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Snapshots from Edmonton

Immigrants in a Rapidly Changing City

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Just north of Edmonton's downtown core, there's a little brick building. It has sat derelict for years, next door to a homeless shelter and, increasingly, in the shadow of the new 28-storey office tower that is under construction. The old railway that ran past the building, bringing thousands of immigrants from Europe via Pier 21 to begin new lives in Alberta, is gone, its former lands rapidly filling with expensive condominium developments. But in the streets surrounding the old Immigration Hall, the continual human change of Alberta's capital city is evident. The Greyhound station, a few blocks away, is where families now step out into a city that has attracted them, often from elsewhere in Canada, with tales of this "end of the rainbow" country where there are jobs and affluence for the taking.

Today those families are probably from Africa or Asia and have not just stepped off the boat, as was the case 50 and more years ago. They have quite likely been in central Canada and experienced disappointment and struggle for a year or more prior to pursuing the beckoning boom out West. As they carry their bags to a nearby immigrant service organization seeking assistance, they walk through neighbourhoods where the streets are bustling with the businesses of the Chinese and Southeast Asians who have preceded them. Add to this picture the rapidly growing population of Aboriginal people, who have moved from rural reserves and settlements that offer no future and no safe water, and who now outnumber the shrinking stock of affordable

housing in the area. They watch these newcomers while waiting in line at day-labour agencies for jobs that pay a fraction of what it costs to live in Edmonton. Aboriginal people have been pushed aside on the land that was first theirs.

Others arrive flying high above Immigration Hall as their flight arriving from another continent lines up for a runway at Edmonton International Airport. They have made a thoughtful choice, waited years, and are confident about the opportunity that 3% unemployment rate offers, and about the value of their professional education and experience. The first seeds of doubt for them may be sown as they ride into the city on Gateway Boulevard in a taxi, chatting with the highly experienced Somali physician or Pakistani geologist who is their driver...

Some of the migrants who arrived in Edmonton in the days of Immigration Hall look at this new reality with concern. When the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN) opened a new building in 2008, in a neighbourhood where many older, retired, European immigrants live modestly in the homes they have had for decades, it received anonymous phone calls saying that we were not welcome, and that the people associated with us were not wanted in the area. But others remember their own struggles and are generous in their welcome. European immigrants from half a century ago are volunteering their time day after day to tutor newcomers from Central Asia when they could be playing cards or crafting with friends at a seniors' centre.

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The contrasts abound in Edmonton. Wealthy first-generation immigrants are major real estate developers and leaders in professional fields of all sorts, including the spectacular new Mazankowski Heart Institute. A child refugee became a four-term Member of Parliament and Chair of the Government Caucus in Ottawa. But Campaign 2000¹ says half of the children of newer immigrant families live in poverty and the average earnings of highly educated accountants and engineers entering EMCN's bridging programs in the year previous hover around \$15,000 mark.

During the past three years, after years of neglect, both the Province of Alberta and the City of Edmonton have developed major policy frameworks expressing the importance of immigrants and their commitment to these newcomers. In Alberta, more municipalities have joined the UNESCO-based Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination than in any other province.

The boom times in Edmonton have been very good for some, but immigrants arriving in recent years are facing steep slopes in their ascent to the good life. The rapid escalation of rental costs has made it difficult to maintain housing that is adequate, affordable, healthy and secure. Fifteen years ago, the near-elimination of social housing funding in Edmonton exacted a terrible cost, with more low-income affordable housing disappearing than was constructed. Thousands of modest walk-up apartments in urban core neighbourhoods were converted to condos and sold to a young, new, middle class who wish to live downtown, especially as the cost of suburban housing has skyrocketed. Far too late, provincial law began to limit rent increases to one per year; however, in doing so, it placed no ceiling on the size of this single increase.

¹ Campaign 2000 is a national anti-poverty public education coalition. It was formed to monitor progress on the 1989 House of Commons resolution to end child poverty by the year 2000 and produces an annual report card to provide updates on this progress. Information is available at <www.campaign2000.ca>.

Provincial welfare rates, which determine government-assisted refugees' allowance rates during the first year of their arrival, are the lowest of all provincial rates in Canada and are far below the cost of living in Edmonton.

But the stories of Alberta narrated in other parts of Canada remain rosier than is the reality, and newcomers keep arriving.² When questions are raised about the resources to assist such newcomers, the official position is there is no way to accurately measure the number of immigrants coming as secondary migrants to Alberta from the provinces where they have landed, so federal funding for services to immigrants remains based on the place of landing, adding to the pressures on settlement organizations. With no housing available, families press in with others, children sleep crowded on basement floors, have no place to study, and sometimes attend several schools per year as insecure arrangements fall apart. Even facilities to prepare and store food may be inadequate for many families.

In the past three years a new phenomenon has been added to the patchwork quilt. The Temporary Foreign Worker Program was modified to admit foreign workers in low and unskilled occupations. This program was embraced by so many employers that in 2007 more temporary foreign workers came to Alberta than did permanent residents. A significant percentage of these workers report they have been charged outrageous fees by brokers to secure their jobs; many also report abusive treatment from these

² According to Government statistics, in 2007 approximately 20,000 immigrants landed in Alberta directly from abroad, among which 6,000 landed in Edmonton. But secondary migrants, from other parts of Canada, are not documented. Immigrant serving organizations make estimates based on the information they gather when asking those who come seeking services where they are coming from. About one-third answer from another province in Canada, while two thirds answer from another part of the world. Historically, the number of newcomers indicating that they have originated from elsewhere in Canada was about 15%, and there was a sense that the number of those arriving and leaving was somewhat equal. In recent years, however, the number of newcomers seems to be increasing, while those who leave for other parts of Canada seems to be declining.

agents. When they arrive, they often become isolated and live in fear. The idea of immigration as a contribution to the social development of a nation is being abandoned in favour of catering to the most basic of labour market demands. The list of “expedited” occupations, for which employers are not even required to demonstrate an inability to recruit people already established in Canada in order to get approval for temporary workers, has grown.³

EMCN and its “holistic integrated practice”

The dynamics of Alberta today are far from simple; this is especially true for immigrants. Few of us experience our own lives as simple or tidy either. If we know that our own lives are messy, disorganized, uncertain, and ambiguous much of the time, it should not be difficult to realize that the same probably holds true for people who are making huge changes in their lives as they embark upon their new life in Canada. Listening to the voices of people coming through the doors at EMCN from more than 100 places of origin in every part of the world each year, noticing how, once the invitation to share was provided, an initial reason for turning to the office is often tied to an intricate web of intersecting issues, EMCN staff, most of them immigrants themselves who have lived the same experiences, decided it was important to name the nature of their involvement with newcomers.

“Holistic integrated practice” was the term chosen to describe how the organization worked.

³ Most reported actions by employment brokers occur in countries of origin and not in Canada, so it can be difficult to document or address. However, the volume of problems experienced by temporary workers once they have arrived in Canada, relating to such issues as employers not complying with labour standards or changing the terms of their original offers of employment, poor housing, and health problems, has become so severe in Alberta that in 2007, the provincial government created a team mandated to respond to complaints. Furthermore, it began to fund some settlement organizations in 2008 to provide services to temporary workers similar to those provided to immigrants. As the program continues to operate and involve more people, new ambiguities and problem areas continue to be identified. These include the ability of temporary workers who bring school-age children to have these children educated in public schools, and the status of temporary workers in a workplace that enters a strike or lockout situation. A federal government “pilot project” allows employers to bring temporary workers to Alberta and British Columbia in 33 expedited occupations, which include food counter attendants, desk clerks, and even snowboard instructors, without requiring employers to demonstrate that they had not been able to find workers in Canada. This is a fundamental change in the philosophy of the temporary worker option.



Hundreds of internationally educated engineers and accountants have moved from low-skilled, low-paying jobs to professional employment with the support of EMCN's bridging programs (Photo: Jim Gurnett).

A commitment was made to a vision of EMCN as contributing to a democratic and intercultural Edmonton as opposed to only being a settlement services agency. More than curious vocabulary, this language has become a framework for the organization's work. This framework has dictated EMCN's three-fold mission: to provide services enabling immigrants to be successful in their own lives; to work towards educating and supporting change within the dominant culture to gradually broaden the narrow perspective of “Well, they're here now so they need to learn how we do it here;” and to make efforts to see that the best public policy serves as a foundation for the full participation of the most diverse range of immigrants Alberta has ever seen.

Holistic integrated practice is dignified. It is anchored in the perspective that each new arrival is a rich addition to our life as a community, not a miscellaneous assortment of needs that are to be sent here and there to stand in line and fill in forms for services. It is also founded on the belief that receiving newcomers in this way allows each person to use individual and family strengths to map and travel a chosen route to integration and success. It takes a lot of work and courage for those on the receiving side.

In other words, the approach being left behind is the fast-food restaurant perspective on human services, where a good solid counter firmly separates the two sides, a bright attractive menu is mounted above with clear tasty choices outlined very precisely (and at exactly 11:45 a.m. each day the breakfast side rolls over and the lunch menu is displayed), and a friendly fellow in the franchise uniform asks what you'd like and whether you want it supersized or not. Holistic

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integrated practice is about the collective kitchen. People arrive and contribute their various offerings, perhaps with names hard to pronounce and tastes never experienced before, to a common table around which a conversation with everyone learning from everyone else takes place, tasks are determined based on skills and interests, and tasty unique meals are created together, and perhaps shared together as well.

Holistic integrated practice requires the organization's staff to know a lot about what else is available beyond their particular immediate responsibilities so links can be made and a range of appropriate services suggested and arranged in the most convenient and effective way.

Perhaps a newcomer arrives, seeking help to develop a resume that will be effective with Canadian employers. The job is not finished once that service has been delivered. Time is taken to do some analysis together to see if the employment goals of the person are too modest (or too ambitious) for their qualifications. Suggestions and liaison with good employers can be made. The invitation to share about the settlement experience more generally may lead to the person mentioning a spouse who wants to study English but has a pre-school child at home. EMCN staff can make the connection to another staff member who can help register that person for LINC classes and free childcare. The conversation goes on and the isolation and unhappiness of a junior high school youth is mentioned. This opens the door to another opportunity to connect with a member of the team working in schools, who can invite the youth to get involved in one of their programs. Oh, and the children need bicycles too? We can arrange free bikes with a partner community agency that provides sports equipment for low-income families. Then the person shares a worry that the household income currently cannot manage the rent increase they have just received. Another link can be made to a housing specialist for help applying to a provincial emergency eviction prevention program. The person mentions wishing the children were not



Families from over 15 countries live together in EMCN's supported housing apartment buildings, receiving services and building a community together (Photo: Ben Lemphers).

so quickly losing their first language as they are swept up in Canada: here is an opening to tell them about EMCN's World of Story resources that provide folk tales in more than 30 languages for families to use together in literacy activities. And so the day goes.

A newcomer leaves with information, appointments, resources and a sense of belonging and having more control over his or her life. Holistic integrated service is convenient, but far more than convenient, it is the human way to work, it is based on understanding how life happens, how even a small situation can have a ripple effect in various parts of a person's life.

The open method of listening to newcomers is central at EMCN and has allowed us to observe that many refugees who come traumatized after long, terrible, experiences of violence and danger are not likely to be successful in gaining and keeping jobs, excelling in educational programs, or dealing with the complexities of daily life in a strange new culture. When no Canadian funder was prepared to recognize that settlement services included services addressing these psychological needs, EMCN secured resources from the UNHCR for this specific purpose and became one of a handful of internationally-accredited service provision agencies in Canada. Additional listening made clear that access to services during "office hours" was inadequate for many. EMCN created an approach to assisted housing, in which newcomers – especially refugees – could be part of a residential situation that both supported the continued development of independent living

skills and provided opportunities to safely develop relationships with others. This approach provided secure, affordable housing with support available, in order to ensure longer hours of service. Approximately 100 people now live in two apartment buildings that offer this model.

Listening to newcomers further revealed the deep human cost of having years of education and work experience in a chosen profession disdained in Canada; however, the steep economic cost of this reality might perhaps be less than the pain. Out of this grew EMCN's bridging programs. Careful assessments identify the many strengths of internationally-educated and experienced professionals and the particular deficiencies that might make working in Canada difficult for them. EMCN develops programs that renders these individuals fully acceptable to Canadian employers in a short period of time, by focussing on the small gaps rather than the commonly held view that people will need to "go back and start over," leaving them to find their own way. The feedback from those who have moved on to working again in their professions is that not only is there deep satisfaction when income begins to reflect one's true abilities but that families are happier, stress is reduced, and everyone can begin to partake in this new community.

Holistic integrated practice can be a challenge for funders who are familiar with a model

whereby each funder supports specific programs that need to be reported in their particular framework. It can be a challenge for a community organization to weave together funding from several sources to provide this more integrated service. But as funders and community organizations learn to do this together, there is no doubt that immigrants and communities will benefit.

There is nothing mysterious or amazing about holistic integrated practice. It is a careful effort that aims to cultivate, within a community organization, the natural behaviour of caring people towards others. Edmontonians benefit from the success of newcomers, yet too many newcomers are experiencing disappointingly weak achievement in their adoptive community. EMCN is therefore convinced that it makes good sense to continue this work towards a community where each person can contribute in the fullest and best way they desire.

About the author

JIM GURNETT is Executive Director of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (www.emcn.ab.ca) and Chair of the Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance. He is a Board member of the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations and of the Advisory Board of the Social Work Department of Grant MacEwan College. He is also active with the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.