

BEYOND *the* WELCOME:

Churches Responding to
the Immigrant Reality in Canada



A Letter from the President



Beyond the Welcome: Churches Responding to the Immigrant Reality in Canada is a research project that involved over 300 church leaders in cities across Canada.

Studies consistently show that recent immigrants to this country experience poverty at much higher rates than Canadian-born citizens. We believe that churches are part of the solution. When churches welcome newcomers to Canada effectively, they help immigrant children and families overcome the limitations of poverty.

At the heart of the Beyond the Welcome study is our vision of Canadian churches as communities where recent immigrants are fully welcomed and included. We posed three questions:

1. How do recent immigrants experience church in Canada?
2. What has been the response of churches in Canada to recent immigrants?
3. What can churches do to be more welcoming and inclusive?

What we found is that Canadian churches are indeed welcoming recent immigrants. The results of our research also show that churches need to move beyond that initial welcome toward fully integrating families new to Canada into church life.

Immigrants have to adapt and change as they adjust to living in a new country. A goal of this study was to nudge churches forward in the knowledge that they too must change and adapt to their evolving communities. Our treatment of immigrants to Canada is critical as part of our witness to the global community. Christians can set an example of respecting and inviting newcomers rather than simply tolerating their presence in our midst. We must stand against the suspicion and paranoia that threatens our world, as we seek to answer Jesus' call to love our neighbours.

Dave Toyce
President, World Vision Canada

“The more we see this as a biblical mandate, it changes our motivation.”

Respondent



Moving Beyond the Welcome



The church down the street has supported the family with furniture, helped get their kids in school, and the people are always welcoming when they go to church on Sunday mornings.

But after two years, Carlos does not feel they are really part of the church. Carlos would love to bring his guitar and be part of the worship team. There seems to be resistance to even singing the occasional Spanish song, even though there are other Spanish-speaking people in the congregation. Back home, he regularly led worship and was even an elder. The kids are learning English quickly and do well in Sunday school but it's hard for Carlos and Maria to understand the materials in adult Sunday school. They usually just sit quietly if they go at all.

Carlos immigrated with his wife Maria and three children two years ago. He knows some English but still struggles to communicate at both of his jobs. His work as a cleaner and warehouse worker is not satisfying and does not use the skills as an accountant he brought from Colombia. But it helps cover the cost of the two bedroom apartment he shares with his family.

Maria is often very homesick. When Carlos isn't too tired, he can sometimes be talked into taking Maria and the kids across the city to a small Spanish-speaking congregation where Maria has friends and feels more at home with the worship and the people.

When they don't show up at the church down the street for a few Sundays, people notice and wonder where they are but nobody knows them well enough to know why they aren't there.

Carlos and Maria's story is a composite representing the church experience of many new Canadians.

It is increasingly important for churches to be aware of the immigrant experience as the new arrivals pour into the neighbourhoods around Canadian churches, especially in our largest cities.

Within the space of a single generation, the cultural face of Canadian society has been transformed. Canada's churches could lead society and model how to enfold these newcomers, demonstrating the biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and to love our increasingly multicultural neighbour.

“It is striking that in a country of immigrants, it is difficult to become integrated and then be part of a congregation.”

Respondent

“I think Canadian churches are doing well. It's not easy to integrate many cultures. Back home, it is the same culture. [Churches] cannot change overnight. I need to adjust.”

Respondent

Every journey to Canada is unique. How immigrants experience Canada is shaped by whether they have extended family already here, whether they arrived as a fleeing refugee, whether they can speak English or French, and whether their home culture is similar to or radically different from Canadian culture.

But the journeys for all have much in common. Navigating in a new society is challenging and, for many, exhausting. Immediate basic needs, such as housing, employment and language learning, must be met.

Family tension is also common, especially as children tend to adapt to Canadian culture more quickly and often want to adopt Canadian customs that their parents may resist.



The Canadian church through the eyes of a newcomer

It is against this background that new Canadians experience church life in Canada.

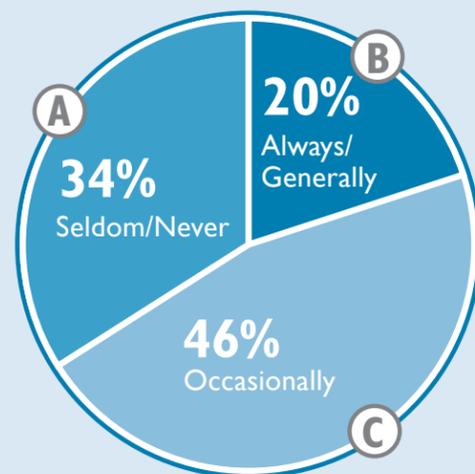
Research respondents noted that recent immigrants who receive support with their settlement needs generally have a very positive initial experience of the church. For some non-Christians, it may be their first ever exposure to a Christian church.

Study participants noted that many Canadian churches are quite active in helping settle immigrants, especially in the area of language learning. If churches are not providing classes themselves, they are often part of a network or contribute financially to a group that does.

Respondents noted that churches generally try to welcome people from other cultures, especially during Sunday morning services. Respondents also noted that as churches become more aware of recent immigrants and their experiences, they become more outward looking and less self-centered. “We have been enriched by a broader understanding of our world. We have learned a greater appreciation of social injustice and how we might serve to do better,” said one survey respondent.

This awareness, coupled with the trend toward more ethnic diversity in church membership overall, has fed a growing desire for churches to demonstrate intentionality in welcoming recent immigrants.

The extent to which congregations provide settlement and relief services for recent immigrants that meet their immediate basic needs



Source: Beyond the Welcome survey, 2010 (232 congregations).

“A lot of immigrants get into the Canadian culture without fully realizing the dangers. They end up in divorce and breakdowns. The church should be the answer to those in need. But unfortunately, the church is not ready to receive them.”

Research participant

Beyond the Sunday-Morning Welcome

Not all the research participants had a positive view of the current situation. A few even questioned whether the positive trend noted above exists. Examples of progress were seen to be too few and far between for many research participants.

Churches are perceived to prefer running formal programs for recent immigrants rather than building relationships with them, according to some respondents. While church leadership promotes the importance of an inclusive community, the depth of personal relationship between recent immigrants and other church members was seen as limited.

Respondents from established churches acknowledge it's a struggle. Sixty percent said that recent immigrants receive a warm welcome at their church, but only 32 percent said recent immigrants were generally well integrated into church life. “...we have international dinner and dress [events].

But we don't change the values and practices within our congregations. Congregations don't accept those levels of change,” said one respondent.

While congregations might be happy to see recent immigrants coming through their doors, they were less successful at integrating recent immigrants into various aspects of church life. In the words of one survey respondent: “...taking that to the 'next level' and connecting them to meaningful life in the body [of the church] has been a struggle.”

The study showed that recent immigrants were lacking in opportunities to serve and lead in the congregation. Additionally, few congregations have made efforts to accommodate the language of recent immigrants in worship and in ministry programs. Examples cited included using multiple languages in worship, translating educational materials, or recruiting multilingual staff or volunteers.

In the Front Door, Out the Back

The Church's lack of intentional focus upon integrating recent immigrants leads many to conclude that the congregation down the street will never be their permanent church home.

Respondents acknowledge the culture clash that recent immigrants can experience in church. Barriers to participation for recent immigrants mentioned include differing worship styles, unfamiliar church structures, leadership relationships that are more egalitarian, and divergent approaches to societal issues like abortion or divorce.

When the culture clash is too great, some immigrants will seek out or establish ethno-specific churches, particularly in large cities. There, recent immigrants find similar cultural identity, languages and social ties. Respondents reported that in these churches, recent immigrants' spiritual gifts were more likely to be acknowledged and used.

"It's all about social and family events in terms of true involvement for the majority of immigrants and refugees in our congregation."

Participant

"I go from church to church to find what we had back home. We had zeal to pray and seek God."

Research participant

Within these churches, immigrants are seen as "neighbours," and members of the community, rather than as a "target population." As one survey respondent noted: "Ministry with immigrants is not something we think about. We are the immigrants. We focus on our neighbours who are from other places."

Ethno-specific churches are playing an increasing role on the Canadian church scene and model positive approaches for welcoming and enfolded new immigrants.

But they also face challenges. Because the children of new immigrants are not likely to remain in an ethno-specific congregation, those churches may have a short lifespan. Further, many ethno-specific churches lack facilities in which to run their own programs. Limitations in financial resources may also require clergy to be bi-vocational or lead the church as a volunteer.



What is holding established Canadian churches back and how can they be released?

"[We need] to be more integrated within the community network – to use our strengths together."

Respondent

Resistance

Some study participants identified a culture of resistance in congregations, stemming from a fear that recent immigrants would change the church landscape. While most congregations welcome recent immigrants, existing church norms are not considered to be open for discussion.

This desire to maintain the status quo was linked by respondents to a fear of change and issues of control. "Sometimes the mindset [of Canadian church members] is that we need to stay in power" said one local leader.

As the quote above illustrates, it can be church leaders themselves who resist change. Too seldom, it was argued, were leaders casting an alternative vision in which the contributions of recent immigrants were valued and sought out.

Some respondents pointed to latent, or even overt, stereotyping and racist attitudes about recent immigrants taking root in the church. One survey respondent said, "A few [church members] have long-standing biases that come out at inappropriate times. [For example:] 'We all know that a lot of the problems in our community are because of immigrants' or 'We would not have lost our jobs if we didn't have immigrants' ".

A general lack of awareness and understanding of immigrants' experiences and perspectives can perpetuate stereotypical attitudes, the study shows. Taken together with attitudes toward certain ethnic or racial groups, an "us versus them" attitude between church members and recent immigrants can develop, hindering meaningful interaction.

The most frequently mentioned strategy for overcoming resistance to recent immigrants is to raise awareness about the experiences of these new Canadians. Whether through literature, websites or seminars, training is seen as a primary tool to help all parties increase cross-cultural awareness. Activities and social functions, especially involving food, bring people together and allow opportunity for relationship-building. As one participant said, "Food has no language barrier."

Communication barriers

Communication barriers are a significant challenge for churches and new immigrants. Navigating cultural norms and assumptions, on top of language barriers, can impede relationship-building between new immigrants and established Canadians. This can result in new immigrants relegated to observers, rather than participants, when it comes to church affairs.

Language learning helps newcomers become more fluent in English or French. But participants also suggested facilitated conversations between recent immigrants and other church members to help promote cross-cultural dialogue.

"Newcomers want to find a church that reflects their language and culture."

Respondent



Lack of opportunity for leadership

Earlier it was noted that recent immigrants lack opportunities for leadership and service in Canadian churches. Study participants noted that differences in the style of church leadership may hinder interactions between recent immigrants and Canadian church members.

At the heart of this difference can be divergent understandings of the nature of a leader's authority. Study participants reported that many recent immigrants come from cultures where people in authority are honoured and their decisions are seldom challenged. In these cultures, the opinion of clergy matters most.

Contrast this with the culture of many Canadian churches where some form of shared decision-making among the membership is emphasized. The integration of different cultures within leadership and how decision making gets done therefore poses a challenge. "It is easier to welcome them into the church, but it will be difficult to lead with them [because their understanding of leadership is different]," said one focus group participant.

One suggested solution is for leaders of ethno-specific congregations to have more interaction with leaders of other Canadian churches. Leadership exchanges could help both leaders learn from the other about leading churches in Canada's multi-cultural context.

Other participants suggested that congregations and denominations should identify recent immigrants who have previously been church leaders and provide similar opportunities in Canada. "Let the newcomer leaders be part of the church. Let their voices be heard. Let them speak and share their abilities," said one participant.

Lack of resources

Many congregations lack the capacity, skills, tools and strategies to deal with their community's changing demographics. It takes a lot of time and money to help recent immigrants, especially if there are a large number of them in a church's neighbourhood. "There are all of the practical needs that have to get taken care of first and it is one of the challenges because integration can only happen after other needs like food are taken care of," said a focus group participant.

Study participants suggest that churches develop new or stronger partnerships with other churches or para-church organizations, immigrant-serving organizations and the government. Such partnerships enable groups to efficiently share their resources, whether financial, experiential or human resources. In particular, study participants called on churches to encourage volunteer involvement in their ministry to immigrants.

Study participants said that such cooperation not only prevents duplication of efforts. It also helps bring new perspectives to ministries to ensure that those ministries are continuing to meet the evolving needs in the neighbourhood.

Sharing of experiences and best practices is essential. "Dissemination of information is critical... This becomes a critical part in churches effectively welcoming immigrants," one participant said.

It Takes a Vision

Overall, the study results show that churches are doing well at welcoming recent immigrants but if they are to take the next steps to truly enfold them into the life of the church, it will take visionary planning.

Unless churches intentionally move out of their comfort zones, recent immigrants will only experience a warm, but somewhat shallow, welcome.

Participants noted that the churches that do well in enfolding new immigrants have leaders who cast a vision in which immigrants do not just passively belong to the church, but are catalysts for life-giving change in the life of the church.

Respondents noted the importance of these leaders modeling relationship-building behaviour, going out and building those personal relationships with recent immigrants, particularly with fellow leaders of ethno-specific churches. Setting that example is seen as much more important than developing formal programs.

Going Beyond the Church Walls

As churches get better at integrating recent immigrants into the life of the church, participants said this will lead churches to go out into their increasingly multi-cultural neighbourhoods to run community development programs. These programs can be building blocks toward healthy and inclusive communities.

The study also noted the need for effective change at multiple levels: local congregations, within and across denominational lines, partnerships between Christian networks and para-church organizations, as well as in working with local community groups and government programs.

"If immigrants don't seek out [opportunities], it is difficult for the congregation to give you the opportunity and ask you to begin serving in the congregation."

Respondent

Planning for Success

Adequate planning is essential, participants said. Without planning, churches can end up creating programs that don't meet the needs of recent immigrants, wasting valuable time and money.

Conducting a needs assessment was one suggestion, to help identify which programs and ministries respond to the actual needs of recent immigrants. Including recent immigrants in the evaluation and planning process will help ensure that church ministries respond effectively.

Seeking out partnerships with other churches, groups and agencies will help avoid duplicating efforts and create synergies. Networking with ethno-specific churches creates bridges between communities bringing mutual benefit.

"Why not ask the newcomer, what did you do in the past, what is your gift, what is your talent?"

Respondent

A Time of Reflection

Many study participants argue that the time is ripe for the Canadian church to reflect and to evaluate its progress in ministry to recent immigrants: to celebrate its successes, to identify the challenges, and to become more intentional about moving forward.

Further, they argue, Canadian Christians as a whole will be well-served by reflecting upon their own personal journeys in moving beyond stereotypes, cultural assumptions and racist attitudes toward new immigrants. After all, it is upon a bedrock of friendships and loving relationships that communities that value and include every member are built.

Moving beyond the welcome: It starts with coffee in the church hall, but moves to kitchen tables, children's playgrounds, church boardrooms, and onward into the community. This is when churches know that their welcome has moved beyond the superficial, to truly take root in a life of worship and service together.



“Determining [immigrants'] gifts and how they fit into a brand new society is something that there is sensitivity to, but I think it will take some time to really see that come to fulfillment.”

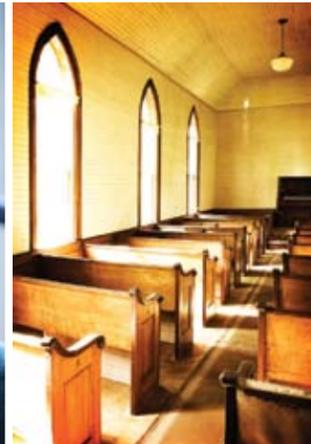
Respondent



World Vision Canada and Beyond the Welcome

“Everything is relational; ours with God and then with each other. If I trust you, I will listen to what you say.”

Participant



For over 30 years WorldVision has been partnering with Canadian Churches to welcome new immigrants to Canada. In 1979 we were one of the first organizations to work with local congregations to bring the Vietnamese “Boat People” to a new home in Canada. Following this, we established a Refugee Reception Centre (now Christie Refugee Welcome Centre) which provides settlement services to refugee claimants, as well as assisting churches in sponsoring refugees.

Through our Canadian Programs, we are partnering with 60 organizations serving some of the 600,000 children living in poverty across Canada. The fastest growing segment within this dispiriting statistic is comprised of immigrant and refugee families. We believe that local churches and Christian community-based organizations are called to partner in response.

This research project highlights the need for intentional bridge-building between the local congregation and all people in the neighbourhood. Now that we have read through this document we are more aware of the challenges churches face in reaching out to new immigrants...so what will we now do?

One resource that WorldVision Canadian Programs has developed is a tool box churches can use to assess the depth of their welcome and to plan how to grow from awareness to integration of new immigrants into congregational life. Within the tool kit you will find an assessment tool, an action plan, and a host of tools and resources to allow your congregation to move *Beyond the Welcome*.

For a free copy of this toolkit, please e-mail:
canadianprograms@worldvision.ca



“The inclusive leader sees difference as an asset to the faith community.”

Sheffield, 2005

If you would like more information about WorldVision’s Responding Church Network, please send an e-mail to churchrelations@worldvision.ca

If you would like more information about WorldVision’s community-development work in Canada please send an e-mail to canadianprograms@worldvision.ca



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The research for **Beyond the Welcome: Churches Responding to the Immigrant Reality in Canada** was carried out collaboratively by **World Vision, The Tyndale Intercultural Ministries Centre and the Centre for Community Based Research**. An advisory group reflecting a cross section of Christian ministries collaborated in developing the research protocols and reviewing the results.

Through surveys, focus groups, community forums and individual interviews, information was gathered from a spectrum of Christian churches, including those not denominationally aligned. It included churches of varying sizes, ages, and with varying mixes of Canadian-born and immigrant membership.

Interviews included people who could speak knowledgeably about Canadian churches nationally and inter-denominationally as well as those whose expertise was local.

Focus groups were used to gain ground-level insights about how new immigrants experienced church and provided suggestions about how churches in their city could better include recent immigrants. Two focus groups were conducted in each of Hamilton, Vancouver and Montréal and six were held in Toronto. A teleconference was held in Winnipeg.

An online survey targeted the urban churches in the nine cities in Canada that have proportionally the highest immigrant populations. A total of 355 congregations entered the survey.

Community forums were held in Vancouver, Hamilton and Toronto to verify research findings.

For a free copy of this toolkit, or for an electronic copy of this report, please e-mail: canadianprograms@worldvision.ca

