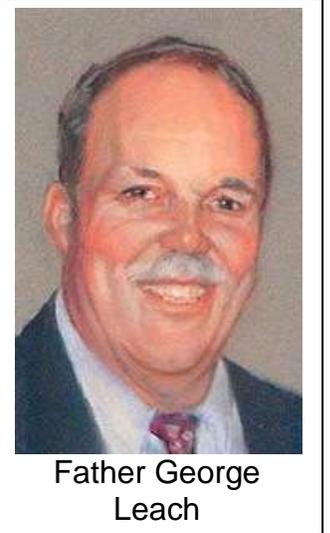


Atlantic Canada Remembers...



By Marilyn Moore, Yarmouth, NS

In the early to mid 1970's Faith and Sharing began in the Atlantic provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. After the Marylake retreat in 1968 several priests and lay people carried Jean Vanier's message back to their faith communities. F. George Leach, SJ, living in Ontario at the time, came to Nova Scotia at different times and animated retreats in Halifax, Antigonish and Yarmouth. Small faith-sharing groups emerged from the retreats. Then we were blessed to have Jean Vanier come to Halifax, Antigonish and New Brunswick. Soon these faith-sharing groups began preparing annual Faith and Sharing retreats. In the beginning there would be one annual retreat for all three dioceses in NS – Yarmouth, Halifax and Antigonish. The retreats had to be held in universities to accommodate the large numbers attending – it was not unusual to have over 200 retreatants! At the same time retreats were also being held in New Brunswick. Archbishop Chiasson from the Diocese of Moncton and Bishop Lacroix from the Edmunston diocese animated retreats and from these retreats small Faith and Sharing groups began.



Father George
Leach

The following are some reflections from people who attended some of these first retreats in the Atlantic region:

Martin's Point, A Mountain Top Experience - Donna Legere, Halifax

Like most of our experiences that happened a long time ago, the mind fills in what it forgets and if others wrote up this experience you might ask were they at the same event. Of course the joy of Martin's Point makes no sense without the retreat that started it all, so let me begin here.

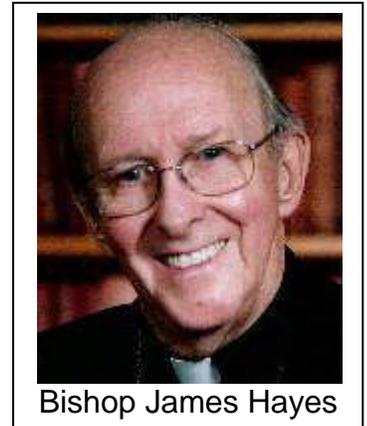
In the summer of 1974 Jean Vanier came to Halifax to give a preached retreat. I was not on the retreat team nor did I know much about it. Someone said he was coming and that I should go. I was not a "line-in retreatant" but merely came for the talks like hundreds of others, but somehow I got pulled into it all and became friends with the team. Jean Vanier spoke to the core of my being and I was hooked! The team was on fire and I wanted to be connected to it all. When the retreat was over, we began to meet weekly at St. Patrick's Rectory for prayer, discussion and plans. Out of it all, came the retreat at Martin's Point and many more retreats and Faith and Sharing small groups.

Martin's Point was a summer place owned by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. It was a beautiful piece of property on the South Shore near Mahone Bay with a main house and a number of cabins. It was the beginning of Faith and Sharing retreats in the Halifax diocese.

There were some thirty retreatants, three priests (Fr. Basil Carew, Fr. Harvey Seasons, SJ and Fr. George Leach, SJ) and Bishop James Hayes – imagine that! The retreat was animated by Fr. George Leach and a young handicapped woman, a friend of Fr. George's. She could speak with only

the use of two fingers and believe me getting her around in her wheelchair was a challenge. That being said, Dixie McMaster from Antigonish was an even bigger challenge – she was in a bed. I cannot remember that young woman’s name but I can still see the smile on her face – it was so infectious and there was always someone by Dixie’s bed treating her like the royalty she was. The retreat was filled with so much spirit and laughter – no challenge seemed too great. Our accommodations were basic but nothing about our retreat was – we were like the early Church – we shared everything in common and when something went wrong those who had less showed us how to fix it. We took turns making meals and cleaning up, we pushed the wheel chair and gathered around Dixie’s bed, we prayed and shared. Our inside space was small but the camp grounds were beautiful and we swam, walked, talked and sang around an open fire.

On the day Bishop Hayes arrived it was obvious to the three priests that he was not in a good mood, but not wanting to ask him what it was, things got tense. We were gathered in a circle outside ready to celebrate Eucharist with the Bishop as presider, when one of the ladies stood up and loud and clear said: “wait a minute, wait a minute!” She went right up to the Bishop and put her arm on his shoulder and said: “Bishop, what is wrong; you are so sad.” The tears came to his eyes and he said: “a friend of mine died.” She gave him a hug and turned to the rest of us and said: “Did you hear that?” She told him it was all right and that we’d pray for him and his friend. She told him she would take good care of him - and she did – then said “Now let’s have Mass”. What a lesson we all learned that day.



Martin’s Point was such a powerful retreat for us all – we wanted to stay there forever but it was only a beginning. I remember the lonely empty feeling I had when I got home from Martin’s Point. After a few hours I called up one of the group and said: “Do you miss me?” She laughed and in no time we had a few others gathered for supper. We knew right there and then that this was just the start of something good.

Everyone on that retreat stayed involved in some way for many years and I am sure those of us still on this side of life remember those days with great gratitude for they were a mountain top experience for sure and only the beginning.

Doris Paisley, Kentville writes:

“The first time I went to a Faith and Sharing retreat, it was held at Acadia University in Wolfville, NS. I knew there were people who had physical and intellectual disabilities, but never had I seen so many in one place. It was wonder and love at first sight. I attended Faith and Sharing retreat in Wolfville, Halifax, Antigonish and Yarmouth. The people attending from Kentville –Wolfville area began to meet monthly at the Evergreen Nursing Home in Wolfville. We continued meeting there for many years and the residents always looked forward to our gatherings. Since my first retreat I have been a part of L’Arche Homefires – volunteering in any way I can. Faith and Sharing has been a large part of my life since that first retreat.”



Sr. Evangeline Poirier, Hospitallers, Villa St. Joseph Nursing Home Yarmouth remembers going to a Faith and Sharing retreat sometime between 1975 – 1980 animated by Archbishop Chiasson. At the time she was living in Tracadie, NB. She says when she closes her eyes she can see and hear Archbishop Chiasson’s quote that he used for his talk, 1 John 1:1: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life...” After the retreat she became a part of a small faith-sharing group in Tracadie where she lived for several years. Later she was transferred to Villa St. Joseph in Yarmouth, NS.

Father Pat O’Meara, Yarmouth shares:

I remember at one of the first Faith and Sharing retreats that I attended in the 80’s being impressed with one of the animator’s comments. The animator encouraged everyone not to use his or her illness or disability to over-power others by making them feel guilty.



Donna Newell, Yarmouth shares the following:

I had the privilege of attending the first Faith and Sharing retreat in Yarmouth in 1974 or 1975 which was animated by Fr. George Leach, SJ and I never looked back! I felt very much at home there and for me it truly was the gospel coming alive. I was so amazed how everyone was so willing to help each other. It was pure love. I think Faith and Sharing is the best kept secret in the Church!

The first Faith and Sharing retreat held in Antigonish, NS was in 1974. Bishop Lacroix and Sister Caztherine McLellan animated the retreat. Dixie McMaster attended that first retreat – Dixie was confined to a hospital bed and was an inspiration to all those attending. She was like a magnet – everyone gathered around her. After the retreat a small Faith and Sharing group gathered at her house for many years, and at the same time other meetings were held there which became the start of the founding of L’Arche Antigonish. Today one of the L’Arche Antigonish homes is named “Dixie House” in her memory.

