



Learning to Learn from Each Other

The Role of Churches in Immigrant Settlement and Integration - Summary Article

What does welcome look like? In rural New Brunswick, several churches from different denominations cooperate to raise money and provide services to Filipino temporary foreign workers. In Montreal, a Congolese immigrant becomes the pastor of a church composed mostly of other immigrants from Francophone Africa, and church members offer their own immigrant experience as a way of accompanying newcomers to Canada.

What does partnership look like? In Toronto, a Cantonese-speaking suburban church supports a Mandarin-speaking church from a different denomination as it works with newly-arrived refugees in the inner city. In Vancouver, church groups collaborate with other community agencies to provide affordable and supportive housing for newly-arrived refugee claimants.

These are just a few snapshots from a [two-year study](#) looking into the relationship between churches and newcomer immigrants and refugees to Canada. Churches have many different approaches, many different levels of involvement, and many different ideas about how immigration and refugee ministry could develop over the coming years. A participant in the study reflected on the broad spectrum of work currently being done across Canada and concluded, “We need to learn to learn from each other”.

These words summarize an opportunity both for Canadian churches and for newly-arrived immigrants and refugees as they settle in Canada. Learning from each other implies reciprocal relationships of give and take, and it implies ready-to-be-discovered work emerging within many different locales. As this study demonstrates, this work is very important, but sometimes it does not happen automatically. Sometimes we need to learn *how* to learn from each other.

And you? Whether you are a newcomer to Canada yourself, a congregation member hoping to launch a refugee-support ministry, a professor ready to contribute new scholarly insights, a denominational staff-person considering a new approach to government advocacy, or an “average person” simply extending friendship to newcomers in your local community, we hope that this project motivates you and offers you some new tools for making a difference in your community.

Project overview

The Role of Churches in Immigrant Settlement and Integration is a national research partnership intended to better equip church groups across Canada (whether congregations or denominations) to help immigrants and refugees settle and integrate into Canadian society. With funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the project is facilitated by the Centre for Community Based Research in collaboration with ten different partners including universities, Christian denominational offices and interdenominational networks.¹

¹ Partners include: Centre for Community Based Research, Trinity Western University, Tyndale University College & Seminary, Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre, Crandall University, Direction Chrétienne, The Salvation Army, Christian Reformed Church, Outreach Canada, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Canadian Council of Churches.



The first year of the project (September 2013 to August 2014) focused on research, including a national survey of 38 denominations from a variety of Christian traditions across Canada, key informant interviews with 18 national denominational, interdenominational, and nondenominational leaders, and a literature review of over 90 sources covering everything from academic articles to mainstream books to individuals' blogs. In addition to these nation-wide activities, local partners conducted focus groups and congregational case studies in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Moncton, and Shediac. The following four research questions guided both the national-level and local-level research:

1. What changes in vision (why churches are working on this), structure (what churches are doing), and process (how churches do their work) would best enable church groups to be more effective in supporting immigrants to settle and integrate?
2. How could immigrant church leaders help advance these changes?
3. How can research and training help to advance these changes?
4. What promising practices, structures and partnerships currently exist?

Overall, Year 1 revealed contrasting themes including *celebration* (e.g. we are well-involved, we are more aware of the needs of others, we are learning so much from our organizational partners), *lament* (e.g. we are not doing enough or in the right way, we do not seem willing to change based on our relationships with immigrants and refugees), and *readiness* (e.g. we want to be intentional about our immigrant work, we are ready to re-train our leaders, we want to learn from best practices from other churches).

The second year of the project (September 2014 to August 2015) is focusing on mobilizing research findings. Research partners are sharing insights in a variety of formats (including a guide-to-action for congregations), and are engaging interested others to develop strategies for translating the research into new ways of carrying out immigrant and refugee ministry. Perhaps this is where you have a part to play!

Learning about our role as churches

Canadian churches work with immigrants and refugees in many different ways. From meeting people's immediate needs such as housing, food, and clothing, to building friendships, to providing accompaniment to medical and legal appointments, to engaging in political advocacy on behalf of newcomers, to sponsoring refugees or offering sanctuary in their church buildings, Canadian churches clearly have a tradition of "stepping up".

At the same time, questions emerge. Is there always consistency between how churches envision this work and what they actually do? What does Canada's increasing cultural and religious diversity mean for how churches work with immigrants? Are churches aware of what other churches are doing, and are they collaborating well? How are immigrant church leaders shaping the way that churches respond to newcomers? Do church-based ministries represent a helpful niche within the overall way that Canada welcomes immigrants and refugees, or does this work reveal something out of joint with how our country relates to newcomers?



In other words, churches are still grappling with how best to work with immigrants and refugees in Canada today. And as they explore their role, they want to hear and learn from others. The research gives up-to-date insight into how congregations and denominations from across the county and across the Christian spectrum can learn from each other. Here are some of the main themes:

- ***Role comes out of a clear vision.*** In terms of how churches envision this work – their underlying motivations, attitudes, and the values that drive them – there is broad consensus about the biblical mandate to welcome strangers, the spiritual vocation of nurturing relationships with newcomers as a practical way to lead a good Christian life, and the responsibility of Canadian citizenship. For those who have their own story of being immigrants or refugees, there is an additional motivation of wanting to “give back” based on their own experience. Some denominations and congregations express their vision through formal policy statements, while for others vision emerges informally from the “grassroots”.
 - ***Leadership is key.*** Leadership from congregational and denominational leaders is an important ingredient in determining how churches work with immigrants and refugees. Church leaders provide vision, passion and concrete direction. Some denominations have leaders at the national level whose role includes encouraging others to be more responsive to immigrants/refugees and cultural diversity. And yet there were calls for churches to better attune themselves to immigrant and refugee issues. According to one denominational leader, church leaders need to better posture their church as a “learning culture”, and be willing to “learn to listen and share power with immigrants and refugees”. This theme was re-emphasized by others who spoke about the importance of involving immigrants as leaders. After all, they have awareness of immigrant cultures and share the immigrant experience. In the words of another denominational leader, “We need more diversity in our leadership. Not just for our congregations, but all the way up to our executive leaders.”
 - ***There are many roles, but churches tend to focus on a few.*** Churches are predominantly involved with meeting the more immediate settlement needs of newcomers. For example, churches are typically involved in giving practical assistance (such as clothing, food, housing, legal help) or providing personal development programs (such as English as a Second Language classes). Many churches today also continue the long-standing tradition of sponsoring refugees and supporting them to settle in Canada. At a denominational level, almost three quarters (71%) of denominations surveyed said that they are tangibly supporting the establishment of newcomer congregations. As can be seen, these roles tend to be reactive, responding to needs that seem most urgent. Churches are less likely to be involved in activities leading to longer-term newcomer integration such as providing community development programming (e.g., job development, health care) or advocating for systemic changes. They are also less likely to offer sanctuary to refugee claimants facing deportation.
 - ***Churches fill a “relational niche”.*** In comparison to the many other services offered by government and social service agencies, Canadian churches appear highly adept at
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extending friendship and informal support. They simply and naturally respond to the needs of immigrants and refugees as they emerge on the journey of life. For example, one participant said, “As a newcomer myself I can tell you that without people around you to encourage you, to help you feel like you’re not lost, and to care about you, it’s a very long walk. And that’s the experience of people who come without church support.” Another participant who had gone through the refugee determination process put it this way: “It made such a difference to be surrounded by supportive people. Especially people who are not paid to help you.” This relational niche can help immigrants to navigate their new culture and help them to build “social capital” – bonding to others in their ethnic or spiritual community and bridging to others in their new homeland.

- **Awareness about what others are doing is mixed.** In terms of the extent to which churches are aware of the immigrant and refugee work being done by others, results are mixed. In some cases, well-oiled local and national partnerships have formed across denominational lines precisely because churches have become aware of complimentary assets, skills, or resources in other groups. In other cases, denominational leaders are unaware of what their constituent churches are doing in certain sectors of newcomer ministry, or else congregants feel disconnected from the work being done by other people in their own local community. This lack of awareness may be linked to the fact that churches typically do not place much emphasis on proactive planning for immigrant and refugee ministry (and even less on evaluating what they are doing).

Learning to be partners

Although Canadian churches are involved in different ways with newcomer ministry, many participants identified partnership as being one of the most fundamental aspects of their current work, and a key area of growth for the future. In fact, partnership might be the key theme that spans all three core areas of vision, structure, and process. If we want to “learn to learn from each other”, partnership offers an excellent point of orientation because it consistently emerges as among the best of existing practices and among the most far-reaching of what is to come.

How have churches understood partnership? Participants in this project talked about partnership in practical terms – collaboration with different levels of government, cooperation with other immigrant and refugee service agencies, teamwork with other churches, and so on. Added to this was a more intuitive sense of “mutuality” that should mark partnerships.

One Toronto-area pastor put it this way: “For us collaboration means that this isn’t just about us and what we can gain from a relationship...It’s about the people and organizations that are around us and how to connect and link with them in a collaborative effort to make things better here in our community.” A Halifax focus group participant put a different twist on partnership by suggesting this approach: “I am not my brother’s keeper. I am my brother’s brother [and my sister’s sister.]” In other words, partnership involves seeing our identities as being interconnected, with mutual benefits for all.

On a week-to-week basis, churches discover partnership as they worship – Canadian-born and newcomer alike – with well-established traditions mingling with new ways. In Halifax, for example,



a church leader reported that “newcomers have taught us to pray in different ways and to think differently.”

In the longer term, churches are learning that partnership impacts more than weekly activities; it can affect their core sense of vocation. In Vancouver, a participant talked about working with newcomers not as a service but as a way of life, about Canadian-born church people and newcomers “living life together” as a way of “creating a world of welcome”.

Our learning continues

This two-year project provides many glimpses of what this “world of welcome” is all about. The research project itself is a partnership of many different people welcoming each other’s contributions. The resulting stories are about people giving and receiving welcome. The stories are also about pursuing a vision that moves beyond one-time welcome to including people in the family as fellow brothers and sisters. In one way or another, Christian spirituality – that which undergirds all of what churches do – points to the mysterious and age-old “migrant stories” where God reaches out to include all people into the family of God.

Moving forward, Canadian churches will continue on their learning curve. On the small-scale, a recently-arrived immigrant family will turn up at church on a Sunday morning, a refugee will share her story with a sponsorship committee, or a new opportunity will arise for a church to collaborate with a local immigrant settlement organization. As participants in this project have pointed out, these are situations that will require ongoing training. Without detracting at all from many Christians’ natural instincts toward supporting newcomers, new (or renewed) skills and awareness are needed particularly in the areas of intercultural competency, understanding the lived experiences of newcomers and related government policy, and community-based partnership development.

On the large-scale, Canada as a whole – land of Indigenous peoples and newcomers, land of many languages and traditions – continues as an unfinished project. We Canadians are still learning how to come together as diverse peoples, and the joys and complexities of learning from one another will persist. Individual Christians – along with their churches and other organizations – make an important contribution toward ensuring that Canada is truly a place where everyone can learn and live together.

For more information about this research project and how you can get involved in “*the learning network*” visit www.communitybasedresearch.ca/Page/View/PDG
or email kyla@communitybasedresearch.ca.