

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: New Immigrants: Meeting People Halfway

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The United Church was created by the immigrants who ventured to Canada in the 1800s. It may well be a church where immigrants of the 2000s find a faith home, but in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) we will need to do some things differently to meet people halfway.

Finding ministry leaders

The obvious challenge for the United Church is the lack of ministry leaders who know the cultures and speak the languages of people who are now our neighbours. In the Brampton area of Southwest Presbytery, for example, the church has an acute need for people who know the cultures of South Asia and who speak Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Tamil, for starters. Other denominations actively look for potential leaders among the new immigrants and help them get started by pairing them up with highly experienced ministers and by giving on-the-job training. We can do that too.

Welcoming the faith and life experience of people from different cultures

At a deeper level, Christian leaders from new immigrant communities say that a real block to the growth of their congregations is the widespread perception that Jesus was Caucasian and therefore Christian faith is closed to them. People need to see people like them in leadership or they feel they are being asked to enter a faith community that is ethno-culturally foreign. People bring other cultural issues from their upbringing: matriarchal or patriarchal traditions; faith formed in massive urban settings rather than the rural areas that many older Canadians came from; extroverted cultures opposed to the more reserved cultures of Europe.

The fit may not be an easy one for some years. But one thing congregations can do is build ministry relationships with the leaders of immigrant congregations. New immigrants' perceptions of us – and ours of them – will only change as they get to know us as respectful colleagues in God's mission in this area. The kind of ministry depends on the culture of the community. Cooperating on women's ministry is unlikely to work among people from highly patriarchal cultures, where the women of those cultures have to lead the change process for themselves. However, cooperation in ministries that affect everyone have a better chance. For example, collaborating to help get a hospice or youth recreation program into the community might work better.

Expanding our ecumenical relationships

All over the GTA, independent churches with indigenous leaders are springing up. Many of these congregations are poor, with underpaid and overworked ministry leaders. (So were the tiny congregations across rural Canada that eventually came together to form the United Church.) Eventually, many of these independent churches will dwindle, join existing denominations, or merge with other congregations to form new denominations. The United Church has offered its name to a handful of free-standing congregations in the GTA. We could welcome many more.

Presbyteries can help smooth the way by developing creative ways of welcoming ministry leaders from non-western churches, especially those who bring little wealth. We need to take a page out of the books of other Canadian professions, like medicine and education, whose credentialing systems are also connected to their roots in Europe and the United States. Congregations might offer a new relationship with a growing congregation – one that goes beyond landlord and tenant to a true partnership for ministry in the community.

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