our life together.



At the heart of community life are *forgiveness* and *celebration*. The normal ups and downs of living with people that are different can bring us face to face with both our limits and with our beauty. To be able to forgive when things don't go as we planned and to celebrate unconditionally people's preciousness and gifts makes community alive and vibrant. You will get a sense of celebration, for example, during our various community events: community nights in which we meet as a community and invite people from the area to experience the joy of community, periodic celebration nights in which we celebrate community members' anniversaries, and the times in which we welcome new friends in our homes and bless and send them off when they transition to new adventures. At the same time, daily

ordinary life has its moments of celebration too: whether enjoying a simple quiet meal after a day at work or being invited to an impromptu dance by one of our core members!

The rhythm of ordinary life

Assistants are generally asked to share time with core members morning and afternoons/evenings, with some overnights (not awake). They are given two consistent and consecutive days of time away, during which we encourage them to find places of rest, nourishment and enjoyment outside of the community.

L'Arche assistants each have their own bedroom and share other house areas with the other assistants and core members.



Assistants are invited to be friends to the core members, but also have the responsibility to be quality direct-care support professionals. When they first come to L'Arche assistants are asked to *shadow* (or observe) the life of the homes, being present and getting to know people, so that they can get to know their new housemates and the rhythm of the house. After a week or so, assistants are trained by L'Arche Chicago to be state-certified DSPs (Direct Support Persons) who are qualified to support core members. This training also includes medication and behavioral training.

The first month in community is considered an introductory period; continued service as an assistant at L'Arche Chicago is contingent upon successfully passing all training, as well as a mutual discernment that L'Arche Chicago is a good and life-giving fit for the assistant.

To nurture assistants in their community journey the L'Arche Chicago team offers them various supports and resources:

- Weekly assistants meeting, which include a monthly time of formation to reflect and savor what is being lived personally and communally.
- Community accompaniment, by which an assistant meets monthly with a community accompanier/companion that provides a listening and supportive ear.
- Functional accompaniment, by which an assistant meets periodically with their house coordinator to touch base on how the day-to-day practicalities of the assistant role are working out.
- Retreat opportunities and pastoral care.
- External resources (counseling, cultural and leisure opportunities in the city, etc.)



A Chicago-Style Setting

We live in three homes on Chicago's west side. Angel House is located in Chicago, near Oak Park (where our office is located), while both Peace House and Friendship House are located in nearby Forest Park. Our community has several vehicles that we use to get around, so a willingness to drive is important.



Our core members are quite active around the city, so you will get a great experience of Chicago simply by being part of the community. You can also enjoy city sights during your time away.

We are located on a bus line and a train line that goes downtown in 30 minutes, which is ideal for exploring the Windy City.

Chicago is very rich in opportunities for culture, education, recreation, worship, food and entertainment. Oak Park and Forest Park have a variety of restaurants, cafés, libraries

and quaint local shops. We are also located near a large city park, with numerous trails and Forest Preserve Districts further west.

Interested in becoming a friend and entering into a journey of transformation?

