



Refugee Newcomer Sponsorship and Social Inclusion: A Learning Resource

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Mennonite
Central
Committee

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

— OJIBWAY ELDER HILDA NADJIWAN

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I. A Story

Nadia and Mahmudⁱ 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 MCC Ontario sponsorship groups from seven different Mennonite churches in Waterloo region were among family and friends. 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, and they are part of a larger and well-connected Mennonite community. They went to youth group activities 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.

Despite the ongoing hardship and heartache of unemployment and lack of meaningful work, Nadia and Mahmud and their families have opened their homes and their hearts to the people who accompanied them in their settlement in Canada. They understand community. The newcomer and sponsoring families 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 interconnected sponsorship groups. And they hosted a grand celebration.

This story illustrates many of the “best practices” of successful integration and unique features of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario’s refugee sponsorship program, such as “two-way” adaptation on the part of newcomers and receiving communities, meaningful intergroup and interpersonal relationships, and MCC’s stated commitment to peacebuilding through building community and “mutually transformative relationships.”ⁱⁱ Yet many churches are no longer interconnected as they were in the past, and many sponsorship groups today are not part of a large, cohesive

community that shares this long history of sponsoring refugees. In order to understand the key features of private sponsorship that are sustainable and might be carried forward into an evolving social landscape, we invite you to take a closer look at the principles and practices of social inclusion, and the limits as well as the potential of refugee sponsoring relationships.



Separated from her family for over a year, an Eritrean child is reunited with her family in Canada. (MCC Photo/Matthew Sawatzky)

II. The Research

Between June 2017 and August 2018, researchers at York University and 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 Exclusion?

Social exclusion is interpersonal and systemic, often unintentional, and it shows up in fractured relationships and divides between individuals, groups, communities, societies, and nations. We identify four forms of social exclusion: economic, spatial, social and political, and subjective.ⁱⁱⁱ

a. 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 relationships of social inclusion. This is the paradox—the simultaneous gain and loss—of forced migration and settlement.

The First Year – Appreciation:

- “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” (a newcomer).
- “I did not expect such treatment. I had never seen that kind of kindness and hospitality before” (a newcomer).

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 can 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:

- “We had good [occupational] backgrounds in our home countries. Here, it is useless” (a newcomer).

- 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:

- Newcomers are often separated from family and their cultural community. 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:

- Children described experiences of being bullied and not having friends in school. “They were kind of scared to talk to you ... I was the only one with a 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” (a newcomer).
- Language remains a significant barrier for adults and youth. Many adults reported that they did not attend language school despite ongoing difficulties communicating in English. Mothers specifically expressed challenges improving their English when the duties of raising young children prevented them from attending classes.
- “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?” (a newcomer).

Subjective Exclusion – Loss of dignity:

- People are sometimes “boxed up,” defined by and for others



Palestinian family resettled to Canada by Toronto United Mennonite Church in 2010. (MCC Photo)

as only refugees, as only vulnerable, as only needy. This devaluation of a person and their education, knowledge, and expertise—even when people are no longer newcomers—blocks access to meaningful work and opportunities to make a valued contribution, and creates social and economic gaps between groups.

- “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. I still feel that the system is not ready for us” (a newcomer).

IV. What is Social Inclusion?

Dynamics of social exclusion are set in motion by familiar mainstream values that promote personal gain, competition, and a climate of fear and scarcity. Effective responses to social exclusion challenge the ideas as well as the social systems that give rise to conflict, fear, and 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. We must thrive in difference, because difference is who we are.

Social inclusion is dynamic and relational, and has to do with the nature of our relationships and social processes rather than 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 create 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.

We define social inclusion as:

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”;^v to live simply in communities of mutuality and shared responsibility.

To put social inclusion into practice means to move alongside one another, especially those who suffer. 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.”^{vii} 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 aloneness.^{vii} Sponsoring relationships between newcomers and settled Canadians can cultivate social inclusion. Sponsorship invites difference—on both an individual and collective level—into relationship. By engaging with difference, we are given an opportunity to see and know ourselves, as our understandings of the world are reflected back to us through the lived experiences of another. Through sponsorship, we value difference and choose “mutually transformative”^{viii} relationships.



*The Lee family pose for a photo taken in Kitchener, Ont., in 1986. In 1979, Ka Lee and her family were sponsored through MCC’s refugee resettlement program by Crosshill Mennonite Church in Crosshill, Ont., when they fled Thailand. (L to R, back row): Cheu, Bao, Chong; (front row): Nou, Mei See, Foua, Ka, Mai Chee.
(MCC Photo/Ka Lee-Paine)*

V. Social Inclusion through Refugee Sponsorship

a. 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 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: ESL 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. language tutoring, 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:

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 to 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).
- 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 (a newcomer).

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.
- Through collective advocacy—not for or to, but with—newcomers and sponsors can work together to encourage cultures of inclusion in communities and institutions.

b. 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) by 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 to secure meaningful employment that matched their abilities 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”





MCC and Silver Lake Mennonite Camp hosted a Newcomer and Sponsor holiday event bringing newcomers and sponsors together to spend a weekend at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp in Sauble Beach, Ontario.
(MCC Photo)

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

c. A History & Culture of Refugee Sponsorship

MCC’s model of private sponsorship is rooted in a non-conformist and communal heritage, culture, and institutional structure^{ix} that supports an ethos and relationships of social inclusion. Thus, sponsor-sponsored relationships have the potential for “mutually transformative”^x relationships that promote social healing. The following features of MCC and Mennonite sponsorship groups have supported and sustained a distinctive 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”^{xii} 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 fostering new relationships between faiths and cultures, and to encourage “relationship-building as peacebuilding.”^{xiii}
5. A Collective Identity of Alongsidedness - 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.

In 1979, Canada’s Private Sponsorship for Refugees was just getting started. MCC provided the following guidelines for sponsors who were beginning this new endeavour, translating many of the key features of a model for social inclusion into practical terms. As a sponsor with MCC, you continue this long tradition of cultivating relationships of social inclusion.

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, 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.**

—From *An Introduction to Southeast Asian Refugees and Suggestions for Sponsors* (1979)^{xiii}

Family members are pictured at the home of Marly Johonna Yanez Ortiz and husband Arbey Gutierrez in Calgary, Alta. Marly and Arbey arrived in Calgary from Colombia in 2007, under the Canadian government's refugee program. (MCC Photo/Joanie Peters)



VI. Reflections for Cultivating Social Inclusion

We return to the story of Nadia and Mahmud’s wedding celebration. How is this a story of social inclusion? In what ways is it a cautionary tale? We see persisting 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. We invite sponsors to reflect on the following:

- What did you learn that you didn’t previously know?
- How might you recognize and use your privilege in Canadian communities, workplaces, schools and health care systems to transform stubborn dynamics of social exclusion?
- What are some practical ways in which you might cultivate a culture of social inclusion in your congregation, neighbourhood or city?
- What can we learn together about the Canadian way of life and ourselves through the experiences of newcomers?
- How might the sponsoring relationship be “mutually transformative” for you as an individual and for the communities we share?

Endnotes

- i All names of individuals, families, and sponsorship groups are pseudonyms. 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).
- 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 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.
- v Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis, MI: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 42.
- vi Lederach & Lederach (2010) relate stories of face-to-face encounters and reconciliation in communities torn by protracted armed 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 violence of poverty and social exclusion.
- vii 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).
- viii Dyck, “Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada.”
- ix 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 Canada and Beyond*. (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, forthcoming).
- x Dyck, “Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada.”
- xi MCC, <https://mcccanada.ca/learn/about>.
- xii Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2013), 235.
- xiii Mennonite Central Committee Canada, *An Introduction to Southeast Asian Refugees and Suggestions for Sponsors*. (Winnipeg, MA: MCCC, 1979).

Cover Photo: *A first campfire experience – camp songs, stories and s’mores! MCC and Silver Lake Mennonite Camp hosted a newcomer and sponsor holiday event bringing newcomers and sponsors together to spend a weekend at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp in Sauble Beach, Ontario. (MCC Photo)*

Back 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)*

Full research report can be viewed at:
mcco.ca/Sponsorship-and-Social-Inclusion-Research-Report



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