

BEYOND *the*
WELCOME:

Churches Responding to the Immigrant Reality in Canada

TORONTO
CITY REPORT



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. At the heart of the study was a desire to know how new immigrants experience church in Canada and what churches can do to be more welcoming and inclusive. New immigrants to Canada face the limitations of poverty to a disproportionate degree. We believe that Churches can be community leaders in addressing this inequality.

Answers to questions of how new immigrants can become integrated into Canadian churches are urgently needed, given that within the space of a single generation, the cultural face of Canadian society has been transformed by the arrival of new immigrants, especially in Canada's urban centres. While every journey to Canada is unique, they all have much in common: navigating in a new society is challenging and often exhausting. Immediate basic needs, such as housing, employment and language learning, must be met. The church can play an active role in this process by intentionally engaging new immigrants' needs and creating places for them in our church communities.



“The need for listening to immigrant churches is critical especially with more immigrants coming to Canada,” one respondent said.

Respondent

Participants in this study noted that many Canadian churches are welcoming of people from other cultures, especially during Sunday morning services. But getting beyond a Sunday-morning welcome has been proven more difficult. Participants reported positive things happening in churches, but often these were too few and far between. Those from established majority culture churches admit it's a struggle.

Churches with visionary leaders who highlight immigration needs and model relationship-building are the most likely to successfully integrate new immigrants. Demonstrating intentionality in planning how to be more inclusive was reported to be essential. This may include hosting cross-cultural events with opportunities for social interaction; recruiting multi-lingual church staff, providing translation of worship materials and partnering with other churches and organizations to meet larger scale challenges. As churches get better at integrating recent immigrants into the life of the church, they are also likely to go out into their neighbourhoods to run community programs that respond to the needs of new immigrants.

Beyond the Welcome in Toronto

R esearch participant responses

DEMOGRAPHICS:

- Every year, over 100,000 immigrants land in the Toronto area, about 40% of the nation's total.
- The 2006 Census counted 2.3 million foreign-born people in Toronto and the surrounding metropolitan areas (Toronto Census Metropolitan Area).
- The foreign-born population accounted for 46% of the total population.
- In 2006, 32% of the population identified themselves as Catholic, 22% Protestant, 4% Orthodox, and 4% other Christian denominations (Statistics Canada, 2010).

TORONTO SPOTLIGHT

Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre (TIM Centre), Matthew House Refugee Reception & Christie Refugee Welcome Centre

Toronto boasts a number of excellent ministries with a mandate to respond to immigrants and refugees including: The TIM Centre links with a large network of local churches, denominations and mission organizations, partnering with church and para-church organizations. It offers consulting for churches and mission leaders with an array of up-to-date research, resources, seminars, conferences and symposia on critical intercultural issues. Christie Refugee Welcome Centre specializes in assisting refugee claimants in Toronto and facilitating churches who wish to sponsor refugees. Matthew House is building upon its successful history as a shelter for refugee claimants by inspiring similar ministries elsewhere and regularly conducts "Hope at the End of the Refugee Highway" tours.

www.tyndale.ca/tim

www.christiestreetc.com

www.matthewhouse.ca

CHALLENGES:

The sheer number of new arrivals can be overwhelming for Toronto churches, particularly if a church is located in a neighbourhood where a large proportion of the population is recent immigrants in need of practical help. Language and culture barriers top the list of challenges faced by both new immigrants and the churches that try to welcome them.

Because of language and cultural barriers, there is a strong tendency in Toronto for recent immigrants to seek out and create ethnic-specific churches. Study participants who are recent immigrants offered a list of reasons they tend to congregate in ethno-specific churches:

- Ethnic churches are much more open and easy to bring together for any activity in the city than established churches.
- Immigrant churches more welcoming to the immigrant than established churches.
- More immigrants are from Pentecostal backgrounds with a passion for evangelism.
- Established churches do not see the talents and resources of the immigrant community.

While they appreciate the existence of those ethno-specific churches, respondents would like to see the networking between immigrant churches and established churches improve. "The need for listening to immigrant churches is critical especially with more immigrants coming to Canada," one respondent said.

Additional barriers to integrating newcomers cited include:

- The immigrant community is very mobile and often does not stay in the same church or location due to work and family needs. This makes it difficult to build long term relationships in order to integrate them into the community.
- Often members of immigrant churches have the challenge of first meeting the basic needs of their extended family. They may work two jobs or work shifts that do not allow them to spend time in church activities.



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A NEED FOR VISION AND PLANNING

Most study participants agreed that there is an overall lack of vision and a lack of leadership for the intentional integration of newcomers. “One of my observations is that there is no major guideline for church in general,” said one respondent who travels around visiting many churches, “so the trend is that every church is really fighting to solve this problem on its own.”

Those participants who did report some success in helping integrate newcomers describe success as purely accidental. “Someone comes in and says ‘I don’t know how to get a driver’s license,’ or ‘I need to apply for social insurance,’ so we’re there as a church to help, but never really intentionally. It just happens.”

Better networking among established churches and with immigrant churches would help bridge gaps in services while extending a hand of fellowship to new immigrants and immigrant churches.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

The most basic solutions recommended are those that meet the basic needs of new immigrants: food, furniture, housing, jobs, help with immigration issues, translation help with court cases and government forms. Many churches find ESL classes to be a good bridge for welcoming and befriending new immigrants, while providing opportunities to sharing the gospel and the love of Christ.

Other suggestions include:

- Put more recent immigrants in leadership roles
- Encourage established churches to reach out to immigrant churches
- Make sure worship isn’t using a lot of “insider language” that newcomers don’t understand
- Reach out by inviting new immigrants in the community to come to a church/community BBQ or free dinner.

One church consciously chose to change the style of worship, even though they lost a few people. “You let the people suggest music,” the participant said. “We are a very unpolished church. So you get a Jamaican singing one Sunday and someone else another Sunday...the variety is there.”

Another church holds special events, like Christmas dinner where ESL students can bring their family members. Hosting a community fair with neighbours, local agencies, and neighbouring churches was embraced by another church. Sending a chaplain to immigration holding centres to visit and lead Bible studies was key to another local church’s strategy. Collaborating with existing ministries whose mandate specifically involves coming alongside refugees and new immigrants was touted as a huge asset (*please see the toolkit for examples of these ministries*).

All participants agreed that the church must be more intentional and organized about helping new immigrants integrate into the church community and that it is up to leadership to cast the vision for this part of church ministry.