**Aye Maung, L’Arche house leader: There are no barriers**

Aye Maung is Rangimārie house leader at the Kāpiti L’Arche community. L’Arche is an international movement of intentional communities which include both people with intellectual disabilities (core members) and people without intellectual disabilities.

Aye says living in intentional community with people from a range of abilities, ethnicities and backgrounds has many moments of joy. “When you live in L’Arche, people are your life, and you share your life too with them, and they become just as you. There’s no barriers, no difference between us.”

Originally from Burma, Aye studied social pedagogy in Scotland, and after coming to New Zealand searched for an intentional spiritual community. He found L’Arche on the internet. “Just reading their motives, their way of life, it just drew me. This is the place I really want to go.”

He says L’Arche embraces all the parts of every person, rather than seeing or describing people only in medical terms or focusing in on one part of their lives. “We don’t just look at the medical or physical part of human beings, we also look at the spiritual part of humans. So how are we going to nourish this spiritual body, and how are we going to build a connection and make healing work through our support systems?”

“We are all humans with our physical, spiritual and emotional needs, and all our needs have to be met in the most dignified way.”

Having worked in other health care settings in New Zealand and overseas, Aye would like health carers to learn from L’Arche. “Some communities in New Zealand are very much into the medication thing, you have this problem, you prescribe this. I would really like health carers to look deeper into human qualities. It looks simple, but it’s quite delicate when you actually come into a deeper understanding of how to look after somebody, how to care for each other.”

Covid-19 lockdowns have been a challenge for members of the L’Arche community. Core members of the community miss visitors and volunteers, and don’t always understand why they can’t go out and carry on their daily programmes. Aye says mask-wearing is difficult for communication among community members. “Facial expressions matter, you read through your heart, people hear through your eyes and how you move your mouth, and that’s something challenging for us.”

He says the community is fine but compares it to having a broken leg. “It’s like a fracture, you’re still walking, but you are limping.”

Aye says the wider community could continue to support L’Arche through sending letters and cards. “Like sending a lovely email or sending a lovely postcard, just embracing with love and care people in the frontline. Soul care, I call it soul care, that sort of emotional support.”

He says one of the purposes of L’Arche is to provide a picture of how human life could be. “The most important thing is creating a picture of beautiful humanity. Just finding happiness and joy through doing birthdays and festivals together.

“We are here, whoever you are, whatever religion you believe, and whatever you bring to L’Arche, you are human, we love you and we will make sure you are recognised and looked after.”