



Refugee Newcomer Sponsorship and Social Inclusion:

York U-MCC Ontario Research Report

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Mennonite
Central
Committee

*We are broken within relationships; we need
to be healed within relationships.*

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I. A Story of Social Inclusion... Or, A Cautionary Tale?

Nadia and Mahmud¹ celebrated their marriage on Friday evening. Even though Nadia was resettled in Canada less than three years ago, and Mahmud about three years before that, over 300 guests attended, representing diverse communities, cultures, faiths, and backgrounds. Members of five distinct Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario sponsorship groups were among family and friends.

Mahmud and his two brothers, whose late parents were Palestinian refugees in Iraq, arrived three years apart and were sponsored by two different MCC Ontario sponsorship groups. Nadia and her brother, then 18 and 19 years of age respectively, were Government Assisted Refugees resettled in St. John's, NFLD early in January of 2016. They came alone because the rest of the family had not been cleared for travel. While living in exile in Lebanon, Nadia's family had become friends with the Yasin family, who were sponsored by a third MCC Ontario sponsorship group in late 2015. When the Yasin family heard they were living alone in NFLD, the family invited Nadia and her brother to live with them in their three-bedroom duplex in KW. A few weeks later, when the living arrangement became onerous for the large family and two unrelated young adults, one member of the Yasin family sponsorship group contacted long-time friends who live close to the Yasin family and have a small apartment in their home. These

friends were part of a fourth MCC Ontario sponsorship group (the Neighbourhood Project, or NP) who had welcomed a Syrian family of six and another mother and child about two weeks earlier. Nadia and her brother moved into the basement apartment, and two members of the Yasin sponsorship group, assisted by members of the NP, became their unofficial sponsors. When the rest of the family finally arrived six months later and eventually settled in their own apartment home, Nadia and her brother joined them.

In October of 2016, the three Syrian families and members of the Yasin and NP sponsorship groups celebrated Thanksgiving together. Mahmud and his brother were also invited, as they had helped the sponsors with translation. At that celebration, Nadia's father told a member of the Yasin sponsorship group about his sister (Aliya) and her family who were still suffering in Lebanon. The sponsor was moved by the story and began the long process of applying for a named sponsorship through MCC. Members of the Yasin sponsorship group eventually pulled together a new group from two Mennonite congregations to sponsor Aliya and her family. They were welcomed in Canada a few weeks ago, almost three years later.

Although the sponsors are members of five distinct sponsorship groups from seven different Mennonite churches in Waterloo Region, all are part of the larger and well-connected Mennonite community. Because church (or the faith community) is the centre of Mennonite life, many of the sponsors from these five groups have known one another most of their lives. They went to Mennonite Youth Fellowship (MYF) together when they were teenagers. They played hockey and softball together. They attended Mennonite conventions together. The newcomers they sponsored were welcomed into this larger Mennonite community.

And when Nadia's parents arrived in Canada, they opened their home and their hearts to the people who had cared for their children during the months when they were separated. They understand community. The Yasin family, Nadia's family, Mahmud and his brothers, and members of these interconnected sponsorship groups celebrate birthdays, births, weddings, holidays, and friendship. This community is being transformed. So, when Nadia and Mahmud prepared the guest list for their wedding celebration, their new community in Canada

included over 30 friends from five different sponsorship groups. And they hosted a grand celebration.

This story may be read as a model of refugee sponsorship. Indeed, many of the “best practices” of successful integration, such as “two-way” adaptation on the part of newcomers and receiving communities, and meaningful intergroup and interpersonal relationships, are illustrated in this singular event. Some of the unique features of MCC Ontario’s refugee sponsorship program, including MCC’s stated commitment to peacebuilding through building community and “mutually transformative relationships,” are realized in this celebration.ⁱⁱ However, many long-time sponsors are growing older, and Mennonite churches in the area are declining in numbers and are no longer as interconnected as they were 40 years ago when Canada’s refugee sponsorship program first began. Private sponsorship through MCC Ontario is necessarily changing. In order to understand the key features of private sponsorship that are sustainable and might be carried forward into an evolving social landscape, we take a closer look at the principles and practices of social inclusion, and the limits as well as the potential of refugee sponsoring relationships.

II. The Research

Between June 2017 and August 2018, researchers at York University together with MCC Ontario’s refugee program staff carried out a community-based research project that explored how MCC’s private sponsorship program might help or hinder relationships of social inclusion. The following is a brief summary of what we learned. Four questions guided this research:

- What are the unique features that have motivated, anchored, and sustained refugee sponsorship among long-standing sponsoring groups?
- To what extent (and in what ways) can refugee

sponsorship through MCC be a model for social inclusion?

- How are dynamics of social exclusion reproduced during the resettlement experience?
- How do sponsorship groups navigate power differentials in sponsoring relationships?

III. What is Social Inclusion?

Concerns for immigrants and refugees often have to do with how well immigrants are integrating or trying to fit in. Social inclusion, or integration, is commonly thought of as an outcome or objective that involves economic factors (such as employment and housing) and/or an emotional sense of belonging and trust for individuals who are marginalized or excluded in some way.

We know, however, that many of our social institutions and communities are set up in ways that favour certain people over others. For example, people who are racialized (i.e. not White), Indigenous, immigrants, and refugees are more likely to work in low-paying and temporary jobs and are less likely to move into high status positions. Even when we account for education and training, language skills, and work experience, the opportunities for advancement in the Canadian labour market are measurably worse for those who are not White men. Even more, the values and assumptions (or worldview) that direct how we organize ourselves make these dynamics of social exclusion seem inevitable and justified, even natural. Services and supports aimed at social inclusion—even private sponsorship programs—can backfire, can unintentionally situate perceived *difference* on the margins. Our Well-meaning efforts to change or support the excluded individual, while overlooking the processes that make

them excluded, ultimately serve to reinforce long-standing social and economic divides. Social inclusion requires us to reverse our gaze—to examine and confront the taken-for-granted assumptions we hold and everyday practices in which we engage that prop up our undesired places and identities of privilege.

The definition of social exclusion that guided this research is: *The everyday practices that devalue difference, reinforcing economic, spatial, socio-political, and subjective divides.* Social exclusion is at once interpersonal and systemic, often unintentional, and it shows up in fractured relationships between individuals, groups, communities, societies, and nations. Social resources (or capital) are material and symbolic, and have to do with assets held as well as the functional quality of those assets in social exchanges. Indicators of social exclusion include economic security, social connections, political engagement, access to public services (such as health care, education, and childcare), legal recognition and protection, and the ability to define yourself and make your own life choices. We identify four forms of social exclusion: economic, spatial, social and political, and subjective.ⁱⁱⁱ

Effective responses to social exclusion challenge the ideas as well as the social systems that give rise to conflict, fear, and even violence. Social *inclusion*, then, must move us *toward* one another—toward the reconciliation of social and economic divides, the transformation of fractured relationships, and social healing.

Social inclusion is dynamic and relational, and has to do with the nature of our relationships and social processes as well as specific individual outcomes or conditions. Social inclusion is not a change *in* or *for* the other, but change *with* one another. Dynamics of social inclusion nurture communities and institutions—schools, workplaces, social and health services, neighbourhoods—that make room for change, to support and complement diverse members within them. Social inclusion is a process of relationship-building that enables all of us to effectively develop and use our diverse capabilities to care for ourselves and others. While we did not settle on a precise definition of social inclusion

to frame our research, we suggest a working definition as follows:

Ways of viewing the world and being in relationship with one another that incline us to “seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide”;^{iv} to live simply in communities of mutuality and shared responsibility.

IV. Summary of Research Findings

The following sections provide a brief summary of what we learned from: seven focus groups representing 21 church-based sponsorship groups (49 participants) from six geographical regions that sponsored refugees through MCC Ontario between 2007-2015; interviews with 17 former refugee newcomers who were sponsored by one of the sample groups; a key informant interview with Brian Dyck, the National Migration and Resettlement Program Coordinator; and MCC documents and publications. We highlight key features or characteristics of relationships that foster social inclusion, including institutional relationships between MCC and local congregations, sponsorship groups, and international partners; sponsor-sponsored relationships; and relationships between former refugee newcomers and the communities in which they resettle.

MCC History

The MCC Refugee Sponsorship Story

A commitment to aiding refugees is at the heart of MCC’s institutional origins and peacebuilding work. MCC was founded in 1920 to provide aid and resettlement for persecuted Mennonites in Russia and Ukraine. Between 1923 and 1930, Canada accepted 21,000 Mennonites, with the understanding that Mennonite communities would care for and resettle these

newcomers. MCC and its leaders played a major role in the development of Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) in response to Indochinese refugees. In 1979, MCC became the first "Master Agreement Holder." Several congregations represented in our study have been sponsoring refugees since the program was initiated, and for them, refugee sponsorship has become a part of the very culture of the congregation—sponsorship is a natural means of participating in the church's activities, and it occurs simply because it is "what we do" (sponsor, Ottawa).

MCC Reputability

With nearly 40 years of experience providing support to a wide range of congregations and non-faith groups, MCC has become well-known and widely respected. The MCC Ontario refugee program is unique in many respects: for one, its capacity for sponsorship far exceeds other Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) that are mostly volunteer-led and have minimal staff hours. MCC Ontario organizes events and conferences to encourage and inform sponsors while also reaching out to churches with specific cases requiring resettlement—they play a major role in motivating and supporting sponsors as well as shaping sponsorship relationships. Many sponsors attributed the reputability of MCC to its long history and involvement with refugee assistance, which further reassured sponsors that they would be supported throughout the sponsorship process.

MCC Structure and Ethos – Communities of Faith

International Partnerships

In 1960, MCC moved beyond helping only those in the "family of faith" and began international aid and relief work. By the mid-1970s, MCC had established a physical presence and relationships in many of the areas from which refugees were fleeing. Since then, MCC's programs in other countries have assisted with the resettlement of various groups of refugees in Canada. Within the timeframe of our study (2007-2015), for example, Colombians and Palestinians comprised a significant number of the total

refugee newcomers sponsored by the Mennonite churches within the sample. The high proportion of certain source countries reflects the unique connections MCC had within specific regions, as well as its ability to liaise with churches and communicate with governments and refugee-serving agencies to quickly mobilize sponsors.

Relationship-Building as Peacebuilding

Unlike many other SAHs that sponsor refugees of their own cultural or religious group through named cases, MCC is committed to meeting the resettlement needs of any refugee, regardless of religion or culture.^v This was a deliberate decision made after a review of the sponsorship program in 2008, when MCC Canada stipulated that at least 60% of all cases were to be referred by UNHCR or the Canada Visa Office in order to prioritize those who had been identified as most in need. Further demonstrating this commitment, MCC Canada resettled approximately one third of all Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) cases (refugees identified for resettlement by UNHCR) in 2017,^{vi} further emphasizing its commitment to fostering new relationships between faiths and cultures, and to encourage “relationship-building as peacebuilding.”^{vii}

The Global MCC Community

MCC defines itself as “a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches” with national offices in both Winnipeg (Manitoba) and Akron (Pennsylvania). Many members of Mennonite churches have actively participated in MCC programs overseas, and they provide a global perspective that helps to motivate sponsorship. MCC has the unique capacity to provide accessible and popular programming that grows a community of “MCCers” who connect MCC’s international work with local congregations. Dyck notes that MCC is to be “the service arm of the Mennonite Church. So, we are subordinate to the churches in that our role isn’t necessarily to develop their theology, although we have over the years because people do go back and forth, and it has had an impact on that” (Interview, July 2018). In this way, MCCers shape the values and motivations of Mennonite congregations across Canada.

The Local MCC Community

MCC Canada functions as a unifying body for the majority of Mennonite and Anabaptist churches across the country that covers six distinct Mennonite denominations, but is largely comprised of Mennonite Church Canada and the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. MCC's structure expresses an organizational commitment to "relationships with our local partners and churches," to the extent that "their needs guide our priorities."^{viii} As the "active arm" of the church, MCC enables congregations and their members to become engaged in "relief, development and peace in the name of Christ" at home and abroad. As one respondent noted: "Our churches are all part of MCC, we are constituents of MCC—we see MCC as the extension of our local congregation that does the local and international relief and development work and MCC as an extension of the community and development work" (sponsor, Toronto). Furthermore, MCC has a unique ability to bring together diverse Mennonite and non-Mennonite denominations as well as non-faith-based groups, thus unifying disparate religious convictions and values.

The Congregation as Faith Community

Community, relationships, and a collective identity are central to the traditional theological foundations of Mennonite belief, as salvation is found in community, in the collective. This practical religious expression and communal identity are in contrast to the individualism of personal belief of most Western Christian theologies. Furthermore, the church, or the faith community, is important beyond Sunday morning worship—it is central to everyday life. Thus, refugee sponsorship strengthens the Mennonite identity in several ways, and in turn, provides an enduring foundation for sponsoring relationships.

Motivations to Sponsor

We were interested in learning more about what motivates people to give up their time and money to sponsor refugees, especially those who have been active with MCC's sponsorship program

for years or even decades. The following themes emerged in our discussions:

The Mennonite Refugee Story

- Many sponsors recounted a personal familial refugee story and a sense of personal connection to “refugee-ness.”
- Sponsoring is a way of giving back to an organization from which they themselves, or their parents and grandparents, had benefited.

Identification with Those Who Suffer

- The Anabaptist/Mennonite story is one of persecution, migration, and resettlement. A shared identity as a persecuted people is central to Mennonite culture and disposition.^{ix}

Faith-in-Action

- Emphasis on faithful living over faithful belief is rooted in the teachings of Menno Simons and the Anabaptist interpretation of Biblical stories and remains at the heart of MCC’s approach to programming.
- This faith-in-action is articulated by the familiar words of the Anabaptist leader Menno Simons: “True evangelical faith ... cannot lay dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it ... clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it.”^x

Humanitarian Duty

- Sponsorship is motivated by a shared desire to respond to need and a sense of responsibility to one’s fellow human being.
- “We just do this because of who we are. This is just part of our DNA ... This is the human [condition]—the search for human dignity” (a sponsor, Waterloo).

Social Exclusion and Inclusion in the Newcomer Experience

The settlement experiences of former refugee newcomers sometimes expose stubborn dynamics of social exclusion, mingled with genuine expressions of social inclusion. This is the paradox—the simultaneous gain and loss—of forced migration and settlement.

The First Year – Appreciation

Newcomers expressed their appreciation for the hands-on, practical support they received from sponsors: “People who arrive with the help of the Mennonite [church] or with churches with programs like that arrive with a huge blessing. It’s a big help” (Nicolas). Other newcomers recalled being pleasantly surprised by how they were received: “I did not expect such treatment. I had never seen that kind of kindness and hospitality before” (Fatimah). While the formal and contrived relationships of sponsorship end after one year, the everyday lives of refugee newcomers continue into “month 13” and beyond. The ways in which our communities and institutions function to keep people marginalized become apparent after the first year of sponsorship. We provide here a very brief summary of the intersecting dynamics of social exclusion articulated by former refugee newcomers.

Economic Exclusion – Loss of livelihood

Our research suggests that the losses of forced migration can feel absolute and devastating, especially for men whose worth (or dignity) is tied up in providing for their families. One man noted that he and others like him had “a good [occupational] background in our home countries. Here, it is useless” (Nicolas). Indeed, he has been employed in a variety of jobs (e.g. dishwasher, Walmart employee, home maintenance work), none of which afford the economic stability and social status to which he was accustomed—or with which most Canadians would be satisfied. Others expressed deep frustration with Canada’s “routines” and regulations that prevent them from supporting their families and

making meaningful contributions to their communities.

Spatial Exclusion – Isolation and loneliness

Families who do not live in or near their own cultural community expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness. One family explicitly noted that they were far from their Arabic community, that they had to travel to a nearby city to attend their mosque and access halal grocery stores. Some families remain dependent on sponsors for transportation, further compounding their isolation. However, spaces of social exclusion in communities are created when refugee newcomers are “congregated” or segregated in one neighbourhood, apartment building, or high school.

Socio-political Exclusion – Barriers to formal and informal social supports

Establishing social supports, both formal and informal, remains challenging for many former newcomers. Young women identified experiencing social barriers that their brothers don't face, as they are visually different from their peers: “They were kind of scared to talk to you ... I was the only one with hijab, it was something different to see. [My brother] made some friends, it's just because he looked like them ... But me, I was kind of weird for them to see” (Nur). Children described experiences of being bullied and not having friends in school. Language remains a significant barrier for adults and youth. Dissatisfaction with English language programs was frequently expressed, and many adults reported that they did not attend language school despite ongoing difficulties communicating in English. One young man commented: “I look at other people that have been here and they still don't speak any English, they've been here for years, they have no English, they don't have a job—stable job—they don't have any education. They have citizenship, but what good is that without a job, without your language?” (Omar). Sponsorship relationships between newcomers and settled Canadians provide some measure of social inclusion. Indeed, a number of former newcomers noted that their sponsors were their only “Canadian” friends.

Subjective Exclusion – Loss of dignity

People are sometimes “boxed up,” defined by and for others as only refugees, as only vulnerable, as only needy.³¹ The systematic devaluation of education, knowledge, and expertise for newcomers—even when they are no longer newcomers—in Canada’s labour market and local communities is well-documented. Subjective exclusion functions over time. This is the dispossession of social and cultural capital, and it works to keep people in disadvantaged positions. One former refugee newcomer expressed his frustration: “Canada has a huge contradiction in terms of its policies towards immigrants. What they say is different than their actions. We as immigrants end up doing the work that Canadians do not want to do ... It’s not easy to go up the ladder.” Nicolas went on to express his frustration at the barriers to opportunities in Canada, saying, “I still feel that the system is not ready for us.” Another former refugee newcomer reflected, “I have spent three to four years trying to soak up the culture, the language, but in terms of work, I still don’t see any other opportunities out there for me. No options.” Some newcomers conveyed experiencing a loss of dignity. For example, Nicolas explained that “society expects you to come into society and do the jobs that children used to do.” Alternatively, newcomers also described a sense of self-worth and pride in witnessing their children getting an education, or being able to raise their family in safety.

Sponsor-Sponsored Roles and Relationships

The sponsoring relationship is mostly utilitarian for the first six to eight months, helping newcomers to look after the basics of everyday life. Important sponsor roles and responsibilities are as follows.

Settlement Supporters

- Basic settlement roles and responsibilities for sponsors that are supported by MCC Ontario include: financial, health, housing, education, shopping, and transportation.

- Individual sponsors may be assigned various tasks, such as English tutoring, driving, or accompanying newcomers to their medical appointments.
- Newcomers and sponsors alike report that these primary points of care provide the foundation for the relationships that form between sponsors and newcomers.

Service Connectors

- Sponsors link newcomers to formal social supports, including: English language classes, schools for children, settlement agencies and supports, banking, and health care.
- Sponsors help navigate the complex systems, regulations, and “routines” of Canadian institutions and social services that newcomers face.
- Sponsors often attempt to provide additional services (e.g. employment counselling), rather than facilitating connections with community agencies that provide these services and can support both the newcomers and sponsors.

Social Brokers

- Sponsors help newcomers to connect with informal social supports and networks, such as cultural or religious communities.
- Sponsors reach out to local cultural groups and places of worship that they identify to be similar to, or the same as, that of the newcomer family, occasionally making incorrect assumptions about cultural and religious identities.
- Newcomers report the importance of developing relationships with their own ethno-religious community whose members often make up the core of their friend group in Canada.

Sponsoring relationships shift over time, and sponsors find varying ways of walking alongside newcomers, often moving from more immediate and practical concerns to emotional and

social supports. Sponsors are encouraged to take their lead from newcomers. Examples of emotional and social roles and responsibilities of sponsors include the following.

Listening Companions

- Sponsors and newcomers alike recognize the importance of simply being present and listening—to be open to hearing what newcomers have to say, and try to understand “what’s important to them ... You know, we think that we know what is the best way to do things, but sometimes you really have to listen to them and let them do what they think they have to do” (a sponsor, Stratford).
- One newcomer advised sponsors to “listen to the needs of the person they’re taking care of” and to “be patient,” because newcomers “know things” but may find it difficult to express themselves (Tiffany).

Cultural Mediators and Advocates

- Sponsors can use their social know-how and influence in their local communities to help negotiate cultural differences, social or institutional barriers, or attitudes of prejudice. Sponsors sometimes intervene with landlords, health care professionals, and teachers to avoid or address misunderstandings, to educate service providers, and to ensure rights are protected.
- Sponsors respect dignity by supporting newcomers in making their own decisions and assisting and advocating for newcomers in the direction they want to pursue. As one newcomer noted: “[The sponsors] support, they come to your house asking you about ‘What do you need?’— like ‘Can I help you with something?’ This is just supporting you to make your own decisions” (Nur).
- Through collective advocacy—not for or to, but with—newcomers and sponsors can work together to encourage cultures of inclusion in communities and institutions.

Relationships of Transition: Cautions

As the immediate and practical needs are met, well-meaning sponsors can become increasingly invested in the personal issues of newcomers and are sometimes tempted to define what is “best” for their wellbeing. This can present discomfort for newcomers and tension in the relationship. Sponsors have a responsibility to be self-aware, to check attitudes and positioning of self in relation to the “other.” It is important for sponsors to look beyond good intentions and reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions that can cause harm.

Question assumptions about what it means to be a “good Canadian”

- Sometimes sponsors feel obliged “to make them good Canadian citizens” (a sponsor, Niagara), through ensuring that newcomers secure employment, find appropriate housing, learn English, and become “contributing” members of society.”
- In contrast, all newcomers noted their primary goals were safety, family, and ultimately obtaining Canadian citizenship. Further, they expressed a desire for meaningful employment that matched their abilities, education and personal goals. The newcomers who had longer-term employment had settled in a job that they themselves had sought and secured.

Question assumptions about what it means to be “independent”

- Most sponsors expressed an expectation for newcomers to become “independent,” to “make their own way in life” (a sponsor, Waterloo).
- Newcomers described independence as “settling into a place where you are not depending on anyone” (Fatimah), to be in charge of your own life choices.
- Sponsors must “let them go” (a sponsor, Waterloo) and

trust they can do it for themselves, while not abandoning the newcomer.

- Sponsors often desire a more personal and emotional attachment to newcomers, to move to “more of a relationship than a sponsorship” (Omar).
- However, the shift from “duty” to “friendship” is not a natural transition, and may not be desired by all parties. Former newcomers expressed their deep appreciation for their sponsors, emphasizing the strong and necessary utilitarian value of those relationships.

Walk with humility and curiosity

- Sponsors sometimes view newcomer choices as pride, or a desire to live off welfare and “milk” the system. When sponsors place value on certain decisions or behaviours rather than seeking to understand, they unintentionally chip away at the agency and dignity of newcomers, and devalue difference.

V. Social Inclusion through Refugee Sponsorship

The social as well as the individual dimensions of trauma must be addressed as part of peacebuilding.

—HOWARD ZEHR

Unique Features of MCC/Mennonite Sponsorship

MCC's model of private sponsorship is rooted in a non-conformist and communal heritage, culture, and institutional structure^{xii} that support an ethos and relationships of social inclusion. Thus, sponsor-sponsored relationships have the potential to be “mutually transformative”,^{xiii} promoting social healing. The following distinct features of MCC and Mennonite sponsorship groups have supported and sustained a unique model of refugee sponsorship with long-standing sponsoring groups for over forty years.

1. **A Refugee Heritage** - The “refugeeness” of Mennonite heritage is reflected in the recent refugee history of Mennonite families in Canada, and in MCC's origins almost 100 years ago sponsoring Mennonite refugees from Russia.
2. **A Community of Sponsoring Communities** - MCC's structure expresses an organizational commitment to “relationships with our local partners and churches”^{xiv} that is rooted in the Anabaptist principle of community and sharing of material and social resources. The church as a faith community provides a natural structure and culture for sponsorship.
3. **A Culture of Beliefs in Action** - A practical and collective response to human crisis or need is an obligation that grows out of religious and humanitarian beliefs and values that have shaped Mennonite cultures for over 500 years.
4. **An Ethos of Sponsorship** - MCC is committed to meeting the resettlement needs of any refugee, emphasizing its commitment to foster new relationships between faiths and cultures, and to encourage “relationship-building as peacebuilding.”^{xv}
5. **A Collective Identity of Nonconformity** - The Anabaptist heritage and disposition are counter-cultural, outside the mainstream. Until recently, Mennonites as a people have experienced repeated dispossession and persecution that was met with non-violent resistance. Mennonites often identify with the disadvantaged and those on the margins.

Social Inclusion as Worldview

We identify the following values or principles of Mennonite heritage and theology that support social inclusion.

- Community, and living and working together
- Mutuality, and sharing resources
- Service, and living simply
- Peacebuilding, and tending right relationships

These values are rooted in a deep awareness of our common fate: that we all live the conflict and violence wrought by the economic, spatial, sociopolitical, and subjective divides of social exclusion. From histories and current realities of racism, slavery, and colonialism, to war, poverty, and ecological destruction—these are our histories and current realities. These tragic stories are ours to deal with now and to respond to together. Social inclusion then becomes the lens through which we see the world—to recognize that dominant cultures and structures reward individual competition and accumulation over shared responsibility and mutuality; to see the everyday practices that devalue difference, divide us from one another, and deny dignity; to know that the current order of things is not natural or inevitable. Social inclusion is more about relationships and social processes than an endpoint or outcome.

Social Inclusion as Practice

Policies and practices of social inclusion recognize the structural violence of poverty and social exclusion to be the chronic failure of human relationships. Social inclusion, then, is a process of closing distance within broken relationships. Reconciliation is relational and dynamic. Social inclusion as social healing is situated both in local communities and in interpersonal relationships. In practical terms, this means that social inclusion is cultivated in places that facilitate encounters – “places for the estranged to meet, exchange, engage and even embrace.”^{xvi}

A culture of social inclusion encourages us to accompany others, without desire to change or direct the other, but with a disposition to be changed ourselves. This is alongsidedness.^{xvii}

Sponsoring relationships between newcomers and settled Canadians can cultivate social inclusion. Sponsorship brings difference—on both an individual and collective level—together in relationship. By engaging with difference, we are forced to confront ourselves, as our understandings of the world are reflected back to us through the lived experiences of another.

The Importance of Reflexivity

“Our most important learnings come not simply when we see the world anew, but specifically when we see ourselves—and our role in creating the world—new.” — URSULA VERSTEEGEN

Research and practice that adopt a social inclusion framework are necessarily reflexive. In other words, the focus of attention is on the ways in which we engage with one another as well as the outcomes of our work together. We identify the overarching methodology that guided this research project to be “epistemic reflexivity.”^{xviii} Epistemic reflexivity requires us to see that which we take for granted, to recognize that we have a worldview that is not the only way to view the world. Intentional examination of our practices and beliefs confronts us with the knowledge that privilege is often not earned, not deserved, but is simply granted. Such “critical self-consciousness” involves courage and a willingness to be changed, and we commend MCC Ontario staff for engaging in this work with intentionality and curiosity.

Future Directions

We return to the story of Nadia and Mahmud’s wedding celebration. Is this a success story or a cautionary tale? Our research highlights two key questions for strengthening refugee sponsorship through MCC as a model for social inclusion.

1. Traditional Mennonite communities no longer happen the way they did in the past, even one generation ago.

Furthermore, the personal Mennonite refugee story is becoming distant with each passing decade. Many Mennonites (for better or worse) have achieved more privilege, prosperity, and status, and are less likely to identify with those who are marginalized. As membership in Canadian Mennonite congregations gradually and steadily declines, MCC has built on its widespread reputation to diversify its sponsorship base by reaching out to other denominations and non-faith-based groups. As a result, it may be that some features of the MCC model of private sponsorship are not sustainable. *How can MCC build on, adapt, and support the strengths of Mennonite sponsorship of the past?*

2. We see persisting indicators of social exclusion for many former refugee newcomers. Sponsoring relationships provide social recognition among sponsors and their communities. Yet former newcomers are often not afforded places of status, influence, and value. Those who have employment are too often stuck in low-paying, precarious jobs with little ability to advance. Access to material and symbolic resources in society may be uneven. *How can MCC equip sponsors to recognize and use their unearned privilege in Canadian communities, workplaces, schools and health care systems to transform stubborn dynamics of social exclusion?*

We conclude that MCC's rich history provides a framework for moving forward. An excerpt from the MCC 1979 document on Indochinese Refugees articulates many elements of a model for social inclusion that has grounded MCC sponsoring relationships for 40 years.

What is the Sponsor's Role?

Your biggest contribution will be your plans and determination to help them become established so they can make their own decisions, make their own way, and make their own contribution to the community. Your efforts begin immediately. Their earliest days here are very important and a decisive period. An intensive and intimate interaction

with all aspects of Canadian culture that the sponsors can provide is crucial to helping overcome cultural misunderstandings, the most difficult problem a refugee faces. Remember, however, that the persons who will be arriving bring considerable experience and generally have led lives of success and fullness, but their most recent experiences have been of suffering. Be sensitive to their feelings and allow them time to make an emotional adjustment as well. Your role, then, is not to provide instant answers, but rather to encourage the newcomers to weigh and test a variety of possibilities. With your guidance they will grow in confidence as they adapt to new routines and develop their own solutions to the many problems that will confront them. Sponsors should be involved in a mutual learning process. Just as a very important part of your effort is introducing and explaining the Canadian way of life, you have much to learn as well from the newcomers: words of a new language, the difficulties and joys of starting a new life, customs and traditions of another culture, different foods and decorative styles.... In each situation, remember that if their way of doing something is different from our way, it does not mean that our way is right or better. Each culture, and individuals within that culture, have their own way of doing things.... Remember, that they, as yourself, need to be treated as people with feelings and needs.... Patience, mutual respect, good humour and love are invaluable assets as you work together in resettlement.^{xix}

Endnotes

ⁱ All names of individuals, families, and sponsorship groups are pseudonyms, and some details are changed to protect anonymity. The story is recounted here with permission.

ⁱⁱ See Michaela Hynie, “Refugee Integration: Research and Policy,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2018); Stephanie Dyck, “Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: An Opportunity for Mutual Transformation,” *Intersections: Challenges and Opportunities in Refugee Resettlement* 5, no. 4 (2017). Hynie identifies that policies and practices, while well-meaning, sometimes segregate refugees from the rest of the community, limiting their contact and recognition, reinforcing stigmatization and undermining integration. She also notes the importance of institutional norms that support positive intergroup and interpersonal relationships that are key to successful integration. Many of the unique features of MCC private sponsorships discussed in this report demonstrate an institutional ethos of “right relationships” and peacebuilding.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more detail on the four forms of social exclusion, see Luann Good Gingrich, *Out of Place: Social Exclusion and Mennonite Migrants in Canada*. (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

^{iv} Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis, MI: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 42.

^v Treviranus and Casasola, “Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program,” 195.

^{vi} Rachel Bergen, “MCC resettles one-third of Canada’s BVOR refugees,” MCC, 2018, <https://mcccanada.ca/stories/mcc-resettles-one-third-canadas-bvor-refugees>.

^{vii} Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2013), 235.

^{viii} MCC, <https://mcccanada.ca/learn/about>.

^{ix} See Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee*; Luann Good Gingrich, *Out of place: Social exclusion and Mennonite migrants in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2016); Janzen, “The 1979 MCC Master Agreement.”

^x Menno Simons, “Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing, 1539” in Wenger, J. C., and Harold Stauffer Bender. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, C.1496-1561* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1986).

^{xi} See, for example, Royden Loewen, “Boxing up the Old Colony Mennonites.” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 14, 2013. Paulo Freire, in his famous book called *“Pedagogy of the Oppressed”* identifies that people sometimes accept that they have been made “beings for others,” reduced to the level of a category or even object by unjust social relations. He calls for transformed social structures that allow people to become “beings for themselves,” to be fully human. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th ed.). (New York: Continuum, 2005), 73-75.

^{xii} See Thea Enns, Luann Good Gingrich & Kaylee Perez, “Religious Heritage, Institutionalized Ethos, and Synergies: Mennonite Central Committee and Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program,” in Shauna Labman & Geoffrey Cameron (Eds.), *Strangers to Neighbours: Private Refugee Sponsorship in Context*. (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, forthcoming).

^{xiii} Dyck, “Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada.”

^{xiv} MCC, <https://mcccanada.ca/learn/about>.

^{xv} Epp-Tiessen, “*Mennonite Central Committee*,” 235.

^{xvi} Lederach & Lederach (2010) relate stories of face-to-face encounters and reconciliation in communities torn by protracted conflict and “unspeakable violence.” If such interpersonal engagement between enemies of war is possible, surely it is possible to reach across the divides produced by the slow, structural violences of poverty and social exclusion.

^{xvii} In his extensive writing on conflict transformation in situations of violence, John Paul Lederach describes the importance of accompanying those who suffer trauma. He used the term “alongsidedness” in the following valuable resource: John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict transformation for ordinary Christians*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014).

^{xviii} For more on epistemic reflexivity, see Good Gingrich, *Out of Place*

^{xix} Mennonite Central Committee Canada, *An Introduction to Southeast Asian Refugees and Suggestions for Sponsors*. (Winnipeg, MA: MCCC, 1979).

Cover Photo: *Southeast Asian families arrive at the airport in Winnipeg, Manitoba on May 2, 1979. In early 1979, MCC was the first group to sign an agreement with the Canadian government for the private sponsorship of refugees. Half of Canada's 600 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches sponsored some 4,000 refugees in the first 18 months of the crisis. During that time, MCC actively encouraged the Canadian government to increase its efforts as international mediator in refugee-creating situations. MCC photo/John Wieler*



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