

“The Hidden Artist”: Edith Schaeffer and the Success of L’Abri Fellowship

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Abstract

While much attention has been given to Francis Schaeffer, his work, and his influence on the L’Abri community, less attention has been given to Edith Schaeffer’s unique contribution. She complemented Francis’s more intellectual, apologetic, and discussion-oriented approach by cultivating a family-oriented community with an emphasis on hospitality, creativity, and prayer. L’Abri’s visitors have lauded Edith’s crucial contribution to their enduring community. However, to fully understand L’Abri community’s impact, there remains a need to assess Edith Schaeffer’s work and contribution more fully. This article considers Edith’s written work, as well as observations from those who attended L’Abri, and in doing so, evaluate Edith’s unique contribution. I will argue that Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to L’Abri Fellowship’s enduring success.

Keywords

Edith Schaeffer, Francis Schaeffer, hospitality, community, family, L’Abri Fellowship

Much of L’Abri’s influence has been closely tied to the apologetic thought and practice of Francis Schaeffer. This focus certainly seems appropriate given Francis Schaeffer’s involvement and his key role in facilitating “honest answers to honest questions” in the chalets in Huémoz, Switzerland. Yet, when discussing the embodied practice of apologetics and Christian community at L’Abri, few, outside of her own admission, have emphasized Edith Schaeffer’s role in the success of L’Abri. Complementing Francis’s thoughtful interaction with guests’ questions, Edith promoted and practiced in-home hospitality with an intentional focus on shared living and open conversations. Further, her conceptuality of “family” played a key role in L’Abri’s organizational structure. Therefore, this article will argue that Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to the enduring success of L’Abri.

Commending the work of Edith Schaeffer in the life of L’Abri is not without its proponents. William Edgar states “Edith, many of us believe, was the ‘hidden artist’ who held L’Abri together.”¹ Barry Hankins underscores this thesis: “While Francis might have accomplished much as a pastor and lecturer without Edith, there would have been no L’Abri without her.”² Upon these assumptions this article will first explore Edith Schaeffer’s unique contributions to the L’Abri community, which include but are not limited to her conception of family and practice of in-home hospitality. I will then survey the lasting influence of L’Abri, seeking to evaluate what areas and emphases have led to its continued influence, noting the work of its founders, specifically Edith Schaeffer.³

I. Edith Schaeffer’s Contributions

Little has been written on Edith’s unique contributions to the overall legacy of both Francis Schaeffer and L’Abri. Those references that do exist are often

¹ William Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 62.

² Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 9.

³ I have chosen not to engage thoroughly with Frank Schaeffer’s writings on his parents and their ministry. This omission is twofold. First, Frank Schaeffer’s historiography is peculiar and often times inconsistent. Colin Duriez argues that Frank Schaeffer’s memoir *Crazy for God* is not intended to be a factually accurate biography in all its details. Second, his critiques have often been repudiated or challenged by those closest to the Schaeffers. Therefore, as one who has no firsthand experience with the Schaeffers, I thought it best to avoid these treacherous waters—though, of course, his writings are not without significance for the legacy of the Schaeffer family. See Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 35, 40, n. 1; Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 183.



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utilized as a backdrop to Francis's larger work and do not generally emphasize the strengths and works Edith exhibited in and of herself. Remarkably, references to Edith are not assessed on their own merits. Therefore, crucial to this argument is highlighting those elements and contributions unique to Edith that were brought to bear at L'Abri.

Regarding contributions to L'Abri, Os Guinness gives a sterling endorsement of Edith Schaeffer's work and character:

Edith Schaeffer was one of the most remarkable women of her generation, the like of whom we will not see again in our time. I have never met such a great heart of love, and such indomitable faith, tireless prayer, boundless energy, passionate love for life and beauty, lavish hospitality, irrepressible laughter, and seemingly limitless time for people—all in a single person. There is no question that she was a force of nature, and that her turbo-personality left many people, and particularly young women who tried to copy her, gasping in her slipstream. To many of us she was a second mother, and in many ways *she was the secret of L'Abri*.⁴

Guinness was not alone in this observation. Those who interacted with Edith noted equally her mothering quality, as well as her incredible zeal and work ethic put to practice in creative endeavors.

Much as Francis's list of books are categorized into various emphases (i.e., culture, truth, spirituality, church, and the West), Edith's books can be roughly catalogued as well. Edith was just as prolific in her own right. Books like *Christianity Is Jewish*, *Affliction*, and *Everybody Can Know*—the last of which she co-wrote with Francis—can be loosely defined as apologetic works. Her two collections of L'Abri letters, *The Tapestry* and *L'Abri* are largely biographical works, full of personal reflection. *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*, *A Way of Seeing*, *Forever Music*, *The Life of Prayer*, and *Common Sense Christian Living* all express how beauty and imagination are expressed in everyday Christian life. Lastly, her books celebrating children, marriage, and, of course, *What Is a Family?*, demonstrate her lasting love and focus on God's design for marriage and the family.⁵

⁴ Os Guinness, "Fathers and Sons: Francis Schaeffer, Frank Schaeffer, and 'Crazy for God,'" *Banner of Truth USA*, May 20, 2008, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/book-review-resources/2008/fathers-sons-francis-schaeffer-frank-schaeffer-and-crazy-for-god/> (emphasis added).

⁵ Edith Schaeffer, *A Way of Seeing* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977); *Common Sense Christian Living* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983); *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984); *The Tapestry: The Life and Times of Francis and Edith Schaeffer* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985); *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985); *Forever Music: A Tribute to the Gift of Creativity* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986); *The Art of Life* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1987); *With Love, Edith: The L'Abri Family Letters, 1948–1960* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); *Dear Family: The L'Abri Family Letters, 1961–1986* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); *L'Abri* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); *The Life of Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); *Affliction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); *10 Things Parents Must Teach Their*

Utilizing these categories, one begins to see the overlap between her written work and her lasting influence on the work at L'Abri. Her written work and what information we have of her work at L'Abri reveal that Edith's contributions include, but are not limited to, her (1) apologetics, (2) creativity, (3) emphasis on community, (4) conception of family, (5) practice of in-home hospitality, and (6) dependence on prayer. Therefore, we will assess each of these contributions in relation to their influence and practice within the L'Abri community.⁶

1. *Apologetics*

Francis garnered attention as a significant apologist of the twentieth century, yet Edith was not without her own commitment to defending the Christian faith. Interestingly, Edith and Francis first met at a young people's meeting at a liberal Presbyterian church in Germantown, Pennsylvania. After Ed Bloom, a Unitarian preacher, spoke on why he did not believe in the divinity of Christ or the inspiration of Scripture, both Francis and Edith stood up to voice their opposition. Francis, standing up first, would not address all the issues Bloom had brought up, but instead spoke of his resolution and belief that Jesus was the Son of God and how that truth changed his life. Interestingly, it was Edith who stood up and quoted apologetic rebuttals from J. Gresham Machen and Robert D. Wilson.⁷ They were "that type of apologetic for the truth of the Bible which [she] had heard in lectures and read."⁸ In the first meeting between Francis and Edith, it was Edith who initially was more versed in apologetic topics.

Further, it was Edith, who on early dates with Francis, encouraged that they read together *Christianity and Liberalism* by J. Gresham Machen. These early discussions demonstrated that Francis had found his counterpart in apologetic thinking.⁹ To be sure, they were very different people, each having different strengths and weaknesses. Yet, as Colin Duriez notes, Edith's culture and refinement complemented Francis's concern for personal relationships. Both had a concern that biblical truth should be applied

Children (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); *A Celebration of Marriage: Hopes and Realities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); *What Is a Family?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); *A Celebration of Children* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); *Christianity Is Jewish* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

⁶ Throughout this article, Edith Schaeffer's work is largely evaluated in the context of her work alongside Francis at L'Abri. While some of her writings date from after Francis's death, the writings engaged within this article were first published prior to 1984. While Francis Schaeffer died in 1984, Edith Schaeffer lived until 2013.

⁷ Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer*, 31.

⁸ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 132.

⁹ Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer*, 31.

in the lives of those who professed Christ. Francis and Edith “stood together as intellectual equals trying to interpret and respond to the contemporary world.”¹⁰ Their apologetic focus was similar, though not the same. They both spoke of the very real presence and work of God, but they emphasized this truth according to their own gifting.

Later in life Edith would pen various works that had apologetic leanings to them, though not as explicitly apologetic or philosophic as Francis’s work. One of these books spoke to the continuity of biblical revelation (*Christianity Is Jewish*), whereas others sought to engage more thoroughly with the problem of evil (*Affliction*). Even here, though, Edith understood these issues to be dealt with in the reality and context of the lived life. Francis himself recommended her book *Affliction*, believing it to be helpful to people because “she did not write this book in a vacuum, but in our own difficulties, battles, tears—as well as joys—in a part of that battle which we have known.”¹¹ Her apologetic was rooted in lived experience and spoke to the experiences of others.

2. Creativity

Visitors to L’Abri consistently noted Edith’s ability to practice hospitality in creative ways. Her resourcefulness in caring for those who visited was nearly as influential as the long discussions often referenced in summaries of L’Abri. Yet, her approach to creativity was not simply for the sake of artistic license but instead led to and was focused on warmth, beauty, and cultivating a compelling atmosphere.¹² This inclination to practical creativity, specifically in the context of the home, is most explicit in her book *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*. Edith saw her role in L’Abri’s work as not simply “homemaking” but one of artistic expression. For Edith, “hidden art” was “the art which is found in the ‘minor’ areas of life.”¹³ Her work here comes from the conviction that “there should be a practical result of the realization that we have been created in the image of the Creator of beauty.”¹⁴ She understood her work to be more than menial chores, but instead a way in which she could fulfill her image-bearing privilege of creative work.

Her own work and creativity were grounded in a theological foundation, a foundation from which she encouraged others to live “artistically,

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer: Spiritual Reality in the Personal Christian Life*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1986), 156.

¹² Barry Seagren, “Francis Schaeffer—An Appreciation,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 103.

¹³ Schaeffer, *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*, 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32–33.

aesthetically, and creatively” in all aspects of their lives.¹⁵ She impressed visitors with her naturally artistic sensibilities and culinary gifts. She possessed physical beauty, confidence, and charisma, and she used it all to exemplify beauty and creativity in the context of the L'Abri community.¹⁶ This practice of art-making was both an element Edith encouraged in ordinary Christian living, as well as an aesthetic case for the beauty of the Christian life. Edith's example in teaching and practice demonstrated both a new perspective in Christian discipleship and an imaginative apologetic.

A deep appreciation for beauty at L'Abri was expressed not only in the art that hung on the wall or works found in books around the chalets. The appreciation of beauty was not just the discussion of various artists and art forms either. Edith intentionally avoided an exclusive definition of what was “artistic” but instead demonstrated her creativity and artistry even in the way she prepared food and set the table. The “hidden art” included not only classical music, but also fresh flowers on the tables. Whether explicit or not, she demonstrated the Reformed belief of Christ's Lordship in all areas of life—including her creative endeavors within the home, in her ministry, and toward guests. Charles Cotherman writes, “Her entire life was a performance of aesthetics and class that few who stopped at L'Abri could miss.”¹⁷ L'Abri was a canvas and Edith Schaeffer was often the artist.¹⁸

3. Community

For those who observed L'Abri from a distance, one might assume it was nothing more than a collective in which there was a free exchange of intellectual ideas. Instead, L'Abri emphasized embodied practical living in the context of community. Edgar notes that “a typical day at L'Abri consisted of an early rise, then breakfast, then four hours of study in the morning, followed by an extended lunch, and then four hours of physical work around the community.”¹⁹ This emphasis on physical work certainly had ties to Francis's blue-collar upbringing and stood in opposition to those who might think of L'Abri exclusively as an intellectual community.²⁰ Yet, this physical

¹⁵ Ibid., 32. She writes earlier in the book, “So our creativity is not on God's level at all. His creativity is unlimited and infinite. Nevertheless, we have been created in His image, so we can be, and are *made to be*, creative” (25).

¹⁶ Charles E. Cotherman, *To Think Christianly: A History of L'Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 44.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 68.

²⁰ Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 44.

work was not simply to balance out the intellect but was an affirmation of the whole of creation as a responsibility for Christians to steward well.²¹

Of course, many non-believers did come with intellectual questions, and this was directly tied to the Schaeffers' original purpose for L'Abri. Yet, as the ministry progressed, many who came to L'Abri were already Christians who were struggling with personal and/or spiritual problems, looking for a more vibrant expression of faith. Even these seekers, according to Edith, were an answer to their prayer that L'Abri would be a demonstration that God exists. By finding solutions to their problems, often through answers to their prayers, the mission of L'Abri was affirmed.²² Through embodied practice in all areas of life, and engaging with both Christians and non-Christians, Edith often led the way in cultivating a sense of community at L'Abri.

This focus on intimate community was essential to L'Abri. As the Swiss L'Abri was expanding, other chalets were added to the ministry. While everyone at L'Abri would come together for church services and lectures, they would eat in smaller groups in the different chalets.²³ Edith thought this shift in format was helpful and that it led to "smaller numbers around a table, [gave] more opportunity for continuing the informal family atmosphere, and encourage[d] conversation around tables."²⁴ She understood this focus on family to require sacrifice on the part of individuals—not to mention the difficulty of logistics with various homes. Edith was committed to find solutions so guests and attendees would feel welcome and at home.²⁵

4. *Family*

One of Edith's most enduring contributions to the work of L'Abri was her understanding and subsequent practice of family life. While she mothered four children, she offered counsel and care to thousands of people who attended L'Abri. She writes in her book *What Is a Family?*, "From birth to death, a human being needs a shelter."²⁶ To be sure, every human being needs a shelter, and for those who were part of their family, the Schaeffer's had their own *abri*. While *What Is a Family?* employs various metaphors for a biblical perspective of family, there is significant overlap between how she understood the biblical family and her conception of L'Abri. She makes a

²¹ D. G. Blomberg, "Apologetic Education: Francis Schaeffer and L'Abri," *Journal of Christian Education* 18.3 (1975): 9.

²² Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁴ Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, 205.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?*, 38.

case for the nature of the “Lord’s family” and how those part of the Christian community must take care of one another, bearing one another’s burdens.²⁷ As one reads the latter chapters of the book, the similarities to L’Abri become more prominent.

Edith recounts, as she looked back over the years of ministry at L’Abri, “To us it is a thing of wonder and awe to see how God has continued to make it a ‘family’ shared, even as it was in the beginning, although the shared family now contains our ‘spiritual children’ as well as our personal family.”²⁸ Edith and Francis understood their work to be so intimate with those they were caring for that only a familial concept seemed appropriate. L’Abri itself was formed around the families in the chalets—allowing an organic development of a familial atmosphere.²⁹

This family dynamic was equal parts unity and diversity, according to Edith. She believed that those involved at L’Abri were united in oneness in the Lord, as well as in prayer and dependence upon the Lord. Workers involved at L’Abri were unified in major decisions and seeking faithful Christian practices. Yet, she was also quick to note that this “family” was diverse, as well. Because of the lack of human perfection, those working together at L’Abri did not always enjoy perfect unity. There was also significant diversity as the “family” of L’Abri changed over the decades.³⁰ Even so, the “family” of L’Abri was unified and diverse, much like any biological family.

This perspective of L’Abri as family is recounted by Maria Walford-Dellù. Dellù, upon becoming a Christian, found herself separated from her family. She would frequent L’Abri almost every weekend for seven years while she attended the University of Lausanne. She writes that the Schaeffers “had offered L’Abri as a second home for me.”³¹ Her parents had told her to leave their home, but she believed she had found a new family in L’Abri and the Schaeffers. For Dellù and others, especially young girls, Edith Schaeffer became like a spiritual mother at L’Abri.³² L’Abri represented a home and shelter for her and others in myriad ways.

Dellù stated that Edith Schaeffer brought creativity to the center of her ministry, often conveying wonder and joy even in the making of a meal. Dellù saw firsthand the practices and patterns that would later find their

²⁷ Ibid., 95.

²⁸ Schaeffer, *L’Abri*, 216.

²⁹ Blomberg, “Apologetic Education,” 8.

³⁰ Edith Schaeffer, “Introduction,” in Betty Carlson, *From the Mountains of L’Abri* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1977), 7–8.

³¹ Maria Walford-Dellù, “You Can Have a Family with Us,” in *Francis A. Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and His Work*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1986), 132.

³² Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 70.

way into Edith's books. She records watching Edith multitask with incredible balance: cooking, preparing, parenting, and participating in open-ended discussion with those beside whom she was working.³³ L'Abri was a place of hospitality, love, and deep care for those who were staying there. When Dellù eventually married, Edith signed a card to her in which she referred to herself as "Your mother and friend."³⁴

5. In-home Hospitality

Connected to her conception of family was Edith's practice of in-home hospitality. She writes, "We are very clearly taught that we are to present an open door to other people, as Christian families."³⁵ She continues, "We are showing a compassion for the lost world in a practical way by showing it to some specific individuals on our own doorstep."³⁶ It was this open-door, in-home hospitality that operated as its own kind of tangible and visible apologetic. Edith Schaeffer records a story about a young Hindu girl reading her book *L'Abri* and becoming convinced by the account of the truthfulness of Christianity.³⁷ L'Abri's space for and practice of hospitality provided a seedbed for both spiritual and intellectual development.³⁸

A brief look through Francis's letters demonstrates Edith's hospitality work. The Schaeffers consistently sent their love to each of those they were corresponding to, but Francis mentions on more than one occasion a gift that was sent along from Edith in appreciation to the recipient.³⁹ This was not a discipline that manifested itself later at L'Abri but was prominent throughout Edith's life. In the 1940s, more than a decade before L'Abri, Edith had an African-American cleaning woman, and the two would have lunch together every day. Each day, as they ate together, Edith would place a candle in the middle of the table to make each lunchtime special.⁴⁰ As Follis notes, "To Edith, the woman was not just the person who cleaned, but a woman made in the image of God."⁴¹ Edith's in-home hospitality was grounded in a rich and compelling theological anthropology.

³³ Walford-Dellù, "You Can Have a Family with Us," 133.

³⁴ Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 70.

³⁵ Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?*, 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

³⁸ Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 38.

³⁹ To "Matthew," Francis writes, "Edith sent you a box of cookies a week ago, and we do hope that you received them in time for Christmas. Do be assured that you're in our thoughts and prayers." Schaeffer, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 117–18.

⁴⁰ Follis, *Truth with Love*, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Sylvester Jacobs recollection of his first visit to L'Abri is illustrative of this point as well. He writes, "I couldn't figure this place out. It didn't seem like an intellectual community; more like a real homey home."⁴² He continues, referencing specifically Edith's efforts at hospitality, "She did it with such joy, as though the greatest thing in the world was giving strangers a square meal. Hard to believe we'd only just met."⁴³ As he and his fiancée prepared to marry and leave L'Abri, he summarized his feelings about L'Abri: "I tried to put into words what the community had meant to me; that I had felt sheltered, secure and loved. These people had given me back my life, and with it all the things that had been suppressed and denied me."⁴⁴ Specifically about the care Edith Schaeffer expressed to him personally, Jacobs stated, "I think of her as someone who cares, someone who loves me. She was part of my life in a very special way."⁴⁵ Jacobs tied this practice of in-home hospitality directly to the work done by Edith Schaeffer.

6. Prayer

D. G. Blomberg gives much credit to Edith's dynamic involvement in prayer that promoted an attitude of spiritual dependence that was fostered at L'Abri. He writes, "The whole history of L'Abri speaks of the belief that God has led each individual to teach or to study at L'Abri, and has provided for them each step of the way in response to prayer."⁴⁶ While Francis often employed intellectual propositions, even about prayer, Edith would be quick to take those propositions or ideas and bring them into the Christian experience at L'Abri. Francis and Edith both offered instruction for prayer in the context of community.

Prayer was an absolute essential at L'Abri—a "mainstay of the whole work."⁴⁷ Francis often talked about the biblical emphasis of prayer, but it was Edith who organized the community to these spiritual ends. She would arrange for prayer in the chalets. Two prayers were said at each meal, and if a crisis occurred during the day at L'Abri, everything stopped, and prayer would commence among the whole L'Abri community.⁴⁸ A day was set aside each week for staff prayer. L'Abri housed prayer rooms in which

⁴² Sylvester Jacobs with Linette Martin, *Born Black* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 106.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁵ Follis, *Truth with Love*, 137.

⁴⁶ Blomberg, "Apologetic Education," 17.

⁴⁷ Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1985), 137.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

various workers would pray for the ministry, the Schaeffers, or any other number of concerns. Yet, it was not just organized prayer, but spontaneous prayer that happened around coffee tables or on hikes.⁴⁹ As Edgar remembers humorously, “I would have to get used to smelling the excellent savors of the great cooking at L’Abri while the praying person went from Genesis to Revelation, then the cosmos.”⁵⁰ Edith, as well as Francis, kept this spiritual dependence and Christian practice of daily prayer as a keystone of their ministry.

Dick Keyes, a long-time L’Abri worker, describes Edith’s contribution to L’Abri, stating, “It is important here to realize the gifts of Edith Schaeffer in her prodigious energy and creative work making the L’Abri community function but also in her high awareness of the supernatural workings of God in the world and ability to communicate this to a wide range of people.”⁵¹ He continues, summarizing and illustrating Edith’s gifts in practice at L’Abri,

Edith Schaeffer was very gifted at communicating these truths in word and deed, with great attention to beauty in detail. Her book, *Hidden Art*, has helped many people to make this real. I remember that a friend of mine stumbled into the Schaeffers’ L’Abri chalet late one night, unannounced and a stranger. Edith Schaeffer was still up, working in the kitchen on meals for the next day and quickly discovered that he had not had a meal in a long time. Within minutes, filled with conversation, she brought him a tray with a hot meal, a tiny flower arrangement and a lit candle on the tray. He couldn’t believe it. But it was a small piece of what eventually enabled him to believe that a loving God is really there. This is the humanness of spirituality and the spirituality of humanness which is so needed in this world of “inhumanity and impersonality and facelessness.”⁵²

This testimony of Edith’s work describes not only her larger ideals but her day-to-day practice. Clearly, her work and practice were crucial to the success of L’Abri.

II. *Influence and Success of L’Abri*

L’Abri was birthed out of the desire to see the truth of Christianity lived out in a demonstrable way before the watching world. Even some of the Schaeffers’ biggest critics found “the description of life at L’Abri

⁴⁹ Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 30.

⁵⁰ Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 24.

⁵¹ Dick Keyes, “The Spiritual Integrity of Francis Schaeffer,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 79–97.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 87.

exhilarating.”⁵³ As L’Abri spread around the globe, its popularity grew. J. I. Packer notes,

Each L’Abri is study center, rescue mission, extended family, clinic, spiritual convalescent home, monastery, and local church rolled into one: a milieu where visitors learn to be both Christian and human through being part of a community that trusts God the Creator and worships him through Christ the Redeemer.⁵⁴

As Charles Cotherman notes,

To spend time at L’Abri ... was to enter into communities who deeply believed that loving God was the work of the heart, the mind, and the hands as one’s understanding of the gospel worked itself out into any number of vocational interests and propensities.⁵⁵

Clearly, L’Abri was and is a unique ministry.

Cotherman rightly labels L’Abri as a faith-and-life community. L’Abri was not a commune. Likewise, it was not strictly a study center. Instead, it was a place to flesh out a Christian worldview in the context of compassionate community. The combination of Francis’s deep discussions and Edith’s ability to cultivate beauty in everyday experiences offered guests a window into the meaningfulness of the Christian life.⁵⁶ Put another way, it became “a launching pad where a generation learned to aspire to meaningful action.”⁵⁷ Scott Burson and Jerry Walls write, “The L’Abri community is in many ways a microcosm of what the church ought to be. It combines spiritual formation, intellectual stimulation, holy living, ethnic diversity, shared responsibility and mutual interdependency. It is a fertile context for engaging the whole person.”⁵⁸

Undoubtedly, it was the combined work of Edith and Francis Schaeffer that made L’Abri such a sustained success. L’Abri has enjoyed growth since its beginning, though it has changed some over the years. L’Abri boasts works in the United States, Canada, Holland, Switzerland, England, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, and Australia. Further, L’Abri hosts annual conferences to facilitate the engagement of topics on important cultural and philosophical questions. However, these elements of success would not

⁵³ Jack Rogers, “Francis Schaeffer: The Promise and the Problem,” *Reformed Journal* 27.6 (1977): 19.

⁵⁴ James I. Packer, “Foreword: No Little Person,” in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Riegseger, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 14.

⁵⁵ Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 270.

have been realized if it were not for the work of its founders and their embodied practices. While appreciating the prophetic tone and apologetic-evangelistic approach of Francis, L'Abri workers have taken the spirit of L'Abri and applied it to a new generation.⁵⁹ Moreover, it is the continued work of family life and in-home hospitality that has thrived at various L'Abris around the world.

L'Abri's success can be tied to a variety of elements, many of which have already been mentioned. One component of success was the way in which ideas were handled by those involved in the ministry. There was one rule for L'Abri discussions, one that helped develop a culture of civil discourse:

Discussions for our own family and for those who had joined us must revolve around ideas and not organizations or personalities—that is, people. The realm of “ideas” was a wide one, including art, music, books, creativity of a variety of kinds, science, philosophy, medicine, law, world events, religions, and how you can know truth. Of course, the Bible was read and discussed, but in a wide spectrum of being “true” and “important”—in the *whole* of life. Discussion was not categorized into subject matters and separated into “disciplines” but invited thinking and recognizing relationships across the board.⁶⁰

There was no subject that was too taboo for discussion at L'Abri. The Schaeffers and L'Abri workers held to a firm conviction of both the truth of Scripture and the worth of the human person. Thus, all areas of life were open for exploration.⁶¹

L'Abri also seemed to be successful because of the “structure of plausibility” it offered to those who attended. This community and hospitality, along with the visual and practical love that was exemplified, were core components of L'Abri's apologetic and evangelistic approach.⁶² As noted before, it was the combination of reasoned arguments, embodied practice, and cultural imagination—a unified whole for the Edith Schaeffer—that made L'Abri so persuasive. The commitment to overcome barriers and to care for all made in the image of God was a significant strength of the ministry. The consistent attitude of care in this direction was, “actually making L'Abri a possibility, as people have come to L'Abri literally from the ends of the earth.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid., 14–15.

⁶⁰ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 434.

⁶¹ Blomberg, “Apologetic Education,” 13.

⁶² Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 232.

⁶³ Louis Gifford Parkhurst Jr., *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985), 41.

The work at L'Abri, and Edith Schaeffer's role in it, has been substantial.⁶⁴ L'Abri was not only substantially different but was also involved in "substantial healing" in the way it practiced its ministry.⁶⁵ Edith and Francis Schaeffer sought to model what a Christian community could look like in an incarnational practice. While not overly novel in its approach, the practice and participation of L'Abri became exceptional, at least from an evangelical perspective. Few other places offered a community that engaged in rich philosophical discussion while likewise engaging in manual labor, family gatherings, and spiritual formation. Thus, L'Abri was and is a shelter for not only the skeptical unbeliever but also the troubled believer as well.⁶⁶ L'Abri was not envisioned solely for discussion and hospitality, no matter how beneficial those elements are in their own right. Instead, it was a place for resolution—for cognitive, emotional, and moreover, personal healing.

L'Abri offered a particular demonstration of Christian spirituality, as noted already by Edith's emphasis on prayer. Francis believed the success of L'Abri to be tied to an almost existential dependency on God, moment by moment, grounded in the sacrifice of Christ. If it were not for those moments of dependency, he writes, "I don't believe there ever would have been a L'Abri."⁶⁷ For the Schaeffers, L'Abri was a ministry of faith—one in which they simply offered themselves to God in a way that demonstrated his existence to those around them. Francis was resolute that this was how their ministry at L'Abri began, and this was how the ministry should continue.⁶⁸

L'Abri has enjoyed a lasting influence, exemplified not least of which in the lives of those who attended. This includes not only thinkers like William Edgar, Nancy Pearcey, and Os Guinness but also artists like Sylvester Jacobs and Jane Stuart. Edith discusses the variety of ways in which L'Abri attendees were excited about future endeavors: "An actor at *L'Abri* at present is planning television productions; a landscape architect, a sculptor, a photographer, an educator are excited about ideas. In other words, a whole flood of creativity is being released as if a dam had been removed, and we can only guess at the possibilities ahead."⁶⁹ What did these individuals have in common? They had "a burning desire to communicate the truth of the universe and the

⁶⁴ Regarding Francis Schaeffer's use of "substantial healing," see Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, and Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* in the *Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982) [hereafter, *CWFS*], volumes 3 and 5 respectively.

⁶⁵ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer*, 13.

⁶⁶ Follis, *Truth with Love*, 160.

⁶⁷ Schaeffer, *Two Contents, Two Realities*, in *CWFS* 3:417.

⁶⁸ Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 41.

⁶⁹ Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, 224.

existence of God in the medium of their own talents.”⁷⁰ Much of this is attributed to the “personalness” and examples of the entire ministry.⁷¹

As Packer notes, L’Abri institutionally incarnated the ministerial emphases of both the Schaeffers. Not only truth, but beauty and goodness as well were embodied at L’Abri. Packer’s observation is key to the thesis of this article.⁷² L’Abri worked out visibly the ministerial vision of both Francis and Edith Schaeffer, not simply one or the other. They both sought to demonstrate the existence of the God who is there. Francis, caring for the individual, hoped to answer questions and offer hope in compassionate conversations. Edith, caring for the individual, hoped to offer a home and family in compassionate practice. Of course, their visions for ministry were complementary, not contradictory. Both Edith and Francis Schaeffer shared an imitable focus on the human person, whether through caring for cognitive struggles or emotional distress. As Edgar rightly notes, for Francis (and one could add, Edith) Schaeffer “It’s all about anthropology.”⁷³ This incarnational aspect of L’Abri may have been their best and most enduring apologetic. As Hankins comments, this incarnational emphasis, in which Edith had a key role, “was the perfect complement to [Francis’s] reasoned arguments for the Christian faith.”⁷⁴ L’Abri, under the leadership of Francis and Edith, produced Christian witness in both word and deed, both truth and love.

A compassionate focus on human beings remains a lasting influence of L’Abri and the Schaeffers’ ministry. Edgar notes, “Treating everyone, disabled or not, as fully human, was one of the most remarkable testimonies from this place.”⁷⁵ While space is not available here, the Schaeffers’ commitment to live out a holistic and resolute biblical-theological anthropology is one of their abiding legacies.⁷⁶ Many visitors and participants of L’Abri remember both of its founders as caring, compassionate, and emphasizing

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 244.

⁷² Packer address specifically Francis’s influence on L’Abri. However, out of seven things he noted Francis did that other evangelicals had not done, the seventh seems to have significant overlap in Edith’s contribution as well. He writes, “He celebrated the wholeness of created reality under God and stressed that the Christian life must be a corresponding whole—that is, a life in which truth, goodness, and beauty are valued together and sought with equal zeal.” Packer, “Foreword: No Little Person,” 9.

⁷³ Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 28.

⁷⁴ Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 108.

⁷⁵ Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 30.

⁷⁶ See Christopher Talbot, “The Mannishness of Man and the *Imago Dei*: An Analysis of Francis Schaeffer’s Anthropology and Apologetic Methodology,” *Eikon: A Journal of Biblical Anthropology* 3.1 (2021): 72–95.

the dignity and worth of each individual that darkened the doors of the Swiss chalets. Guests and attendees consistently felt seen, heard, and sheltered.

The apologetic focus of Edith and Francis was often in harmony. They both lauded the importance of communication, both from God and to other people. As one attendee of L'Abri noted, for the Schaeffers communication was not just an abstract concept to be discussed in literature and film. It was something to be demonstrated as a reality in their own daily lives—in the abundant giving of their time.⁷⁷

As Guinness notes, “Truth mattered and people mattered; those were the two secrets of L'Abri.”⁷⁸ L'Abri was resolute in placing an appropriate emphasis on these areas.

Francis recognized the combined nature of his and Edith's apologetic ministry. In writing the foreword to her book *L'Abri*, Francis stated that his books and hers were “two sides of a single coin.”⁷⁹ Francis infers from this comment that “his side” of the coin was the more intellectual and exegetical approach, seeking to give honest answers to honest questions, whereas Edith's “side” was “the demonstration that the Personal-Infinite God is *really there*.”⁸⁰ He seems to say that Edith's works not only speculate on God's existence but also record and demonstrate his actual work in history. While many of Edith's writings are more biographical, she seems just as set on demonstrating the existence of God as her husband.

One author records Francis as saying, “You must read her books along with mine to see the balance of the total work we have tried to do with L'Abri over the years.”⁸¹ Their books work in tandem with one another. As Francis focused on giving honest answers, Edith focused more on giving concrete glimpses of the *personal*-infinite God. Francis's work, at times, reads more abstract, or at least more philosophical. Conversely, Edith's work is more biographical and personal. Louis Parkhurst argues that Edith focused more on Christian living, whereas Francis's work was more evangelistic and apologetic—yet both cared about individuals becoming part of the larger Christian community and saw it as their shared goal to facilitate that end.⁸²

Together, both Edith and Francis, and their combined work at L'Abri, sought to promote a holistic, complete worldview and a commitment to put all areas of life under the Lordship of Christ.⁸³ As Eduardo Echeverria

⁷⁷ Walford-Dellù, “You Can Have a Family with Us,” 135.

⁷⁸ Os Guinness, as quoted in Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders*, 131.

⁷⁹ Francis Schaeffer, foreword to Schaeffer, *L'Abri*.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer*, 13.

⁸² Ibid., 14.

⁸³ Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 42.

states, “Undoubtedly, the enduring legacy of L’Abri Fellowship is found in Schaeffer’s vision of true Christian spirituality, that is, the Christian faith as a way of life.”⁸⁴ Both Francis and Edith demonstrated and wrote about a persuasive vision of Christian spirituality—one that was demonstrative as much as it was dependent on the supernatural work of the Spirit of God. In many ways, this vision of spirituality is hard to untangle between the two founders of L’Abri. Both heralded and encouraged a resolute Christian spirituality.

The success of L’Abri required the commitment and practice of both Francis and Edith. Together they opened their home with rich hospitality. Each sought to engage with the honest questions posed with honest answers. The sacrifice was one that required the commitment of their entire family. However, the identity of L’Abri was not primarily in its intellectual pursuits or in its engagement with culture or the arts. Instead, L’Abri seemed to find its identity in the gifting and vision of its two founders and how they demonstrated that vision in an authentic belief in God. Put another way, the strengths and influence of L’Abri seem to be a natural overflow from the influence of both Edith and Francis Schaeffer.

Conclusion

As Frank Schaeffer eulogizes his mother, he writes that she combined “compassion, cultural literacy, and loving energy.”⁸⁵ While this sums up the character and life of Edith Schaeffer, it also seems to speak to the success and heart of L’Abri. Edith’s work to demonstrate compassionate care and cultural awareness and express all of it in loving interaction with those around her demonstrates what made her contributions to L’Abri so compelling. Charles Cotherman argues that Edith Schaeffer was one of the most powerful and multitalented women in American evangelicalism of the last century.⁸⁶ Francis and Edith Schaeffer as a pair not only laid out an exemplary paradigm for doing apologetics but also embodied Christian community. Thus, the claim stands: Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to the success of L’Abri.

⁸⁴ Eduardo J. Echeverria, “The Christian Faith as a Way of Life: In Appreciation of Francis Schaeffer (on the Fiftieth Anniversary of L’Abri Fellowship),” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79.3 (2007): 244.

⁸⁵ Frank Schaeffer, “Goodbye Mom, Edith Schaeffer 1914–2013 RIP,” *Why I Still Talk to Jesus—In Spite of Everything*, March 30, 2013, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/frankschaeffer/2013/03/goodbye-mom-edith-schaeffer-1914-2013-rip/>.

⁸⁶ Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 44.

Of course, Edith Schaeffer's contributions led to L'Abri's success. Her work and writing make up a significant piece of the L'Abri puzzle—one combined with her husband's contributions that produced a remarkable community. David Colson says it right:

At the Schaeffers' L'Abri, ideas and lived experiences intersected in life-altering ways. ... Embracing the enduring vision of L'Abri can help us tackle the particular challenges of today's world. May our homes and hearts be a true shelter for others, holding within them the words of eternal life for people who have nowhere else to go.⁸⁷

The work and life of Edith Schaeffer speaks to the lasting influence of L'Abri. Further, while L'Abri has changed over the years, the basic tenets of the ministry are still there and sustain its continued mission.

⁸⁷ "SBJT Forum," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 164.



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