

15th January 2021

The life of L'Arche Mymensingh in 2020



This past year was marked by deepening the unity in the community, discovering others gifts as well as ones own, growing awareness of how to care for each other, and a developing sense of solidarity with people in the locality. The COVID-19 pandemic was surely a misfortune, but it united us more than ever before!

The three community houses had to keep a self-quarantine for 8 months, from March till October, to protect our fragile members with a disability. We were aware that once someone was infected, the virus would spread since most of the core members were unable to manage their daily living without having physical contact.

The External Core members were in an equally vulnerable position. They live with their families in slums and survive on daily income. Without support and help from others their families would not have survived. Therefore, the goal of the community in 2020 was 'Surviving together through sharing, no one left behind'.

The community budget was reviewed to emphasize support of the poor, not only the external members and their families but also poor neighbors and people on the streets. The community's meal menu was revised to be simpler, yet good enough to keep the community healthy!



During the quarantine, Day-assistants, the gate keeper, and the Community Leader worked at full capacity to support the life of the three houses also to support the local



poor. The community's electric car was only the one allowed to run in the city during the lockdown. The Police Super gave us a special permission to drive as he knew that it transported food for our people and vulnerable in the town. They not only purchased food and medicines but also sent money to families of the residential assistants who lived in far villages.

Life in the Community houses

Residential assistants were very dedicated and patient during the isolation. No one complained. The mothers of the residential assistants kept asking for the assistants to return home, but assistants persuaded their mothers of the need in the community. Triqul, the 2nd year assistant told his mother, 'Why don't you understand? What will happen to our core members who have no family if I do not stay with them? Who will feed them, who will bath them?'. He said this in spite of the fact that he missed his mother a lot.

During the isolation what was most hard for the residential assistants was a daily cooking. It was a hard task and a big responsibility. Cooking Bengali food is not easy. Many assistants expressed during the debrief that they did not sleep well because of worrying over the responsibility of preparing breakfast for everyone! Consequently, learning cooking was the thing that many of them learned the most during the quarantine.



The Core members suffered from not being able to go out. Rohim screamed often during the beginning of the quarantine, however, he gradually adjusted to a new environment. Shanta was confused not to be hugged by the Day-assistants when they delivered food. For the Day assistants it was hard to keep distance from the Core members. The doctors supported us through providing the consultancy by phone whenever we needed which was great help. However, we regret that a health condition of Salma, a female core member, went down and was hospitalized due to pneumonia.

At the start of lockdown a daily routine was set up. The core members continued to make crafts, beads, embroideries, cards etc. as they did at the Workshop. Bangla songs and Muslim religious songs were sung through online messenger which is a new way of communication and learning.



Life during lockdown drew us closer together. House core members and assistants discovered hidden behaviors and talents in each other and themselves. It was beautiful to see the relationships deepen during lockdown. Celebrations continued despite the circumstances.

The Holy Eid was celebrated sacredly in May, and Muslim core members and Muslim assistants practiced the Eid prayer at the courtyard of the house instead of having it at the local Mosque.

Sharing together with the people



The impact of the pandemic in the society was enormous. Millions lost jobs in Bangladesh and the statistics of the poverty level fell back to the level it was 10 years ago. Consequently, families of our external core members and poor neighbors suffered a lot. We spontaneously shared food with them and since then have shared food with 30 families who had the greatest need. Twice a month these families receive rice (5kg), potatoes (1kg), onions (1kg), beans (1kg), soybean oil (1L). All the preparation is done faithfully by the Day-Workers. One of the mothers who received the food items once told us that 'Life is hard but it is a big relief knowing that we will be given 10kg rice every month!' This sharing will be continued in 2021.

The mothers carry a big burden and it is even more so now with the pandemic and economic hardship. Thus, we had mother's meeting with a small group during the lockdown. What amazed me was toughness and courage of those mothers. They laughed a lot during the meeting. Jacob's mother laughed 'The COVID is a sickness for rich, the poor won't be getting it! So, I am not afraid of it at all! ha ha ha'. The other mothers laughed and Rinku's sister responded 'We may die at any time because of other sickness, then, why do we have to afraid of the COVID? I have no time to worry about it any way, my days are full of hard work!'



Community life after the self isolation



It was a big joy to get together again among the residential members after the 8 months isolation! The process was gradual and careful. The Workshop and the Day-Care program were opened a half day only for 3 days a week in the beginning. Hand washing became routine by all and it counted for 20 second like singing a song which was also fun! Core members were accustomed to hand washing and it prevented them from catching a common cold.

Christmas was celebrated with immense joy! We were happy just to be together, pray together, dance together, eat together, laugh together. It was a moment of happiness and appreciation of a presence of each other! Winter clothes were delivered to the external core members who could not join the celebration as Christmas gifts.



Raising a local support



Local fund raising continued tirelessly. The Board members and the Community Leader visited the head of the local Government officials to announce L'Arche and appealed for help. All responded well. The Police Super provided 80 sweaters and a big donation. The commanding officer of the Security force

gave us 100 blankets while one of the local parties brought us another 50 blankets. The Community usually accept only necessary pieces. So, L'Arche received only 21 blankets and the rest were shared to the street children who lived in the station and the disabled children in the villages through local organizations in our network.

Moreover, the local staff of the SQUARE, the largest medicine company in Bangladesh promised to provide their company's medicines regularly. The medicine lists (only the SQUARE product) of the core members is sent in and every months since SQUARE sends us the medicine. The Deputy Commissioner of Mymensingh also provided us 3 ton rice this year which will cover needs of the entire community for nearly 10 months. The quality of rice we eat has was improved a lot!



Another a big gift was 'the community grave'. It was a long-time concern how to maintain the grave of Russel who passed away 7 years ago. The concern is that if the grave is not maintained someone else will be buried in it without notice. Only by paying a large sum to the municipality can one own a grave site. It was decided to seek the help of the City Mayor who had an authority with this matter. After making an appeal the City-Mayor allowed us to keep Russel's grave as a L'Arche grave permanently without any charge!

Other impacts due to the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic effected our administrative management. The accountant who was with us over 8 years was unable to come out from his home due to a health reasons and resigned eventually. Consequently, the Board had to recruit a new accountant and the whole process was carried out during the midst of the pandemic. One of the aims for the recruitment was to get a person who could operate 'Tally' a financial software which had purchased one and a half year ago but in fact, it was found none in the over 50 applicants who could manage it. The first new accountant stayed for two months and was asked to leave afterward, and the second one joined in the middle of September. He seemed well adjusted with the community and working faithfully.



Due to the pandemic, many activities did not happen, and several plans were postponed. However, we were able to purchase a new electric car at the end of the year! There was great need to have another electric car to enhance transport service for the community members. Rubel, one of the residential assistants who has a driving skill will assist the community driver.

We thank you for your faithful support! We all are well by your prayer and care. My term as the Community Leader will be end in September and a very competence person will be sent by the L'Arche International to take over my role. So, the life of L'Arche Mymensingh will be continued as a sign of peace and joy here in Mymensingh. We do hope that your generous support and the friendship will be continued for the year of 2021, too!

With love and gratitude,

Naomi Iwamoto

Community Leader

L'Arche Mymensingh

