

Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness Expanded Edition
Available July 3, 2018
 \$17, 128 pages, paperback
 978-0-8308-3496-9

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas collaborates with Jean Vanier, founder of the worldwide L'Arche communities, to carefully explore the contours of a countercultural community like L'Arche that embodies a different way of being and witnesses to a new order, one marked by radical forms of gentleness, peacemaking, and faithfulness.

What Does L'Arche Have to Say About the Nature of God?

Jean Vanier founded the L'Arche communities in 1964, initially by simply living with two people with profound intellectual disabilities. Since then the L'Arche communities, with their fundamental ethos of "living with" rather than "doing for," have become an international network of communities in which people with intellectual disabilities live with people who do not share that life experience. They do not live together as carer and cared for but as fellow human beings who share care and need. The L'Arche communities provide a unique model of inclusiveness underpinned by a profound Catholic spirituality and theology. L'Arche is truly odd—it refuses to do what society thinks it should.

L'Arche as a sign and sacrament. This refusal to conform to societal norms has caused Hauerwas to see L'Arche as a powerful exemplar of the community God gave us as a marker for our redemption: the church. He views the L'Arche communities as witnesses to the reality that the Christian story is both true and livable. For Hauerwas, "Christianity is unintelligible without witnesses, that is, without people whose practices exhibit their committed assent to a particular way of structuring the whole." Christianity is much more than an idea, he says: "Rather it is a bodily faith that must be seen to be believed."

L'Arche shows, as the church is called to show, that Christianity is true by demonstrating what community would look like if the gospel were true. Unlike learning moral principles, following Jesus requires a change of heart. "The very content of Christian connections requires the self to be transformed if we are adequately to see the truth of [its] convictions." L'Arche is a sign of hope and new possibilities, but above all it is a marker for the truth of the gospel; it is living proof that the story Christians bear is not fantasy or a collection of abstract principles but real and true and revealed clearly. When we view L'Arche this way, we begin to see how the question "What does L'Arche mean for the church?" might have implications far beyond the idea that disability theology is a "specialist interest." It is the heart of the gospel.

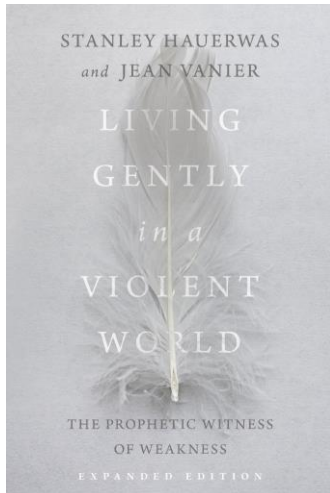
Unlikely allies? At first sight Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas seem unlikely allies. Hauerwas (named America's best theologian by *Time* magazine in 2001) is a battle-hardened academic whose natural inclination is to defend people with intellectual disabilities by using his well-honed intellectual skills. As he says in chapter four, he sees himself as "a warrior on behalf of L'Arche, doing battle against the politics that threaten to destroy these gentle communities." At one level he stands in stark contrast to the gentleness of Jean Vanier and L'Arche. He states, "Where I see an enemy to be defeated, he [Vanier] sees a wound that needs to be healed. That's a deep difference."

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And yet Vanier is no less of a warrior. He has fought many a hard battle as L'Arche has taken shape. He is gentle, but, as we shall see, he also has the capacity for violence because, like all of us, he carries the deep wound of his own loneliness. But unlike many of us, he has learned to see his enemies as wounded people who are loved by God. Though it did not come easily or naturally, he learned gentleness as he allowed his experiences with people with profound disabilities to shape his presumptions and behaviors.

Gentleness is a vital dimension of the kingdom of God (Matthew 11:28-30), but it is a learned skill that requires work and demands patience, slowness and timefulness. Such work means that we have to become "friends of time," a patient people who recognize that "we have all the time we need to do what needs to be done." Such friends of time seek to develop the patience to slow down, to recognize that our lives are not our own creation and that the God who filled the universe with beauty and who created all of us (Psalm 22:9-10) always finds time to be with us, to sit with us and to move us to a place in history we can call our own.

"Like the L'Arche communities, this book calls us to a humanism that is tender, patient, and present. Its humanism is rooted in the incarnation, for 'the Word became flesh to bring people together' (Vanier), and is lived in the church, which proclaims a 'politics of gentleness' (Hauerwas)."

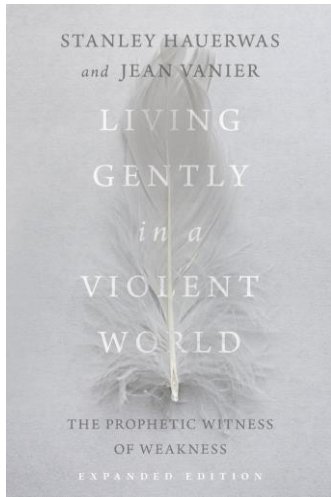
In recognizing the gift of creation and of our lives, we are freed to live differently. In other words, we are freed to love. We are freed to greet one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) and, as Josef Pieper puts it, to offer one another the words of love: "It's good that you exist; it's good that you are in this world." The essays in this book offer a beginning place for all of us to start to do this. We offer them to you as transformative gifts. We pray that they may bring you many blessings.

— Adapted from the introduction by John Swinton

— *The Christian Century*,
December 15, 2009



BOOK DETAILS



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“The secret of L’Arche is relationship: meeting people, not through the filters of certitudes, ideologies, idealism, or judgments, but heart to heart; listening to people with their pain, their joy, their hope, their history, listening to their heartbeats.”

—Jean Vanier

The stirring for L’Arche began in 1964 when Jean Vanier (PhD, L’Institut Catholique de Paris) became aware of the struggles that thousands of people with intellectual disabilities held while being institutionalized in France. Vanier felt a calling from God to invite two individuals to live in his home, and L’Arche took off from there.

The goal of L’Arche is to make known the gifts of people with developmental disabilities. These are revealed through mutually transforming relationships in a community environment. People with and without disabilities live together to respond to the changing needs of their members while staying faithful to their core beliefs. Strength is revealed through weakness and vulnerability, and when given room to grow, a community is formed. This is not “doing for” people with disabilities; rather, it is being with and being a friend to all of humanity. The desire to love and be loved is something every person longs for, and L’Arche strives to bring this love to people with disabilities.

L’Arche is a community built on God’s faith and lives the call of the Sermon on the Mount to be a people of simplicity, gentleness, compassion, justice, and peace. God’s love is experienced through engaging in mutual friendships where gifts and weakness are recognized and accepted, believing that each person is sacred and unique.

L’Arche has grown into an international organization of 147 communities in thirty-five countries around the world and it continues to grow. Vanier continues to make his home in the original community of L’Arche in Trosly-Breuil, France.

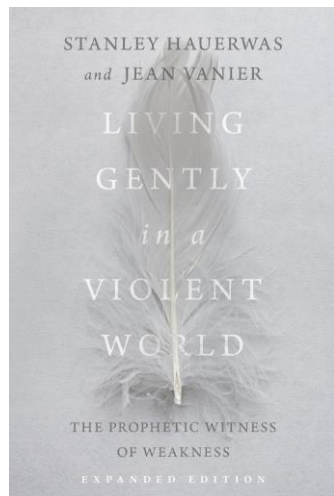
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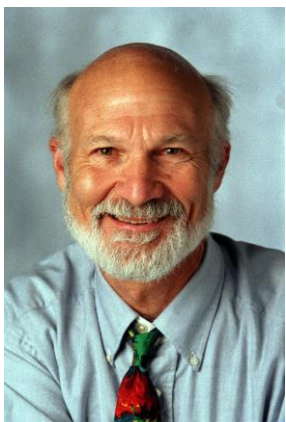
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Hauerwas and Vanier, Theologians and Humanitarians



Stanley Hauerwas (PhD, Yale University) is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law at Duke Divinity School, Duke University. He was named America's best theologian by *Time* magazine and has written on the theological significance of disability. One of the most widely read theologians of the late twentieth century, his books include *Resident Aliens*, *Wilderness Wanderings*, *A Peaceable Kingdom*, *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, *With the Grain of the Universe*, and *A Better Hope*. Hauerwas's book, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, was named as one of the one hundred most important books on religion in the twentieth century by *Christianity Today*.

Hauerwas was the first American theologian to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at St. Andrew's in Scotland in over forty years. His work is frequently read and debated by scholars in fields outside of religion or ethics, such as political philosophy, sociology, history, and literary theory. Hauerwas has achieved notability outside of academia as a public intellectual, even appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

stanleyhauerwas.blogspot.com



Jean Vanier (PhD, L'Institut Catholique de Paris) is the founder of L'Arche, an international network of communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities experience life together as fellow human beings who share a mutuality of care and need. Today over 147 L'Arche communities exist in thirty-five countries on five continents. Vanier is also the founder with Marie H el ene Mathieu of Faith & Light, communities of welcome and friendship that bring together people with intellectual disabilities, their parents and friends. There are now 1,500 Faith & Light communities in eighty-two countries.

Over the years, he has authored thirty books on religion, disability, normality, success, and tolerance. The titles include *Community and Growth*, *Becoming Human*, *From Brokenness to Community*, and *Befriending the Stranger*. Vanier has also received a number of prestigious honors for his work such as the Community of Christ International Peace Award (2003), the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award (2013), and the Templeton Prize (2015).

jean-vanier.org

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