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### The L'Abri Fellowship and the Spiritual Principles of Vital Community

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In the fall of 2014, I lived for two-and-a-half months with a small, Evangelical Christian community in Greatham, England called L'Abri. The L'Abri Fellowship in Greatham is one of eight such communities established around the world that grew out of the pioneering ministerial efforts of Francis and Edith Schaeffer. In the late 1940s, the Schaeffers felt called by God to leave behind the familiarity and the comfort of their flourishing Evangelical ministry in the United States for a new path. Their prayers led them first to relocate their family to Switzerland and eventually to open their new home to the seekers of the day. They invited guests young and old, believing and not, to join in the life of the family and to bring to bear all of their questions about God and life: questions about faith, doubt, freedom, guilt, shame, Christ—everything. In the intervening years, the Schaeffers' home ministry would formally become L'Abri, which in French means “the shelter,” and would grow through word-of-mouth to accommodate successive generations of seekers.

Although I was at L'Abri for only ten weeks in my senior year of college, I was transformed by my experiences there. Deep wounds and confusions began to be healed and clarified. The spiritual life as fundamentally a relational life with God, others, and even myself began to open to me like never before as concepts of faith became lived realities. I experienced challenges, of course, understanding for the first time key differences in belief, from a Christian perspective, between Christian and Unification theologies, and continue to carry fundamental questions of faith that arose from my time there even now, four years later.

Principal among them is the question of the replicability of L'Abri as a model of spiritual community. Are there spiritual principles at work in the structure, practices, and functions of L'Abri that allowed it to touch deeply not only my heart and life, but also the hearts and lives of so many others? Could these principles be applied in another context, for instance in an extant or potential Unification faith community?

Reflection and further research of the L'Abri Fellowship have brought me to the conclusion that the communal model of L'Abri is not wholly replicable to a Unification context, insofar as the Christian theology of L'Abri is integral to its purpose and structure and insofar as that theology does differ from Unification theology. At the same time, I think there is much that the Unification member can learn from L'Abri and its founders, the Schaeffers. In fact, he or she might benefit from applying the spiritual principles at work in L'Abri in pursuit of the central Unification vocation: tribal messiahship and its integral precedent, home church.

### **A Brief History of L'Abri**

The L'Abri Fellowship began in Switzerland in 1955, when Francis and Edith Schaeffer, an American Evangelical pastor couple, and their family, formally opened their home “to help people who have spiritual need.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The Schaeffers first came to Switzerland in 1948 as missionaries, after a survey conducted by Francis on behalf of their denomination's missions board the year before indicated the need for a revival of Christian faith and teaching in post-World War II Europe.<sup>[2]</sup> As Edith explains in L'Abri, an autobiographical account of the founding and growth of the original community, it was not the physical bombs and destruction of the war that motivated the Schaeffers, so much as

... the philosophical and theological ‘bombs’ which had torn up and scattered faith and orderly thinking. It was not only that

theology and philosophy were denying the existence of a personal God such as the Bible sets forth as being really there...but the alarming thing was the generation growing up to be taught that one might as well not even argue about what truth is, because “absolute truth” is non-existent...all things are “relative.”<sup>[3]</sup>

This, according to Edith, was the motivating germ of the Schaeffers’ relocation to and ministry in Europe: a desire to bring clarity of thought and belief to older generations, and to be a voice of trust and confidence in the Bible for younger generations who would otherwise have none.

In Edith’s own descriptions of the early years before L’Abri, much of the Schaeffers’ missionary work consisted in the couple traveling Europe together. Francis gave lessons to adults on topics of theology and church history and Edith taught local women how to give Bible lessons to their children, accompanied with songs and her own hand-drawn illustrations. At the same time, amid daily life in the village of Champéry, the couple began to fill a growing need for a ministry at home. They were encouraged by their own children to hold Bible lessons for the village children, and they began to offer English church services at a nearby chapel, drawing interested locals as well as English-speaking tourists and students in the area. Female students of finishing schools traveling to Champéry for the ski season became frequenters of the Schaeffers’ home; they were among their earliest guests to be invited to conversations of faith over tea which would last late into the night.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Schaeffers remained in Champéry in this manner for several years. Amid trips to different European countries, they slowly grew their acquaintance with the community and engaged visitors in conversations about Biblical truth. However, in 1955 they were unexpectedly given six weeks’ notice to leave the canton of Valais for “having had a religious influence” there.<sup>[5]</sup> Though it was a time of great uncertainty and difficulty in the lives of the Schaeffer family, their eviction would prove, in time, to be well within God’s plan for their ministry. It became the impetus for founding the L’Abri Fellowship.

After several harrowing weeks of attempting to find a new home in a different canton, with much prayer, many close calls, and even more unexpected “coincidences” of support from their neighbors, they resumed the lifestyle of hospitality begun in Champéry, this time in the village of Huemoz. They had a new audience as well. The Schaeffers’ eldest daughter Priscilla, having recently enrolled at the nearby University of Lausanne, began to bring home classmates for weekend discussions about Christianity at the family’s chalet, the Chalet Les Melezes. In time, these classmates would bring more friends and word of L’Abri would spread, bringing to Huemoz a growing number of international guests and a considerable amount of renown.<sup>[6]</sup> The increasing number of visitors would ultimately necessitate the expansion of L’Abri from Les Melezes to several other chalets in the immediate neighborhood and in the village of Huemoz. Over the years, some of the young people who came to study with the Schaeffers would choose to stay on for longer periods, several months to years at a time, to support the the unique Swiss ministry. A few would go on to open their own residential branches of L’Abri abroad.

## **The Living Work of L’Abri**

Although the eight branches of L’Abri differ in particulars: size, length of term, and the character of the workers, helpers, and visiting students who find their way to them, they share an essential unity in message and in purpose, as first outlined by the Schaeffers: “to show forth by demonstration, in our life and work, the existence of God.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The following description of life at L’Abri is predicated largely on my own experiences of that demonstration. It is reinforced by the most comprehensive book I’ve found on the subject, appropriately titled *By Demonstration: God: Fifty Years and a Week at L’Abri* by Wade Bradshaw.<sup>[8]</sup> His experiences and mine represent life at the Manor House of the English L’Abri most; it is the branch where I studied in the fall of 2014 and where Bradshaw and his wife lived with their family for many years as core staff members, or “workers.” As such, our depictions of life at L’Abri may be a bit one-sided in that they only represent the English branch; the overall project of understanding the L’Abri Fellowship as an international community would benefit from a more comprehensive review of its diverse branches. Nevertheless, as Bradshaw suggests, while “All of the various branches do things differently...there is a resemblance between us even across the continents. We have similar purposes, similar methods and similar rhythms.” To present “a fair introduction to L’Abri,” he writes, we must “insist on being particular, while also admitting diversity and remaining slightly unpredictable.”<sup>[9]</sup> I offer following description in such a spirit, of both particulars and rhythms as well as a dash of the unpredictable.

When I first left for L’Abri, I had little sense of what the experience would entail apart from what their website described:

The L’Abri communities are study centers in Europe, Asia and America where individuals have the opportunity to seek answers

to honest questions about God and the significance of human life. L'Abri believes that Christianity speaks to all aspects of life.<sup>[10]</sup>

It seemed straightforward enough and yet also somewhat vague. Ask around at L'Abri and you will find that the workers themselves have decided and different opinions about how to describe the work of L'Abri. Some despise the idea of calling L'Abri a community.<sup>[11]</sup> Others find the idea of referring to L'Abri as just a study center too simplistic.<sup>[12]</sup> Most agree that L'Abri is simply hard to describe.<sup>[13]</sup>

I had heard about L'Abri like most others who have walked through the doors of its various branches around the world: by word-of-mouth. L'Abri eschews any formal advertising about their work. Two alumni of the religion department at my college happened to travel to the English branch a few years before me. Yet, I only knew that because we shared a common employer at the college writing studio who happened to mention L'Abri to me when I was devising a curriculum of experiential, independent study for my senior year of religious studies.

I would learn for myself soon after arriving that life at L'Abri was disarmingly practical and logistically predictable. Half of each day was spent in personal study. "Students," as we visitors were called, were each assigned a tutor from among the workers shortly after our arrival. We would meet once a week with our tutor to discuss life and any pressing questions we might have; and based on our conversations, our tutors would recommend different avenues of study for us to consider during our time at L'Abri. These ranged from readings among the Christian classics housed in a small library at the Manor to audio recordings of lectures given at L'Abri over the years, stored in a digital archive.<sup>[14]</sup> Whether we pursued these avenues was totally up to us, so our studies unfolded week by week according to personal inclination, community wisdom and conversation, and prayer.

We spent the other half of each day doing any number of chores needed around the Manor, in which most of the students and workers lived, or the adjoining domiciles on the property. These chores were sometimes regular tasks that needed to be done weekly or daily: dusting, vacuuming, buffing, sweeping, washing dishes, washing the students' laundry and hanging it to dry outdoors in warm weather or in the attic when cold, chopping firewood, weeding. Other chores were a bit more exciting and particular: painting the conservatory in the old school house where one of the L'Abri families lived; building a rock garden outside the small chapel on the property; dislodging a new soccer ball that had been kicked high up into the branches of a tall pine tree; cleaning out the chimney of the communal dining room; and babysitting some of the younger members of the L'Abri families.

The evening schedule varied day to day but was consistent week to week. On Tuesdays and Fridays, we all gathered together in the slightly makeshift communal study area for formal lectures. The Tuesday lectures were private. The workers chose topics from among the classics of the L'Abri corpus that they felt would be most pertinent to those of us staying at the Manor House at the time, topics like "Cynicism and Romanticism," "The Weight of Reality," and "What is Spirituality?" Friday lectures were open to the public, drawing regular L'Abri contacts as well as new guests who might be intrigued by the theme, and often featured a worker's latest theological reflections and insights on a given topic. Mondays and Saturdays were free evenings, when students would gather together to play board games or trek out to the famed Hawkley Inn in the neighboring village for a drink. On Wednesday evenings, we would watch a film and then discuss it together; this was a practical way of engaging culture as a mirror of contemporary beliefs, and art more generally as a mirror of God's original Creativity.

Thursdays were free, allowing us to travel around and tour England. Sundays were Sabbath days in the traditional sense, with services in the morning at any of a number of local churches (the workers were not affiliated with any one church), afternoons off from work and study, often featuring a giant game of volleyball, and an evening "high tea" when one of the workers would host dinner for all the students. There we would just spend time together—playing a game or listening to dramatic readings from books like *The Hobbit* or some of Wendell Berry's short stories.

Eating meals together was a key element of community life. Breakfasts were eaten altogether in the main dining room, as were some dinners. But for most dinners and lunches, the students were divided into smaller groups of about 10-12 people, dining with the different workers' families in their apartments and properties around the Manor House. We had "formal lunches," every day of the week but Mondays and Thursdays: it was a time to discuss a single question, usually of faith, though any question was a feasible basis for discussion. Dinner conversations were usually more open-ended and informal.

Students could stay in this manner for as little as an afternoon to as long as three months, adding a layer of transience to this otherwise constant—though never static—community life. This transience emphasized our role as guests or even strangers rather than permanent members of the L'Abri community.

Slowly and subtly, in this ordinary, though perhaps unusually intentional, daily life, I noticed a change in my mood and spirit. It was more than just getting used to the lifestyle and the people there: I felt I was being revived from a kind of spiritual death or sleep that for many years I had been oblivious to. It was like undergoing an inner reconciliation of self. The ideas we discussed restored clarity to my mind and renewed a confidence that something real exists beyond myself—a confidence that had begun to erode amid the

relativistic tropes prevalent at my college and in American culture at large. I was experiencing, in L'Abri terms, "substantial healing."<sup>[15]</sup> This was so surprising to me, because that had not been my purpose for going to L'Abri and because I had never anticipated the possibility of genuine healing in the context of any faith community but my own.

## Faith Gives Rise to Form

This genuine surprise and experience of substantial healing stimulated my curiosity about community vitality and its significance as a context for the cultivation of authentic faith. It was hard to comprehend what I was experiencing at L'Abri because I was so wholly unprepared for it at the time. Yet the experience was undeniable, and its positive effects lasted in my life longer than any comparable experiences I had had in Unification faith settings. Since I did not become a Christian at L'Abri, by L'Abri's standards, I was left wondering to what extent my experience of healing was intrinsically tied to the Christian faith and to what extent it pointed to extrinsic principles by which vital community could be built in another religious context.

Of course, L'Abri considers its work innately Christian: without Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, without the Bible, without the Triune God, L'Abri's work would not only be aimless—it would not be.

The founding of L'Abri in 1955 was preceded, ironically enough, by a serious moment of "spiritual crisis" in Francis Schaeffer's life, but a crisis that would ultimately confirm and deepen his conviction about the unique place of Christianity among the world's religions and ideologies. Francis opens one of his seminal theological works, *True Spirituality*, with a confession that he had come into a "problem of reality" that compelled him to question why the outcomes of a true Christian faith promised in the Bible should be so absent from daily Christian experience, not only in the wider church but also in himself.<sup>[16]</sup> He felt he must reevaluate the entirety of his faith, that he "had to go all the way back to [his original] agnosticism and think through the whole matter."<sup>[17]</sup>

After a period of rigorous intellectual and prayerful re-exploration of the Bible, Francis writes, he came through this period of doubt with redoubled conviction in the truth of Christianity. The rest of *True Spirituality* records the path of reasoning Francis followed to reestablish his faith. At its center was a recognition that the life of a Christian must every moment be shaped by a positive love of God and neighbor rooted so deep in his or her "inward reality" that it naturally finds expression in the "outward results" of a sanctified life.<sup>[18]</sup> It is here that Francis claims for Christianity the unique role of the only religion capable of providing access to such sanctification:

It is impossible even to begin living the Christian life, or to know anything of true spirituality, before one is a Christian. And the only way to become a Christian is neither by trying to live some sort of Christian life nor by hoping for some sort of religious experience, but rather by accepting Christ as Savior.<sup>[19]</sup>

In *L'Abri*, Edith Schaeffer echoes and further explains this essential acceptance of Christ as Savior. In recounting a conversation with one of her young guests at Huemoz, she outlines four "areas" by which we can discern whether someone has become a Christian. These four areas are: belief in the God of the Bible, acknowledgment of one's sinfulness, belief in Jesus' incarnation "in space, time and history," and finally, "bowing to this God, and accepting what Christ did as for you, personally and individually, taking your deserved punishment, for your individual sins, as He died outside Jerusalem."<sup>[20]</sup> If these tenets can be affirmed as true, intellectually and personally, one's Christianity may also be affirmed.

Edith's description of "the amazing unity" of the biblical story from Adam and Eve's Fall to Christ's reconciliation of God and humankind through his crucifixion and resurrection is another interesting theological underpinning of the L'Abri Fellowship. In this unified story of the Bible, Edith maintains, God had offered a promise of redemption from the Fall to the first human family, who knew from their time in Eden that the sacrifice of a lamb was needed in order to reconcile themselves with God. Abel, by "simply believing God, coming in God's way" in his offering of a lamb, is therefore seen as a paragon of biblical faith; whereas Cain, in making an offering of fruits and vegetables, is seen as attempting to come to God arrogantly in his own way, seeking to gain redemption by his own works. This essential difference in approaching God can be seen throughout biblical history, according to Edith, with biblical figures like Noah, Abraham, and Moses worshipping God through the sacrifice of a lamb and others seeking to make their own way to God. The ultimate sacrificial lamb who makes this symbol of redemption a reality in his crucifixion is, of course, Christ: born in a stable and proclaimed by John the Baptist as the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world."<sup>[21]</sup>

These theological convictions shaped the form of L'Abri from the outset and are clearly reflected in "The L'Abri Statements," a formal document that relates the self-stated principles of the fellowship.<sup>[22]</sup> It was first composed by the Schaeffers and has been periodically updated by successive generations of L'Abri workers and members. The L'Abri Statements are quite extensive, including a statement of purpose, a statement of boundaries of belief, a statement of provision for reform, and several relevant appendices, like the Chicago Statements on Biblical Inerrancy published in 1978 and 1982. Without going into detail into the contents of

each of these sections, I think it is helpful to look at an overview the eight propositions of L'Abri's current statement of purpose as well as a few statements from the Schaeffers' original guiding document, "The Consensus of Faith/Basic Principles of Operation," to provide clear examples of how theology and faith have ordered the form and life of L'Abri since its inception.

L'Abri's statement of purpose includes the following eight propositions:

1. Devotion to Christ and a reality of prayer as we live in daily dependence upon the Lord
2. Confidence in Biblical Truth
3. The Fall (a belief in the actuality and continuing, corrupting effect of the Fall in human life, visible in our separation from God, one another, ourselves, the environment, etc.)
4. Commitment to genuine humanness expressed in servanthood and love, and displayed in supernaturally restored relationships (that is, relationships restored through the workings of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian).
5. Commitment to apply God's truth to the whole of life and to encourage Christians to make a contribution to the wider culture.
6. The appreciation of God's gifts in all of life.
7. The need to understand the culture we live in and our responsibility to communicate to it.
8. The preparedness to give honest answers to honest questions in such a way that the unbeliever may be faced with the truth claims of Christianity.

In these propositions, we can begin to see how the central beliefs of the community are translated into its practical life, ranging from the centrality of Christ and prayer in the community's daily rhythms to the commitment to being active in the world despite its fallen state, through cultural and intellectual engagement as Christians.

Even more explicitly, the original guiding document for the L'Abri Fellowship, "The Consensus of Faith/Basic Principles of Operation," explains L'Abri's purpose through the lens of Acts 1:8<sup>[23]</sup> and a statement of conviction that "Christianity involves...through faith" an affirmation of the supernatural truth of Christian doctrine and a commitment to act upon this supernatural truth in daily life.<sup>[24]</sup> This essential conviction is translated into the "basic principle of practical operation" of L'Abri, which is a commitment to exhibit in word and in deed:

1. The reality of the existence of God.
2. The character of God—His love and His holiness.
3. The reality of the supernaturally restored relationship among those who, through faith in Christ, are brothers and sisters."<sup>[25]</sup>

In these statements, we find a depiction of L'Abri as a community committed to the demonstration of the existence of God through *sharing* and *living out* the truth of the Christian faith. That L'Abri takes this active faith in God to an extreme can be seen in the centrality of their reliance on prayer in all aspects of the administration of the community. God is invited in prayer to help the fellowship meet its financial needs, which means they forgo any fundraising; to bring to the fellowship the students and workers of his choice and to keep others away; and to fully direct the minimalistic plans of L'Abri, all according to his will. As Ranald Macaulay, a founding member of English L'Abri and one of the Schaeffers' sons-in-law, explains, at L'Abri, they are trying "to live the reality of the Christian life within the unity of the truth displayed in scripture."<sup>[26]</sup> In other words, they are trying to live with the recognition that the absolute truth of scripture touches all aspects of life and experience, including the administration and development of their own small but powerful ministry.

## **Christian Hospitality: Practical Care of the Soul**

Based on my own experiences at L'Abri as well as my research of the community, I think that while there are many ways to describe the practical aspect of the fellowship's work, the overarching principle that encompasses most of them is L'Abri's commitment to hospitality.

There are several lectures available on the topic of hospitality in L'Abri's online archive of lectures, the L'Abri Ideas Library, which cover similar ground in explaining the biblical roots and the general significance of hospitality to the fellowship. In an emblematic lecture on the topic, longtime English L'Abri worker Andrew Fellows<sup>[27]</sup> identifies Matthew 25:31-40 as the essential biblical grounds for the Christian practice of hospitality:

>When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, he shall sit upon his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see thee hungry and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When did we see thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and visited thee? And the King will answer to them, Truly I say to you, whatever you have done to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me.[28]

The key idea Fellows highlights from this passage is that of “welcoming the stranger,” the stranger being those who are somehow displaced or alienated as well as those whom we do not know. When we invite the stranger to join us in our daily life and at our table, as they do at L’Abri, Fellows maintains that we are “dramatizing the Gospel in a very concrete way.” This is because, in an ultimate sense, the alienated human being experiences the greatest welcome when he or she is reconciled to God through the good news of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. And not only that: according to this passage, Jesus, himself suggests that in welcoming the weary stranger, we are also welcoming Christ. Christ’s call to hospitality in this passage, then, is marked by a highly egalitarian view of the stranger, who is equal to Christ and in another sense to ourselves as fellow “image-bearers” of God.

In each of the L’Abri lectures I listened to on hospitality,[29] the speakers were careful to draw a clear distinction between this Christian model of hospitality from a sort of “designer hospitality” where social distinctions and prestige are paramount. Designer hospitality is described by L’Abri workers as being “of the Martha Stewart” variety, marked by “entertaining” one’s guests. This empty hospitality, they suggest, is partially a product of the transformation of hospitality from an endeavor of homes and families to a commercial industry, where a sort of flat, uniform standard of “perfection” is offered to and expected by faceless, interchangeable guests.

In contrast to this cold, impersonal standard of commercial hospitality, Edith Schaeffer and the workers who have followed in her footsteps at L’Abri endeavor simply to create beauty and offer warmth in their homes, to whatever extent they can. “It is true,” Edith writes in *Hidden Art*, a book in which she outlines various ways to add beauty to life, “that all men are created in the image of God, but Christians are supposed to be *conscious* of that fact, and being conscious of it should recognize the importance of living artistically, aesthetically, and creatively, as creative creatures of the Creator.”[30] This creative life, expressed in the care taken in the meals we prepare, in candles lit on the dinner table, tasteful table linens, furniture chosen and placed for connection and conversation, geraniums on the windowsill and roses growing over the walls—all of these simple things represent opportunities for the practice of Edith’s “hidden art.” They were also, I believe, a significant part of the restorative quality of life at L’Abri; the care of the environment in which we lived translating into a kind of care of the soul.

## **Glorious Ruins: The Very Human Realities of L’Abri**

It is important to note that for all the vitality, hospitality, and beauty of L’Abri, the Schaeffers and the fellowship have had their fair share of challenges. Edith confesses in *L’Abri* that regular family life was virtually non-existent in Huemoz, as guests would come at all hours and be invited into whatever was happening at Les Melezes at the moment of their arrival.[31] And praying for the finances to keep one’s home and ministry afloat, though often rewarded in miraculous ways by Edith’s account, also meant many moments of having just enough—and often not enough—to get by on.[32]

Fellows in his lecture on hospitality also discusses that some of the children of L’Abri families have struggled with the open homes that their parents keep, and warns against just anyone opening their home without the support of an extended community like L’Abri on hand to share the load of caring for strangers.

Frank Schaeffer, the youngest of the Schaeffers’ four children and today a published author, openly critiqued some aspects of his parents’ ministry and his own involvement in it. In particular, he questioned the family’s eventual involvement in mobilizing American evangelicals to align themselves with the Republican Party,[33] a frequently noted phase of the Schaeffers’ lives and ministry.[34] And of course, he was not the Schaeffers’ sole critic.[35]

And yet, neither the Schaeffers nor L’Abri aimed for perfection. They recognized both a glorious and a ruined quality in humankind: glorious for being created in the image of God and ruined due to the corrupting taint of the Fall. The Schaeffers were, moreover, highly conscious of human finiteness as contrasted with God’s infiniteness. This was another of their primary theological legacies to L’Abri, which finds expression in the lives of the workers as a grounded humility before God and a forgiving graciousness before human fallibility. L’Abri today continues to carry out the Schaeffers’ project to demonstrate the existence of God through their work and life; and in my experience, they do this to great effect. L’Abri’s invitation to intellectual honesty and relational faith, in the context of an organic and highly ordinary community life, has a lasting, life-giving impact on both mind and soul.

In all of this, it cannot be missed that the self-conception of L'Abri as intrinsically Christian—motivated and oriented in their work by Christ—suggests that the principles, model, and effects of the community cannot be replicated in another religious context. They workers at L'Abri, of course, attribute the healing quality that students experience there to biblical truth and the work of the Holy Spirit, which, in their view, are essentially *Christian*.

And yet, as a Unification observer of L'Abri, I think there is an objective, universal layer in their work that serves as a significant source of the community's vitality.<sup>[36]</sup> I see it in the humble transparency of the workers regarding their own limitations, the commitment to find and articulate truth in contemporary culture, the paradoxical willingness to admit wrong and to defend what they have found to be true, and the centrality of prayer in the governance of self and communal life. I believe that it may be these principles that enable L'Abri to enact a full life invested with the spirit of God; to choose and nourish that which gives life over and against that which yields death in body and spirit.

## Unification Vocations and the Spiritual Principles of L'Abri

The heyday of the home church providence in the Unification Movement in the late 70s and early 80s had passed long before I was born, so I have no memory of that era in the movement. I only ever heard stories about how harrowing the experience of trying to serve a neighborhood of 360 homes in New York City could be. I also do not know much about the education or training given to accomplish home church, and a thorough review of that providential initiative is beyond the scope of this article.

However, I think it is worth noting that the forefront of the providence seems to have returned to the level of the family, the home, and the neighborhood in recent years, with True Mother's revival of the idea of tribal messiahship, a concept closely related to home church.<sup>[37]</sup>

Most recently, True Mother's call to tribal messiahship has been translated into action as officiating the Unification Movement's Holy Marriage Blessing Ceremony for 430 couples, whom, she recently clarified, are in turn expected to bless 430 couples.<sup>[38]</sup> I happen to know several of the first couples in America to have accomplished the first step in this monumental task of blessing 430 couples. They are now returning to these couples and their families with a heart to communicate more about the significance of the Blessing and the identity of the True Parents who made their receiving the Blessing possible.

In discussing home church here, it is not my intention to disparage the work of these courageous brothers and sisters who have put themselves out there in faith and worked hard to fulfill True Parents' directions to the movement at this time. But as these tribal messiah couples are only now beginning the process of educating their tribe *after* giving the Blessing, I can't help but feel that a crucial step in the tribal messiahship process was missed, and that perhaps that step would be the step of home church.

At different stages in our lives, I believe most of us find ourselves searching for home—for a vital, authentic community where we can find a sense of belonging. I experienced this sense of belonging and home, surprisingly, at L'Abri, while sitting at table with strangers and friends, sharing food, faith, and life together. Religious or not, a relational, hospitable life somehow satiates our immediate longing for home; and a Unification home church ministry, based around the kitchen table, the family life, and the word, might do much to satiate such pervasive longings today.

For me, the question of which faith will satiate our deeper, ultimate longings for community, highlighted by Fellows and L'Abri in the idea that all human persons are strangers to God and themselves due to the Fall, remains unanswered. When faced with genuine Christian and genuine Unification belief, I honestly find it hard to say which one has the better or truer answers to our ultimate questions of faith.

But I do think that the most successful religious movement or organization in the years to come will be the one in which relational life, strengthened through genuine hospitality like that demonstrated at L'Abri, will win the hearts of future generations suffering from the anomie of postmodern culture and technological takeover. If my disaffected generation is to be won over, it will be through substantive relationships, especially substantive relationships of faith. It is here that L'Abri provides an important lesson for the overeager tribal messiah: a time of substantive growth must be preceded by a time of prayer before the God “who is really there” and who takes an active interest in our efforts to build his kingdom and seek his righteousness.

Hence, given the continuing relevance of the provision of home to the wearied stranger today, there is perhaps a great value in the Unification member's investing him- or herself in home church as a precedent and a complement to their tribal messiahship.

Notes

[1] Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri: New Expanded Edition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), p. 122

[2] Jerram Barrs, introduction to *True Spirituality: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2001), p. xv

[3] Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, p. 28

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41

- [5] Presumably a Protestant influence in an otherwise Roman Catholic canton. *Ibid.*, p. 25
- [6] The significance and reach of the Schaeffers' ministry is well-described in Michael S. Hamilton's "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today*, March 3, 1997. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/march3/7t322a.html>. Accessed May 18, 2018
- [7] Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, pp. 15-16
- [8] Wade Bradshaw, *By Demonstration: God: Fifty Years and a Week at L'Abri* (Carlisle, UK: Piquant Editions, 2005).
- [9] Bradshaw, *By Demonstration: God*, p. 4
- [10] See [www.labri.org](http://www.labri.org). Accessed May 17, 2018
- [11] Ranald Macaulay disparages the term in "The Principles of L'Abri," lecture, January 1, 1990. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/The%20Principles%20of%20L'Abri%20-%20Udo%20Middelmann%20and%20Ranald%20Macaulay.mp3>. Accessed May 15, 2018
- [12] Bradshaw, *By Demonstration: God*, p. 1
- [13] For instance, Mardi Keyes in "The L'Abri Story: Switzerland to Southborough," lecture, May 13, 2016. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/The%20L'Abri%20Story%20from%20Sw%20to%20Sobo%20-%20MK%20May%2013%202016.mp3>. Accessed April 14, 2018
- [14] Partially accessible outside of L'Abri as the L'Abri Ideas Library: [www.labri-ideas-library.org](http://www.labri-ideas-library.org)
- [15] See for instance, Robb and Christa Ludwick, "The Possibilities of Substantial Healing," December 2, 2007. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/The%20Possibility%20Of%20Substantial%20Healing%20-%20Rob%20&%20Christa%20Ludwick.mp3>. Accessed May 15, 2018
- [16] Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), p. xxix
- [17] *Ibid.*
- [18] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 3
- [20] Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, pp. 164-166
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 176-181
- [22] "The L'Abri Statements," (1997), pp. 3-6. <http://www.labri.org/statements/The-LAbri-Statements.pdf>. Accessed May 18, 2018
- [23] "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." King James Version
- [24] Supernatural, again, pointing to the reality of God and God's involvement in our daily life through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. "The L'Abri Statements," p. 22
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Macaulay, "The Principles of L'Abri."
- [27] Andrew Fellows, "Hospitality," lecture, April 20, 2009. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/Hospitality%20-%20Andrew%20Fellows.mp3>. Accessed May 15, 2018
- [28] King James Version
- [29] Cf. Joe and Sue Morrell, "The Importance of Hospitality: The Celebration of Family Life," November 2, 2006. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/Importance%20of%20Hospitality%20-%20The%20Celebration%20of%20Family%20Life%20-%20Joe%20&%20Sue%20Morrell.mp3>; Mardi Keyes, "Hospitality: The Mark of the Christian," December 2, 2007. <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/Hospitality%20-%20The%20Mark%20of%20The%20Christian%20-%20Mardi%20Keyes.mp3>. Accessed May 15, 2018
- [30] Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), p. 32
- [31] Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, p. 136
- [32] See, for instance, Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), pp. 141-143
- [33] Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of it Back* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007).



[34] See, for instance, Colin Duriez's "The Last Battles (1977-1984)" in *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), or Daniel K. Williams's *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[35] See Michael S. Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today*, March 3, 1997. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/march3/7t322a.html>. Accessed May 18, 2018

[36] I do not think the workers at L'Abri would disagree with me on this; they might simply attribute this universality to Christianity alone.

[37] Home church is your divine altar to offer yourself as a living sacrifice for God. When you make a righteous offering there you are inheriting all of heaven. Your 360 home area is your world, your place of love, service, worship and prayer. There you care for the people and teach them, awakening them from darkness to light. Ultimately you shall be recognized as their tribal messiah. You shall be a master in three ways: master of love, master of all things, master of people. It all comes together in home church." Sun Myung Moon, October 4, 1979, in *Home Church: The Words of Sun Myung Moon*, Chapter 1, Section 1. <https://www.tparents.org/Moon-Books/HC/0-Toc.htm>. Accessed May 21, 2018.

[38] See, for instance, Hak Ja Han Moon, "True Mother's Words at Famicon 2018," March 16, 2018, <http://familyfed.org/true-mothers-words-on-march-16-2018-at-ipecc-las-vegas/>. Accessed May 22, 2018