



National Key Informant Report

The Role of Churches in Immigrant Settlement and Integration

Kyla English, Alethea Stobbe, & Rich Janzen

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The Role of Churches in Immigrant Settlement and Integration is a national research partnership intended to better equip church groups across Canada to help immigrants and refugees settle and integrate into Canadian society. This two-year project is funded by the **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)**.

Led by the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR), the project has an interdenominational focus, with founding partners representing academics, denominational leaders, and interdenominational networks. More information about the project can be found at: www.communitybasedresearch.ca/Page/View/PDG

Key informant interviews of Canadian leaders was one method carried out by research partners. Other methods included a literature review, a national denominational survey, and focus groups/cases studies held within the local study sites (Vancouver, Toronto, Montréal, Moncton, Halifax).

Research Partnership

Rich Janzen	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Joanna Ochocka	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Mark Chapman	<i>Tyndale University College & Seminary</i>
James Watson	<i>The Salvation Army</i>
Sam Reimer	<i>Crandall University</i>
Michael Wilkinson	<i>Trinity Western University</i>
Glenn Smith	<i>Christian Direction</i>
Frédéric Dejean	<i>Université de Montréal</i>
Lorne Hunter	<i>Outreach Canada</i>
Rick Hiemstra	<i>Evangelical Fellowship of Canada</i>
Peter Noteboom	<i>Canadian Council of Churches</i>
Steve Kabetu	<i>Christian Reformed World Missions</i>

Key Informant Team

Rich Janzen	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Michael Wilkinson	<i>Trinity Western University</i>
James Watson	<i>The Salvation Army</i>
Mark Chapman	<i>Tyndale University College & Seminary</i>
Peter Noteboom	<i>Canadian Council of Churches</i>
Joanna Ochocka	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Alethea Stobbe	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Kimia Ghomeshi	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>
Kyla English	<i>Centre for Community Based Research</i>

Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR)
73 King Street West, Suite 300
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 1A7
Phone: (519) 741-1318 Fax: (519) 741-8262
E-mail: rich@communitybasedresearch.ca
Website: www.communitybasedresearch.ca



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Introduction

This report is a summary of research findings based on 18 key informant interviews with denominational, interdenominational, and non-denominational leaders. The key informant interviews were one method in a larger two-year national research project exploring the role of churches in assisting immigrants and refugees to settle and integrate into Canadian society. The purpose of these interviews was to draw upon key informants' collective expertise to answer the project's four main research questions:

- What short and mid-term changes in vision, structure and process would best enable church groups to be more effective in supporting immigrants and refugees to settle and integrate?
- How could the role of immigrant church leaders be maximized in order to advance these changes?
- What are the current research and knowledge capacities and gaps of church groups in addressing the needed changes?
- What promising practices, structures and partnerships currently exist?

Key informants were purposively sampled according to the following criteria: broad-based awareness of immigrant settlement issues, regional representation, denominational affiliation, and gender. Names of key informants are listed at the back of this report.

Definitions guiding the key informant interviews included:

Immigrant: Anyone born outside of Canada (from all immigrant classes, including refugees, temporary foreign workers, and international students).

Refugee: A person who is forced to flee from persecution.

Settlement: The shorter-term transitional issues upon first arrival in Canada.

Integration: The longer-term process of becoming fully included within Canadian society.

Congregation: A group of Christians who regularly gather together at a designated location to worship, promote religious beliefs, and minister to each other as well as others.

Denomination: A network or organizational structure that oversees multiple congregations.

This report is organized according to the main sections of the key informant interviews. It begins with a description of Canadian trends identified by key informants, and then proceeds through three areas of change: i) vision; ii) structure; and iii) process. The report ends with future directions, providing recommendations that may better equip churches to work with immigrants and refugees to help them settle and integrate into Canadian society.

Canadian Trends

Key informants were asked to use their “balcony level” perspectives in order to discuss the trends they had observed in the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees in Canada. Three major trends emerged: changes in government policy, changes in public receptivity, and changes in the church context.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

One of the strongest policy themes that emerged related to changes in the Canadian government’s **admission criteria** for immigrants and refugees. To begin, there has been a substantial increase of economic class immigrants in recent years, both for permanent and temporary immigrants. Key informants noted that the Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) program has been expanding as a strategy to fill skill shortages. In addition, the government’s focus on immigration as an economic stimulant has resulted in the increased recruitment of highly-educated professionals thought to have the skills and resources needed to contribute to the Canadian labour market.

“The education level has gone up steadily... For example [35 years ago] probably 3 out of 25 [immigrants] had a master’s degree at that time and currently it’s 1 out of 5 that has a master’s degree.”

“Right now there’s a trend to bring more professionals, more of the people with money and resources and over the years I’ve seen that increase. And the numbers show that very much; today we have over 60% of the immigrants that Canada brings are people that have professions and have specific skills and have money.”

The economic immigrant class has expanded at the expense of other immigrant classes. Key informants noted increased stringency for family-class immigrants and sponsored refugees, as well as for refugee claimants.

“We [Canada] have policy that’s...more open for [economic immigrants] and more restrictive for anybody else. So family class has been more restricted. Refugees... the laws and the criteria for [refugees] to come is also more restrictive, especially for refugee claimants. Over the years that has restricted, restricted, restricted – and as a result of that what I see and not just myself but many of us are seeing, more people with precarious immigration status or people that are becoming undocumented.”

“The federal government is ... closing the doors and making everything more difficult. Citizenship is more difficult. I’ve been involved with private sponsorship; even that is more difficult. Permanent residence is more difficult. Even learning about refugee claimants - seeing how much more difficult it is for them to have a successful claim. So I see the trends of Canada shutting the doors.”

A second policy theme related to **changes in immigrants’ and refugees’ country of origin**. Key informants described the different waves of immigrant source countries throughout Canada’s history. Today immigrants and refugees are coming to Canada from “diverse” countries from around the globe, and in particular from Asian countries.

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“The demographics are changing in the neighbourhood and we see people that we’ve never seen before in our neighbourhood and they have needs and concerns and if we want to continue to be connected to our neighbourhood, we have to figure out what our needs and concerns are. So I think there’s something about the change in demographics in a neighbourhood that...help churches think about what they are going to do different because of the changing demographics.”

A third policy theme related to the **increased diversity in landing locations** for immigrants and refugees coming to Canada. Key informants noted that immigrants and refugees are increasingly settling in locations other than the three traditional receiving centres of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal. Although these three cities still receive the majority, key informants noted that mid and small-sized cities, towns, and even rural areas are now receiving immigrants and refugees.

“Churches in the larger urban areas across the country, they [have] learned and relearned and figured out. And now there’s the churches in the smaller towns and rural communities who to a large extent over the 30 years have felt untouched by this whole conversation, but now that’s starting to change in the last 5-7 years. When I’m in rural communities I hear more and more about that. People [immigrants and refugees] are showing up in their communities.”

“What was once true only in Toronto and Vancouver is now true in places like Prince Albert, Saskatchewan and small communities in New Brunswick and places like that... These are communities that have been stable and white and are now being infused with color and accent. The huge cities [like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal] weren’t ready for it 15 years ago, and the churches in the small towns are not ready for it now. We need to help them take on the challenge that’s before them.”

PUBLIC RECEPTIVITY

A second Canadian trend related to the willingness or readiness of Canadian-born citizens to receive and welcome immigrants and refugees. The opinions among key informants about the direction of the public’s changing attitude toward immigrants and refugees was mixed. Some believed that the Canadian public has developed an increased awareness and understanding about immigrant issues, often stemming from personal experience. However, more key informants that commented on public attitudes saw the public moving towards a less accepting attitude. Key informants often attributed this negativity to the media’s involvement in influencing the public.

“The understanding of the public has changed a lot... so there’s a lot more resources, social services available for people [immigrants and refugees].”

“I just think there is a more selfish attitude or maybe it’s a fearful attitude about letting too many people in [to Canada] or you know, they [immigrants and refugees] are going to take our jobs, those kind of things that you hear about.”

“Sometimes I feel like we [Canadian-born people] are more concerned about stopping people from coming here [to Canada] than working on the conditions that would actually improve people’s lives.”

“And also something else that I see in [Canadian-born] people is more of a dislike of refugee claimants ...government officials talk [to the media] about refugees as bogus refugees, so there’s more of a strong

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media involvement in a way. Which I think has impacted people negatively, [Canadian-born] people, and I would imagine and I would include also, church people.”

THE CHURCH CONTEXT

Canadian churches themselves were also seen to be in a process of change. First, key informants saw the composition of churches changing to better reflect the **cultural and racial diversity** of Canadian society. They also noted an increase in the diversity and number of ethno-specific churches in Canada. Some saw an increase in immigrants and refugees holding church leadership positions, although this was limited.

“In 1987 when I began my ministry, there were perhaps 6 churches across the country [Canada] that were multicultural. Multicultural is when there are groups of varying colors and accent in the pew, but very little shared leadership. From 2000 to 2007 there was in the neighbourhood of 2000 churches that became multicultural and let’s say 500 of them completed the transition to become intercultural, which is where there’s shared leadership at the pastoral, board, and ministry level.”

Second, key informants saw churches changing in their **support for immigrants and refugees**. Here, key informant opinions were mixed. Some saw increasing levels of support. Often this increased support was attributed to the fact that churches had begun take small steps in providing for immigrants’ and refugees’ immediate settlement needs. A couple of key informants also saw churches engaging beyond the initial connection, providing substantial ongoing assistance.

“The churches that are actually immigrant churches and those that are Canadian, both are becoming more supportive of immigrants.”

“So before 2011, [there was]... a contact level of support. But now especially with the sponsorship program, the role of church is much more extensive and providing many services throughout the entire process.”

“And within the church context there’s more understanding of what the issues are and how to respond. So there’s people with life experience working with 10 years with one group and 10 years with another.”

“We have always ministered to migrants ...The countries of origin of the migration trends have changed over the years, but the role our church plays continues to answer to the varied cultures.”

Other key informants saw low levels of support, either because of a recent decrease in support or consistently low involvement over time. Sometimes the low level of support was nuanced depending on the type and location of the church, the specific issues being addressed, or the level of commitment to support immigrants and refugees for the long-term.

“In 1970s, [churches] were dominant among groups advocating for fair policies for refugees... During my time, I’ve seen how churches have gradually stepped back from [that] time.”

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“Years ago, all the major churches would have had someone on staff working on refugee issues – rights, sponsorship, resettlement etc. – they would have one or more or many doing that work...But because of changes in church staff capacity they are all gone.”

“One thing I was going to say is I’ve seen somewhat of a trend that in larger urban areas - it seems that there’s been sort of a decreasing involvement.”

“I think the churches that are very intentional for social justice are doing more. I think [those churches] are more intentional because they know the trend; they know what’s behind that trend, right? But regular churches, I think they’re probably very much been tainted, been infected, if I can use that term, by the general discourse by media and by the government [calling refugees] illegal people or criminals... just here because they want to cheat the country, cheat the system. I think there’s more of that today.”

Vision – Why Churches Work with Immigrants and Refugees

Vision is one important component in ensuring that churches are enabled to assist immigrants and refugees in making Canada their new home. For the purposes of this project, vision is defined as the motivations that provide direction for churches in supporting immigrant settlement and integration. Key informants acknowledged that different factors motivate different people and that motivations can change with changing contexts.

There were four main motivations that key informants discussed during their interviews. The first two motivations were theologically based: (1) the desire to live out the Christian life; (2) the desire to grow and revitalize churches. The second two connect to people’s common humanity: (3) the desire to be a good citizen; and (4) the desire to help others in response to their own migrant story.

MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO LIVE OUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The most frequent motivation mentioned by key informants related to Christian calling. In other words, working with immigrants and refugees was a matter of faith and obedience as informed by scripture.

“So I think that’s a unique thing that Christian community has, because we’ve got this biblical, theological foundation for why we should do it.”

More specifically, scripture informed motivation in two ways. First, people are motivated by a desire to be **faithful to the biblical narrative as a whole**. Some key informants pointed to a “biblical migrant identity”, drawing parallels between the plight of migrants across biblical stories and today’s immigrants and refugees. Others highlighted the biblical theme of “bringing together all nations” into an inclusive kingdom of God.

“Again the teaching of... you were strangers in the land as well. And that seems to [be] ... a door opener for many churches.”

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“So it starts with creation and then through the Old Testament - the idea of, even the people of God being aliens and being sent out... you know Abram being sent from his family to be a foreigner.”

“Some people would say that the Bible is a book of migrants... For example Adam and Eve who were forced to migrate because of their disobedience and then their son was also forced to leave because of a crime that he committed, but there was also instruction from different people in the Bible to move - Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mary and Joseph had to leave Egypt. All of our work is grounded on those stories and theological groundings, so that’s the motivation to be faithful, to be faithful to do what is asked from us.”

“I think the impetus... and this isn’t just my impetus, but it’s been the impetus for the whole immigrant care movement in Canada, has been Acts 17:26-27. The whole idea is from one man God made the nations and in Christ he’s bringing that back together.”

“The moral imperative is to recover the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God, which is neither male nor female, nor Greek nor Gentile, nor Iranian, nor Jamaican, nor Dominican, nor Kenyan - it’s a great big imperative and I think European Canadians have not realized, or fully appreciated, how thoroughly ghettoized we are ourselves. And the future isn’t in our ghetto.”

Second, people are motivated by a desire to be **faithful to specific biblical exhortations**. People wish to be obedient to particular “chapters and verses” that are seen to direct their daily Christian life. Leading examples included welcoming the stranger, loving one’s neighbour, helping those in need (including the “poor” and “alien”), and sharing the gospel message with all.

“I would say first of all a theological [motivation] about being welcoming to a stranger, about hospitality.”

“We look at the Old Testament passages around welcoming the stranger and realize we are all strangers on this earth and seeing what God commanded the Israelites in terms of welcoming the strangers and I think many of us take that to heart. I over the years have used Matthew 25 many, many times where Jesus says anyone who comes to us – whether it’s a refugee, prisoner, or stranger, or someone who’s hungry – that we see Jesus in that person. And I think basically that is what motivates people.”

“Hospitality means loving the neighbors, not just those very close to us, but especially in context of the Good Samaritan, loving those who are in need.”

“I think that in general the churches would use the immigrant, the widow and the orphan passages of God’s love and therefore God’s direction.”

“Certainly a Christian worldview says that we want opportunities to put the Jesus story in front of people that have never had access to it. And that certainly is a motivational factor for ... an evangelical denomination. And so when you know, your neighbors are Somali Muslims, there are appropriate ways of doing that and inappropriate ways of doing that. And so there’s a whole motivation around spiritual outreach.”

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MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO GROW AND REVITALIZE CHURCHES

A second motivation related to the desire to enhance Canadian churches. Most key informants that discussed this motivation saw it as a secondary or background motivation. Some saw church people motivated by a view of immigrant ministry leading to **church growth** – infusing otherwise “dying” churches with new members. Other key informants thought that Canadian churches were hoping for **revitalization**, with immigrants and refugees bringing genuine energy and enthusiasm for faithful Christian living.

“Well there are several divergent streams going on. There’s one that I call, I didn’t originate the term - vampire form of evangelism – which sees these people [immigrants and refugees] coming and they say, ‘Ha, new blood’. And they see potential members to boost their own churches declining numbers and replace aging workers and so on. So that is one motivation.”

“The church wants to reproduce itself; new recruits will advance the growth and prospering of church community. I don’t think this is often articulated as a motive but it is certainly a consequence of the primary motives.”

“I see a very dynamic stream of Christianity, mostly from the Southern hemisphere, but not exclusively, re-entering this country, many of them having come from the persecuted church, who have a very articulated apologetic, a profound ethic of evangelism. They know their faith, they’re passionate about it, they would like to communicate it and they’ve come to a [Canadian context] that has a very morose, lackadaisical, sometimes depressed and often dying church... I see a possibility of reintroducing a profound aspect of the gospel, which is still living in the immigrant church, which we desperately need infused into the inherited church here.”

“New immigrants being welcomed and the church actually becomes more vibrant. Because new people are coming in because they are serving these people who are coming in, this adds vitality to the church; now the whole church is serving others.”

MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO BE GOOD CITIZENS

A third motivation related to citizenship; contributing to the greater common good. Key informants saw church members motivated by different levels of citizenship. Good citizenship was understood at a global level (e.g., responding to the plight of refugees around the world), at a national level (e.g., contributing to a caring society), and at the local or neighbourhood level (e.g., developing healthy communities).

“There is education in churches and emphasis on global citizenship, being global communities, seeing beyond Canada’s borders and seeing the injustice in the world and how we can respond as Canadians.”

“It is the culture as a whole; it is the society as a whole that is benefitting from programs [run by churches to help immigrants and refugees settle and integrate]. So it’s not just to help settle refugees and immigrants, but it’s... creating a society where in the long run it’s going to benefit our community and economy.”

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"[We realize] we [Canadians] have so much and they hear of such tremendous need and open their hearts in compassion. You know I think people are motivated around justice issues where they see such imbalances and people are suffering so inordinately in certain places. They move to respond that way."

"They see the benefit of helping somebody, and that's going to be good for society, you know, bringing them to the community of the church... I think being part of the church community is a really positive thing for mental health, for spiritual health, for whatever – it really is beneficial and it is beneficial to society when somebody is benefitted...it's always good for society and I do think that probably most churches would see that."

"They [a particular congregation] have motivations around [how] our Christian presence here in this community could ameliorate some of the gang violence that is a factor in that community. And so things like setting up sports programs and arts programs and after school tutoring programs... doing these things actually helps to bring about change in the neighbourhood."

MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO HELP OTHERS IN RESPONSE TO ONE'S OWN MIGRANT STORY

A fourth motivation related to one's personal migrant story. In particular, a relatively recent migration story, and the acknowledgement of newfound privilege living in Canada, was the impetus for action.

"Many [immigrant] churches still have strong ethnic identity that ties back to their home church and they want to be responsive to their needs.... For the local ministry who focuses on refugees, anyone who participates and supports this ministry do so because they themselves were immigrants or refugees and they were welcomed into Canada and they want to give back in the same way."

"Most of the [congregational leaders] and elder generation [of this immigrant denomination] are immigrants themselves so they feel a sense of responsibility to their homeland and the people they left behind. Since they left [their country of origin], Canada has a much higher standard of living than they had in [their country of origin]... So there is sense of obligation of helping them who are suffering; those part of same community and same faith. So they have an eye towards looking back towards their relatives and others they left behind."

"Most Canadians are immigrants or descendants of immigrants so we know what it is like to have to settle and integrate into Canada with the love and help of fellow Christians."

Structure – What Churches Are Doing

Structure refers to the activities and partnerships that facilitate churches to work with immigrants and refugees. Key informants discussed three major topics related to structure: (1) how church groups initially connect to immigrants and refugees; (2) what activities church groups subsequently pursue; and (3) what challenges church groups face in fulfilling these activities.

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INITIAL CONNECTION TO IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Key informants acknowledged the many ways that churches make initial contact with immigrants and refugees. This initial connection can be an important milestone in the settlement experience as immigrants and refugees seek out new relationships and resources to ease their adjustment to their new homeland. As congregants form relationships with immigrants and refugees, these initial connections can also lead them to become involved in greater ways – whether through connecting newcomers to their church, teaching their church about immigrant and refugee issues, or advocating for and with immigrants and refugees.

Key informants noted that the most common facilitator of connections between churches and immigrants and refugees was by the “word of mouth” of family members or friends. This relational connection also applied to refugees, as it was family members who were most likely to approach the church to initiate sponsorship for a relative overseas. However, key informants also mentioned other ways that connections could be made, including when immigrants and refugees live in close proximity to the church (even if they eventually switch congregations), through referrals from settlement workers, and through congregants’ involvement in the programs of community partners.

“One [method of connection] is through word of mouth. So we’ve helped a family and another family moves into the same building – they are friends and they are like, ‘You should meet my friend [at the church], she can get things.’”

“I think... normally the point of contact for most churches is that they have someone in their congregation that is connected ... So they have family that is in a refugee situation. So that’s where the bulk of our [refugee sponsorship] applications come from, which is partly why I think it’s so small because it is very much relationally driven.”

“Well initially... [congregations] connect with immigrants either living next door to them or by turning up in the next pew or next chair in church.”

“The second [method of connection] is the settlement workers...They are meeting families and they say, ‘This family arrived and they need this and this thing’, and that’s for us [church groups] to follow up. Similarly, we have settlement workers in the school and they also will connect with us if they know that there’s a family needing some help.”

“Another way that it happens, people that served on a committee from [a specific congregation] started serving coffee at an ESL class and got talking to people and uncovered problems and got involved...[They] became leaders in that denomination on the issue.”

AFTER THE CONNECTION: ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORT SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION

Key informants were asked to discuss the ways that churches are presently supporting immigrants and refugees to settle and integrate into Canadian society. Throughout this discussion, key informants emphasized that church groups act or react differently in response to the needs of their specific community.

“The dialogue that I have with our church leaders is that there’s no one program that’s the right thing to do with every group of immigrants. It’s a question of ‘What does this group need?’”

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“There’s lots of ways churches can be involved, but that’s the thing... to be involved. Every community has its own need, so there isn’t a cookie cutter thing across the board that can be done. You have to know your community.”

Key informants summarized a number of important roles that the church groups can play in the settlement and integration process. These roles are grouped into five categories in order of strength of opinion: (1) addressing immediate settlement needs (including practical and spiritual needs); (2) providing relational support; (3) advocating for immigrants and refugees; (4) assisting with long-term integration needs; and (5) forming partnerships with other congregations or organizations. Most key informants explained that church groups play many of these roles.

Addressing Immediate Needs

Immediate settlement needs encompass the services and supports that immigrants or refugees initially need in order to settle in Canadian society. Immediate settlement needs include both practical and spiritual needs. Examples of practical needs include access to education, transportation, employment, doctor’s appointments, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, legal and paralegal services, housing, and help with shopping for groceries, clothing and furniture. Examples of spiritual needs include having access to church services in a native language, and opportunities to connect with others of the same ethnicity and/or faith tradition. It is important to note that while immediate settlement needs apply to both immigrants and refugees, the needs of refugees were often acknowledged as being greater than the needs of immigrants.

“It’s housing and food and employment and all those things they need – their shelter. They [immigrants and refugees] can’t think beyond those things. And so it’s really important that in their first year they get those things.”

“Some of our churches offer ESL programs... That’s one of the first requirements for refugees, just to establish the language because it helps with their resettlement.”

“What struck me was the practicality of services offered – for example completing a tax return – almost any congregation can organize this and is in fact very useful for newcomers. Much more ambitious would be provision of jobs, or purchase of housing.”

“To me, one of the really strong points of [the] private sponsorship program [is that] the church that receives the family is hands-on from the minute they get off the plane... [They] include the family in deciding where they want their apartment and helping them learn about public transportation.”

“What’s happened in our case is that the [specific immigrant population] really wanted to keep having church in their own language and their own style, and our church allows it and I think it’s fantastic.”

Providing Relational Support

Relational support was identified as an equally important, yet often more challenging role. Intentionally developing relationships can help immigrants and refugees feel welcomed, supported,

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and cared for. Some key informants described relational support as emerging through the process of addressing settlement needs – as church members work with immigrants or refugees to find housing and fill out paperwork, they may develop friendships and support one another.

“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... People around you who care and can direct you; it’s a very long walk. And that is the experience of people who come without church support.”

“Someone who spoke at our conference who had gone through the refugee process had spoken about how well they [his family] were supported throughout their process. It meant such a difference to be surrounded by supportive people. Especially people who are not paid to help.”

“People who can ask how they [immigrants and refugees] are doing, and how their children are adjusting to school, and how they are doing in their job search, and how they are finding Canada as a whole. So the social component of having a network of friends. This is the contribution of the church.”

“You can help people, such as accompanying people somewhere... A lot of newcomers have to do things like go to hearings, etc. Having someone to go along [with] is real solidarity building.”

“In the community, people are really generous with their money, but not their time. And it’s time that they [immigrants and refugees] need most.”

Advocating for Immigrants and Refugees

The third most common role discussed by key informants was advocating for immigrant and refugee issues. Those key informants who talked about advocacy agreed that experience working with immigrants and refugees leads to increased understanding, which often leads to increased advocacy.

“When you do get involved, you do start to see a little further... They [church groups] will see the lack of services or they’ll see the lack of acceptance, or maybe [they’ll] see sort of a discrepancy between the government message around refugees and what they’re experiencing themselves working with refugees. And I think in some cases that has led people into becoming advocates.”

“I mean you have the doers, the people that are just helping out with a cup of water... And then you have the other people who are more involved in understanding how they [immigrants or refugees] are disadvantaged already from a political perspective. And so they’re also able to do advocacy.”

Assisting with Longer-Term Integration

Most key informants primarily talked about how church groups are supporting immediate settlement rather than longer-term integration. Those who did discuss integration described the many challenges that immigrants and refugees face, often without providing concrete examples of ways that church groups help. For example, some key informants discussed the specific challenges faced by immigrant children and youth, such as learning a new language while struggling to succeed in school. One role that did emerge in relation to longer-term integration, which was similar to churches’ role in short-term settlement, was the importance of providing on-going relational support.

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"I don't know if the Canadian churches have really tackled the integration question... They have settlement services, which means the people are able to feed themselves and take care of... basic needs, but the integration services are a much longer-term process. Usually 5 to 12 years... It takes them through self-doubt and cultural-doubt and all sorts of other steps, and the church just doesn't know what to do... There's the reality that they need to become people of two cultures - their old culture, as well as their new culture."

"The major reason why immigrants come to church is to feel like home. When they are hosted, they feel like home. When I see this happen, when the new immigrants invite our people to their home, then there's family already. And the integration is really very solid at this point."

"It's relationship – that's what they need...The only way they're going to integrate is if they feel comfortable with Canadian people."

Forming Partnerships with Congregations and Organizations

Key informants acknowledged the need for church groups to partner with others. Some discussed the importance of being connected to **other congregations within the same denomination**. Through these partnerships, individual congregations can learn from each other and inspire each other in their practices. There was, however, some disagreement as to whether congregations are actually forming these types of partnerships. While some key informants believed they were, others said that intradenominational partnerships are rare or do not exist.

"Our [ethno-specific] church has affiliated with an existing denomination. For us, this is a good way of being integrated when we get to know the other churches and like-minded groups. Our denomination is helping out immigrants through a community-centred approach. Being exposed to what other churches do... gives us inspiration to do the same."

"Across the country we have all our churches in networks – five or six churches. So that's a key piece...They're relating to other churches of other cultures as part of their participation in our movement."

"Despite everything we are taught, churches [in a specific denomination] are independent of each other. I cannot recall a church talking about a partnership with other churches. I'm not saying there weren't any, but it wasn't a high profile part of the story. Interestingly, this [partnering with immigrant congregations] is something in the last week or two [that] my own church is talking about."

Key informants also noted that **interdenominational partnerships** – partnerships between different denominations or congregations within different denominations – also exist. These types of partnerships also allow church groups to share ideas and to work together.

"[There are] country partnerships, whether it's the Syrian Orthodox or Syrian Catholics or Presbyterians or Mennonites who all have a presence in Syria, I think they all gather from time to time to share perspectives on what is happening [in Syria]."

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“One of the families that we’ve sponsored we worked with a few of the other SAH [Sponsorship Agreement Holder] communities right here... So there’s the Catholic organization and there’s the MCC [Mennonite Central Committee] organization. And so as SAHs we worked collaboratively together to sponsor a family. So that was a new approach. I think there’s some potential there.”

Finally, partnerships with other **community organizations** can help church groups understand the availability of other services and supports, and plan their role accordingly. While a number of key informants discussed the benefits of developing such partnerships, only a few key informants described these partnerships as presently occurring. The importance of developing community partnerships is explored further in the ‘Future Directions’ section of this report.

“From the beginning we established this refugee advisory committee and so there we had people from health and the school district and community programs and English programs and just everybody at the same table. [We were] talking about some of the things we were dealing with and from there we identified certain areas that were priorities...I think being able to have everybody at a table can do a lot...Because oftentimes I think churches do have the ability to respond quickly to needs whereas programs that are funded by the government can’t...Churches can mobilize quickly and respond to needs quickly.”

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING ACTIVITIES

Key informants identified some challenges related to the ability of church groups to fulfil the activities outlined above. The most commonly cited challenge identified by key informants was related to **funding**. In many cases, church groups do not have adequate financial resources to serve and support immigrants and refugees in an effective or comprehensive way. As a result, church groups often rely heavily on material or financial donations from congregants in order to fulfil their activities.

“The church’s income is entirely from donations, so it is the congregation that is donating to the church and that is being used to assist refugees in the process of arriving and upon arriv[al], to help them for that year. Housing, food, shelter, clothing, a lot of different needs of these families.”

“Churches are major players in refugee claim work and sponsorship, and detention. The role of churches is so important in these areas. There is nobody to fund this kind of work. So the availability of church funding to response to these needs is very critical.”

“Also the resources available, churches are having to downsize [in their] areas of engagement. [They] don’t have the infrastructure to support engagement the way they used to.”

Administrative challenges were also expressed by a few key informants. If church groups are to take on more of the above activities, such as forming partnerships or assisting with longer-term integration, then they will also require additional staff to fulfill this work. While volunteers often do an excellent job of this, the amount of time required may be unreasonable for an unpaid worker.

“I imagine that many of the churches work on a volunteer basis, people working with immigrants and refugees... I think ideally somebody should be hired to do this work, whether it’s part-time or full-time. But then have lots of volunteers that can help out in providing services.”

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“My guess is that more partnership [with government services] would mean more effectiveness, but it also means more administration is needed which is the downside. One has to remember that volunteers have finite time.”

Process – How Churches Equip Themselves

Process entails the ways that churches prepare and equip churches to meaningfully work with immigrants and refugees. Key informants spoke mostly about the importance of leadership and training as key components in facilitating ministry with immigrants and refugees.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership was viewed by many key informants as an “essential” component and very closely related to vision. The “vision” and “passion” for helping immigrants and refugees settle and integrate comes from leaders who act as a catalyst to involve others. Key informants identified the process of leaders initiating and sharing this vision as vitally important.

“There has to be a champion in the church who initially has the vision... Someone who will back-stop and show some perseverance in getting something off the ground.”

“It should begin with the leadership itself. If there is an ownership of the vision, it should not simply be the [congregational leader] giving that vision. It should be a shared vision across all members of the church.”

“I think the first thing in terms of leadership – even just casting a vision of, ‘we have to help.’ We’re called to help and putting that forward, like it’s not an option, it’s something that we’re called to do because of our faith.”

So who are these leaders? Some key informants emphasized that those already in church leadership positions should be primarily responsible for leading this work. In other words, spreading a vision among the existing leadership would be the best strategy to enact change.

“I think probably in the broader sense to be more effective and more across the board it would have to be reaching the leadership first and getting buy-in and interest and awareness growing within the [existing] leadership within the churches.”

“You just need to connect to one person in a congregation who begins to exercise this kind of leadership. Sometimes they work on their own, sometimes others come behind that person and they work together on that initiative.”

However, much of the discussion about leadership focused on the need to better engage immigrant leaders – whether they were already formal church leaders or not. Immigrant leaders were described as having **cultural awareness** and an intimate understanding of immigrant values and beliefs. This awareness is helpful in providing culturally-relevant spiritual support and in assisting immigrants to negotiate cultural differences between Canada and their previous homeland. Immigrant church leaders also have **lived experience** similar to that of other immigrants. From this lived experience comes some understanding about what it takes to settle and integrate into Canadian society.

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"If immigrant leaders work with the Canadian church and are allowed to work with the Canadian church and be leaders, that can be a powerful team."

"I would see that church leaders who themselves are immigrants or former refugees would be so well placed because they have the cultural awareness. They also have their own background, so they will have a deeper understanding of the issues; they'll know what it takes to settle and integrate into a new country. So I can see that those are particular leaders that we would want to access and encourage and involve in the process."

"They [immigrant congregational leaders] are able to minister to their members and build communities that answer to their specific cultural needs which gives the immigrants a sense of belonging. The more support they [immigrants] receive, the faster they are able to integrate into the mainstream Canadian life."

"In terms of people that have come through private sponsorship of refugees, they [refugees] have lived experience that will offer, the compassion and the insight and the vision to do [that work]. So those are all soft skills at that point, but they [refugees] definitely lead...Creating space for them [refugees] to flourish."

TRAINING

Another process component that key informants discussed was training. One training audience included church leaders, both immigrant leaders and church leaders in general. Training for leaders was discussed both in terms of formalized seminary training, as well as more ad hoc seminar or workshop training. A second audience was congregations where the training focused on practical educational tools to assist congregants to learn about immigrant and refugee issues, and to explore their role in helping immigrants and refugees settle and integrate. Regardless of audience, training opportunities should be ongoing.

"I think that at one time, [congregations were] intentional about recruiting a generation of leaders, rather than waiting for those who felt called. I think those of us who are in established leadership now, we need to be very intentional about looking for the brightest and best of the [immigrants from the one and a half generation] and new immigrants and pointing them towards good leadership training institutions like the TIM Centre."

"Having some sort of education and awareness raising tools that are adapted for the church context and implemented in regular church activities. For example, having the churches encouraged to do something on April 4th [Refugee Rights Day]."

"[There] could be long-term rather than a one-time seminar or training. This training should be done with the whole congregation, first with the pioneers to make sure the innovators are trained first and then shared with everyone."

"Keep having these educational workshops every two months or so. Do it constantly, never end, never finish. Because policy things change all the time so you can't say, 'Oh we've done it, we've"

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done the trainings, we can move on and provide services and never have training again'...Have this learning process on a regular basis for churches."

Key informants expressed a number of topics on which leaders and congregants should be trained. The main topics suggested included understanding immigrant and refugee experiences and policies, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and intercultural communication.

"Invite somebody who can talk about the immigration system. So the church themselves, their volunteers and everybody who's working with immigrants, can also know how to do it [provide services to immigrants and refugees], [and] know the issues."

"[It is important to provide training about] the issues and how to understand the [immigrant and refugee] issues from a faith-based perspective and a Christian analysis. When I see people [congregants] who are generally sympathetic but not knowing what to do about it, it's very disempowering...So strategies for engaging people [are needed]."

"A lot of it [training] has to do with cultural sensitivity... If it's a white church working with, let's say, Muslim immigrants and refugees – how do you deal with that? It's not easy. You have to overcome a lot of your own biases, and learn."

"The other piece that I'm specifically interested and concerned is around this issue of intercultural dialogue and communication and how do we move beyond smiling and shaking hands at church on Sunday and then moving back to our own ethno-specific communities during the week...how [can we] develop a skill base around facilitating dialogue across cultures?...That's part of what I think is important, and I think it's a missing piece in a lot of settings."

Future Directions

Key informants gave many forward looking suggestions. Four main themes emerged about how churches can better work with immigrants and refugees to help them settle and integrate into Canadian society: (1) relational living; (2) develop partnerships; (3) understand the context; and (4) build capacity. Key informants did not prescribe an order for these suggestions, but saw them as mutually reinforcing and together building a holistic response.

RELATIONAL LIVING

The most frequent suggestion from key informants was the importance of learning to live relationally with immigrants and refugees. Key informants saw this suggestion as less an action than a stance or a "way of being" with immigrants and refugees throughout all stages of their life in Canada – from their first few weeks of arrival to their long-term integration. The ability to form reciprocal relationships with newcomers is a great potential asset of churches and what differentiates them from many other professional settlement services.

At one point during the interview, key informants were explicitly asked whether they thought church groups should offer formal supports (i.e., professionalized services) or informal supports (i.e., more natural and mutually beneficial relational supports). The consensus among almost all key informants

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was that church groups should not feel pressured to step into a professional role if they want to start or continue working with immigrants and refugees. Intentional relational supports are just as important for the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees and these are often unavailable through other avenues.

“I think the church can do something that nobody else can do, and that’s providing that kind of accompaniment, providing that sense of community, of friendship, which community agencies have a really difficult time doing.”

“We can talk about professional settlement help, but when it gets down to it ... [an] aspect of it is people hands-on being with the [immigrant] family and helping them learn how to turn on a shower with hot and cold running water or how do you use a stove and how do you use the elevator and how do you get on a bus. And you can’t just tell them, you have to show them. That’s what churches above all else can offer.”

“[Church groups should offer] relational support - the personal aspect of a church, anything that doesn’t have the professional aspect to it. To drink a tea or something. If you feel like you’re connected to a community, not just because they are paid to provide a service, but something deeper motivating it.”

“I would like to see the opportunity to invite our landed Canadians [congregants] to do what my dad did and essentially invite a half a dozen extra people [immigrants or refugees] for Thanksgiving supper or for Christmas supper. The kind of place where you spend hours and hours together in a kind of jolly atmosphere, simply breaking bread and learning together.”

DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships was another strong theme emerging from the interviews. Key informants stressed that church groups are not alone – no one congregation or even cluster of congregations can attempt to provide comprehensive supports for immigrants and refugees.

“[There is a] value of partnering with like-minded groups, who are already doing this, to be coached by them to be doing that act of kindness to new immigrants, rather than one church doing it by itself.”

“So the message that we repeatedly want to put out is that you [church groups] don’t have to do this on your own – that there are resources and people with experience.”

A first part of developing partnerships is **building an awareness** of what other groups within the local community and beyond are doing. Understanding this will allow church groups to identify organizations with common goals and like-minded interests, and help them to find their own complementary niche. Awareness of other services will also prevent churches from being overwhelmed and “burnout” in their response to immigrants and refugees.

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“In the urban centres, there’s a lot of organizations that are set up to assist immigrants and refugees. It would be good for them [church groups] to know all of those, maybe even be involved in some of those.”

“One of the greatest things that would be of assistance is an awareness of what government services are available in terms of immigrant services. This type of awareness would be beneficial.”

“One of the first things that your church is going to do is to go out into the community and find out what settlement services are available and how you can access them, and how can we work together – those kinds of things. Then they [church groups] start to become aware of bigger issues and settlement needs within the community.”

A second part of building awareness is **identifying current gaps** within the community. Key informants stressed that church groups should not “reinvent the wheel,” or take on activities that are already successful within the community. Rather than overlapping with these activities, church groups should find the “gaps” in community services and the areas which could use additional support.

“[The] church could do a bit of an assessment on the resources that are out there. Through an assessment and seeing the resources, recognizing where the holes are, what are they [immigrants and refugees] missing in terms of living a quality life here in Canada. And then I think at that point, churches could design the kind of supports that aren’t taken care of by the community.”

“Talking to stakeholders and community leaders and social service providers and saying what’s the niche place that nobody else is addressing – how can we address that? Or are there ways that we can partner with existing [supports]?”

“We [church groups] need to know what the regional municipality or provincial housing agency thinks of themselves because we don’t want to walk on the places where they have confidence that they’re doing a good job. And they are doing a good job in many cases. We need to come alongside and look carefully at the areas where they would like help.”

In tandem with becoming aware of services and identifying the gaps within the community, it is important for church groups also to foster **ongoing connections** with like-minded organizations (whether faith-based, other community organizations, or government). Key informants discussed a variety of possible partnerships, ranging from informal connections, to referral networks, to more formal partnerships. These partnerships may look different in each context.

“I think if churches were more community-oriented, or at least have a representative on a community committee, they would be able to reach out to them [immigrants and refugees] more.”

“It’s like a referral system. We [church groups] can refer to their [community] services, and they [community services] can refer newcomers to us. A referral system of seeing who is able to provide resources, and how.”

“I wanted to stress the relationship that could be strengthened between the church groups and the government. The church is willing to take on much of the work that government is cutting back on,

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but need to know how to do this effectively. If the resources are provided to government, then they can provide for the congregation[s] and at the same time [the government] can step back and even save some money. But [the government] need[s] to assist churches in doing the work effectively.”

“The church is doing many things the government is doing, but the church is unaware of how [it] could be better if integrated with professional [government-funded] services.”

A final piece of advice given by key informants in regards to developing partnerships was the importance of **learning from one another**. Key informants saw partnering as important, but also stressed the importance of taking a moment to step back and learn from these connections. As explained by one key informant, church groups should have an “openness” to continually growing in working together with immigrants and refugees.

“Learning from others is [an] important thing to do and not reinventing the wheel. There are churches that have done this for years and with some success. It is good to learn from them.”

“Learning is so key in working with immigrants and refugees... As much as they [congregants] engage in wanting to help, that has to come with an understanding that they have to engage in the process [of learning]. That probably works the best and in that learning process, they make really good connections and really good partnerships along the way.”

“I think as Christian people we need to be on the front end of showing people that we can set aside our differences and learn, you know, adopt a posture of humility and learn to learn from each other. So then we have immigrants and refugees among us; there’s an inherent respect and desire to hear from everyone... It puts mutuality and equality at the centre stage.”

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Another important component of working with immigrants and refugees is to understand the congregational and community context. Such an understanding involves **identifying immigrant needs** (i.e., what immigrants and refugees require to successfully settle and integrate) and identifying the capacity within and across church groups (i.e., the range of people, resources and finances available to assist). This understanding should precede developing new services and supports. Understanding should also necessitate listening to immigrants and refugees while developing and implementing plans.

“We cannot do it [plan for immigrant and refugee support] based on our own experiences. Then it will be wrong...So of course to develop a vision, we need to work with immigrants themselves.”

“[Churches become aware of immigrant needs] by stopping and talking to them where they meet them. And more than talking to them, listening to them.”

“Sometimes it’s not easy for us [church groups] to hear, you know, people’s [refugees] feedback. And we don’t want to hear any feedback or criticism if it’s not going to be... positive, right? [Refugees] have told us, ‘Yeah, you know I appreciate the effort, but you really didn’t help that much because that’s not what I needed.’ I think that says a lot, you know, because from the beginning we didn’t ask, ‘So what do they need?’”

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In addition, key informants expressed the need to **identify capacity within churches**. Capacity could be explored in terms of the skills and expertise, volunteer and staff time, and funding resources available within churches groups. Assessing capacity in these ways will help set realistic goals and expectations. It will also help to enforce that they do not have to provide every service and respond to every need on their own.

“The fortunate thing is that you have a very wide range of people in the congregation with different experiences and abilities. You have to identify who is best to approach to address that [particular] need...Once a need [is] identified, tap into people of congregation as a resource...You don’t need to train somebody new, or have somebody who doesn’t know what they’re doing. You can go to somebody in the [congregational] community.”

“I think if there were people in the church who are competent with accreditation in an area, such as a lawyer who could help people with immigration needs or an accountant to help with income tax returns... these people can share their skills with the church. It’s not reinventing another program but using existing expertise.”

“There’s no surplus room [in people’s busy lives] for more programs and more activities because people are already over-stuffed. So then the question is how do we integrate newcomers into existing activities? Rather than saying, ‘Guess what church? I’ve got a whole new thing for you to do one night a week,’ and watch everybody’s heads explode...We can’t add it as another activity; it has to be integrated into something we’re already doing.”

“There needs to be a very careful selection of what they can do at [the] congregational level. What is achievable with their own gifting? There are some things that can be done just of out Christian charity, but beyond that...there has to be careful inventory so that there isn’t an overarching burnout that happens for the congregation...You need to weigh carefully what is feasible.”

BUILD CAPACITY

Building the capacity of church leaders and congregants was another aspect that key informants identified as being important when working with immigrants and refugees. Capacity building can involve both formal training and other awareness raising activities. For example, ongoing training sessions could be offered to existing and future leaders. In addition, learning can happen when working alongside others, by observing how others are leading the way, and through evaluating what has already been done. In particular, key informants mentioned the importance of having church leaders and congregants work alongside immigrant leaders.

“Train the leaders to be the initiators of such hospitality. Because the people in the pew will be looking at ways the leaders actually do it. So the modeling of the leaders to actually be helping immigrants settle and integrate would move the whole congregation to get involved.”

“Many people do not have much of an awareness of the challenges and what it takes to integrate successfully into a new country. Immigrant congregations and immigrant leaders will have that [awareness] and probably have a tremendous amount to offer us [Canadian churches] in terms of how can we think better, how can we plan better, what are the issues that we need to consider from their perspective rather than people who have been in Canada for generations.”

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“I see a leadership-wide effort, and then a church-wide effort. So it’s not just the [congregational leader] ministering but the whole church ministering. Can you imagine if there are one hundred in a church, and every member holds the vision to help new immigrants settle and integrate? And that member has his/her own network of family and friends. Can you imagine what the hundred can do together rather than just the [congregational leader] doing everything by themselves?”

“And evaluating...It’s essential, that’s how we learn...It’s very easy to just keep doing what you’re doing because the need is there. But I think that any organization that takes a step back and can look at the landscape and set out a plan for what’s our priority and what are we going to do next; there’s value in that.”

Conclusion

This report summarized the findings of 18 key informant interviews about the role of Canadian churches in immigrant settlement and integration. Key informants provided “balcony level” insights into the Canadian context, vision, structures and processes of churches who work with newcomers. They also offered their suggestions for how churches can become better engaged in immigrant and refugee ministry in the future.

Above all, key informants confirmed that a shift is needed for Canadian churches to remain relevant in Canada’s increasingly multicultural and pluralistic society. In this sense, key informant opinions can be seen as a call to strategic action – or perhaps more accurately – a call to change. The specific change may be different for each congregation or denomination depending on their unique context. And the change may start small and incrementally, maturing over time via reflective practice. Having capacity within itself to navigate this change, the Christian church in Canada must (as one key informant put it) “learn to learn from each other.”

“I would say that in established Canadian churches...we still think we are the establishment, there’s still very much a way of thinking that says, ‘Well, our doors are open, if they [immigrants and refugees] want to come they can come’. I don’t think there is a profound understanding yet, that welcoming strangers means being changed ourselves. And that’s something I’m working very hard on with our leadership.”

“I have often put it in terms of asking the question – who are we willing to become in terms of character and purpose in order that the newcomer knows that they are welcome?...I believe that in North America today, an awakening [of a vision to work with immigrants and refugees] cannot happen unless our characters change. And our character has to be a welcoming character.”

“I am seeing an earnest desire on the part of denominational leaders to be more intentional. But sometimes if you yourself are mono-cultural – our attempts at reaching out can be so offensive...I see signs of hope in that we are acknowledging that at least in Christian terms, the next generation of church probably does not look like us.”

Appendix: List of Key Informants

Alfredo Barahona	<i>KAIROS</i>
Brian Seim	<i>Serving in Ministry International</i>
Connie den Bok	<i>United Church of Canada</i>
Dan Sheffield	<i>Free Methodist Church in Canada</i>
David Ley	<i>University of British Columbia</i>
Evelyn Vollet	<i>Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver, Office of Service and Justice</i>
Janet Dench	<i>Canadian Council of Refugees</i>
Jennifer Mpungu	<i>Mennonite Central Committee</i>
Narry Santos	<i>Saddleback South Manila, formerly Greenhills Christian Fellowship</i>
Pam Dewilde	<i>Inter-Church Immigrant Support Group</i>
Peter Noteboom	<i>Canadian Council of Churches</i>
Rob Olson	<i>Canadian Baptists of Western Canada</i>
Rob Shropshire	<i>Presbyterian World Service and Development</i>
Rose Dekker	<i>World Renew</i>
Samia Saad	<i>The Lighthouse Community Centre</i>
Sharon Kavanaugh	<i>Karen Initiative</i>
Sherif Ashamalla	<i>Canadian Coptic Centre – Newcomer Services</i>
Tom Clark	<i>York University Centre for Refugee Studies; Inter-Church Committee for Refugees</i>