

Ep 28 - Welcoming the stranger

Show Notes

- <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/consider-it-resettled>
- <https://mcc.org/our-stories/founding-ottawa-office-director-bill-janzen-honoured-order-canada>
- <https://mcc.org/our-stories/we-are-strangers-no-more>

Welcome to *UNDERCURRENTS*, my name is Ken Ogasawara. I'm part of the Communications team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is just one way of telling all the amazing stories coming out of our community of program participants, staff, partners and others. *Undercurrents* is brought to you in part by **Kindred Credit Union**. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred supports welcoming communities for newcomers through products, service relationships, and partnerships.

This episode is about welcoming the stranger.

Voiceover (VO): "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Matthew 25:35

There are 22 scriptures in the Bible about welcoming newcomers from another land into your community, but it could be argued that none resonate with MCC as much as that verse from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me".

It could also be argued that there is no stronger form of welcoming the stranger, than refugee sponsorship. This isn't just saying hello to someone new from another part of town, or province, or even another part of the country. Refugee sponsorship is truly welcoming the stranger - generously giving of your time and money to help some from a strange country, speaking strange languages and with strange customs, to adapt to life in your community. It's hard work. But incredibly, Canadians - mostly small-town Canadians, many Mennonites - have been welcoming tens of thousands of these strangers into their homes and communities for over forty years.

Private refugee sponsorship, where citizens are able to legally take on the responsibility of sponsoring and resettling refugees into their community, started in the late 1970s and, not to brag - but MCC basically started it, right here in Canada. To this day, Australia, the US and the UK are the only countries in the world to have joined Canada in setting up private refugee sponsorship programs.

All of this to say, that MCC has been at the forefront of refugee resettlement for a long time - our role as "Sponsorship Agreement Holders" means that we hold legal liability for the refugees and the sponsor groups and we support them with orientation, trainings and ongoing support for all the different needs that resettled family will have in their first year in a new country. However, to my knowledge, MCC has never sponsored a family itself... until now.

Michelle:

My name is Michelle Brennaman and I serve as the executive director here at MCC Ontario. The idea for this proposal and starting doing a refugee sponsorship with staff came to our senior leadership team last winter, came through the migration and resettlement team as they had been having some conversations about the blended visa office referred sponsorship programme

VO: The blended visa office referred program - it just rolls off the tongue. Also known as the BVOR program, it matches the most vulnerable refugees identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with sponsors who are willing to resettle them. The added benefit of BVOR is that the Canadian government pays for 6 months of resettlement costs so the fundraising load is lightened considerably. The challenge for the BVOR program is that sponsor groups like churches or community groups will rarely do it twice. This is because the refugees they sponsored through the BVOR program inevitably will have family left behind that they want to resettle too. So next time around, sponsors will sponsor so-called 'named' cases which is when you name the people you want to sponsor and that's a whole separate program. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable refugees under the BVOR program struggle to find sponsors to match with.

Michelle: So the question was, what can we do to try to get people interested in participating in this programme? And this programme is one that just, it hits the heart of MCC because it's about welcoming the stranger, about radical hospitality about serving those most vulnerable, which are core values for us here at MCC. And so the programme folks did a bunch of thinking and dreaming and research and to look at a way to try to get people involved in this.

And one of the things that they started to think about was, although volunteerism is a trend that is perhaps waning a little bit in our Canadian society, employer sponsored volunteerism is something that seems to be picking up interest amongst organisations and companies. And so is there a way to think about sponsorship groups a little bit differently and think, is there a role for organisations to play in terms of employee sponsors? And so it's an interesting idea, but we have to start somewhere. And so they came to our senior leadership team to say, Hey, could we test this here at MCC? We're an organisation, this fits directly within our values. It's who we want to be. It gives us a chance to, you know, practice what we preach, live out our values.

Christina: My name is Christina Edmiston and I work in MCC Ontario's Refugee Programme. As a refugee sponsorship associate, the large part of my role is supporting sponsors in the pre-arrival stage of sponsorship. So that means anything that happens from the point where potential sponsor reaches out to us and says, Hey, I want to sponsor a refugee. Either they might know someone or they might not know someone.

VO: Christina has experience with refugee sponsorship both professionally and personally - but never have the two combined at once.

Christina: It's very exciting. I've sponsored in six or seven other sponsorships previously over the last 15 years, so I'm very familiar with this as a sponsor. But it's always exciting. Every sponsorship is different, every family is different. And so this was a bit of a step outside of my normal responsibilities here, but not necessarily a step outside of what I have done in the past.

VO: The BVOR programme is part of Christina's portfolio at work and she explains that one of the major benefits of the BVOR program is that all the refugees on the waiting list are already fully vetted, processed and travel-ready, whereas with 'named cases' when you're sponsoring

specific people that you have chosen or 'named', the process can take years of paperwork and waiting.

Christina: Sometimes the momentum can suffer along the way. It's not always the easiest process to go through, but with BVOR, you know that they're going to be here soon, and so you can prepare, you look forward to the family.

VO: The family in this case, is the Salazar family - Anderson, Keli and their teenaged sons David and Samuel and they are from Venezuela where an autocratic government has forced over 7.7 million Venezuelans to flee as refugees. To be clear, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee not only their home, but their country. So they've crossed an international border, but then what? Here is Moses Moini, MCC Ontario's Migration and Resettlement program coordinator.

Moses: The options for refugees are three. One is once refugees flee, and this is what most refugees want, is to go back home when the conditions that cause them to flee changes in a positive way and they can return back home in peace and in dignity. But as we know, this solution is not available to so many protracted refugees. So then there is what is called local integration in countries that can allow them some kind of status where they can work and be able to send their children to school and living in that particular environment. But we know that there are not very many countries actually that provide that because most of the refugees are actually in the developing countries. They flee to a neighbouring country, which is equally struggling just as the country they flee from. So those countries have their own political and economic challenges

VO: This is a key point. They're forced to flee their own country, and the country next door that they've fled to is not exactly rolling out the red carpet either. So in many cases it's jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

Moses: So refugees find themselves in more precarious situation. So they are there and mostly what I call that as is a state of limbo. These are people who are stuck in between, and this is where the third durable solution comes in, which is resettlement in a third country. And resettlement is an option for a very small number of refugees. It allows very, very few people to come to two countries like Canada, the US and Australia. These are the major players. So less than actually 1% of the global refugee population find durable solution in Canada. One of the things that of course we have is the private sponsorship programme, which is a great opportunity.

Joel: Do you want me to do this in Spanish or Spanish? Which one?

VO: When welcoming a newcomer family, usually sponsor groups need to rely on an interpreter to help with communication. Sometimes the interpreter is a hired professional, but ideally, they are a member of the sponsor group - and even better if they are from the same country and culture of the newcomer. But what are the chances of MCC Ontario having a Venezuelan on staff? Enter my colleague:

Joel: Joel David Font Mendez - all Spanish words. I work at MCC and I'm an IT technician support.

VO: Joel was one of the first staff members that were contacted to join the core sponsorship team.

Joel: The first contact was from Moses and the second one from Christina because they know that I'm from Venezuela too. So it's going to be a better support for the Anderson family because Yeah, I know in some way the culture and I could have at that time a better communication with them at the first time because [of my] Spanish. In this task. It's not only by me, it just, I need to include my wife and my son too because yeah, we are Venezuelans and we understand in some way better the situation coming here to Canada as the first time.

Darlene:

Think MCC has such a good preparation package that they would do with meetings with the sponsors, making sure you know what you're getting yourself into because you have a big heart.

VO: This Darlene Bartha, she's part of the donor relations team at MCC Ontario and a core member of the sponsor group.

Darlene: But then as soon as Moses started, we had that first initial meeting of what type of people that he needed for the team and how many hours it would take. I'm sure that scared a lot of people off going, "This might take 50 hours of your time."

VO: It is definitely a commitment and at this point you figure out if you've got not just the heart for this - but the time and energy as well.

Darlene: So from day one, before they arrived, we had to do a lot of those meetings or those prep meetings and then meet as a team and figure out who is capable and able and willing to do what tasks.

VO: Darlene, being part of the donor relations team, volunteered to help lead the fundraising for the sponsorship, which was around 15,000 and as of this writing - they have not quite met. But her goal was much more than just raising money.

Darlene: So how we can get the staff to realise that they are the greater community. We're not just the only ones, our little group of six or whatever we are, but they are also community. So whatever area that they could be a part of, being engaged in this funds or not doesn't matter. Just thinking of ways of how to create community among our staff in this. We're doing this endeavour together and how do we put our arms out wider?

VO: While they were reaching out to the MCC Ontario staff community; the core sponsor group was also able to reach out to the Salazar family.

Christina:

Well, as soon as we got the contact information, I reached out to Joel who speaks Spanish and is part of our group because I knew that for the family hearing from a fellow country man and someone who could speak Spanish and the language would be a lot easier.

Anderson: [speaking Spanish] *I had never heard of MCCO. I didn't know anything about them.*

VO: This is Anderson, explaining that he had never heard of MCC. Had no idea who were were.

Christina: And just trying to open that conversation knowing that, yeah, it's likely that they're going to wonder who you are and if this is all a scam, but it went really well after that. There are some things that are good to know before they arrive. And so yeah, we were able to get that information and just really be able to reassure them that preparations were being made.

Christina:

So in the weeks slash months, depending on how much lead time you have, sort of leading up to the arrival, obviously housing is a big one. We were blessed in this situation with an apartment that was available for us to start moving into right away when we receive notice of their travel dates. And then of course, you need to collect household effects furniture. This is typically something that's not that hard to do because everyone likes to get involved when it comes to collecting stuff for the kitchen or bedding or towels or just getting a family ready and set up in their house. And we had one big moving day where we got a truck and picked everything up and moved it in lots of hands on deck.

[Scenes of moving day]

ARRIVAL

VO: We had a lot of MCC staff come out for this - people were helping move boxes, washing dishes and cutlery (purchased at the MCC Thrift shop, obviously) and assembling furniture. The apartment is a beautiful, cozy unit on the 12th floor, overlooking downtown Kitchener with spectacular views of the city and with stunning sunsets. The home was set. All that remained was for the occupants to arrive.

[Scenes of welcoming and cheering as the Salazar family comes out of the gates at the airport]

VO: Arrival day was a whirlwind. There was a lot of waiting and then suddenly they were out the doors. There were hugs and greetings and big smiles. We ordered gigantic coffees for each of them. It was relatively calm, but the true impact of that moment didn't sink in until a few weeks later as I sat with them in their new living room with Joel and Alejandra interpreting.

Keli -[in Spanish] "When we came out, it was like seeing family... etc"

VO: This is Keli

Alejandra:

Suddenly they noticed a group of people waiting for them as a family, as a relative. That changed everything for them. At some point Kelli feels every time she talk about that, she feels

emotional and she cry and made me cry too, because at that moment she felt that every bad thing she had experienced was gone.

VO: Why was this such a powerful moment for Keli and Anderson? I admit, even after hearing many such stories, I didn't clue into the power of welcoming the stranger, until Keli and Anderson and Joel and Alejandra shared it with me.

Imagine life in your home country, wherever you are, being so unbearable that you do the unthinkable - you flee, sometimes with nothing but the clothes on your back; maybe a few suitcases. But as Moses pointed out at earlier, the country next door that you escape to doesn't have room for you there, either.

Here's Alejandra explaining how challenging this was for them:

Alejandra: They wanted to adapt to that country. But they received a wall. "You are not – you don't belong here, you are Venezulean." There was a rejection every time, in every aspect of their living, was a rejection there.

VO: "In every aspect of their living, there was rejection." This went on for six years. Six years of limbo, of discrimination, building stress, anxiety, and no future in sight. So when folks from Canada, of all places, reaches out and says "come live with us?" that is almost shocking. And when they got off the plane and see big smiles and signs that say "Welcome to Canada". And they show you the beautiful apartment they've prepared for you, and the home-cooked meal, and the hand-made comforter, and the fresh flowers.... It's truly life-changing.

First days in Canada

VO: The first days are full of wonder, gratitude ...and paperwork.. I'm not going to list all the various forms and legalities here, but rest assured, this is where MCC's support comes in real handy. It's Christina's job to provide a nice detailed checklist of all the ts that need to be crossed and I 's that need to be dotted.

Christina: Yeah, the first month is a flurry. There's this paperwork registering that needs to be done, a lot of orientation happening, bank appointments, showing them the grocery stores, and then things do settle a little bit. They have in the meantime found a community conversation circle that they're attending.

VO: The Salazar family arrived in the early summer and that is a beautiful season to arrive in southwestern Ontario. Darlene dived right into showing them a good time.

Being Community for Someone

Darlene: We went to a Canada Day, I brought them out downtown Kitchener. We went to Canada together and starting to do social and birthdays, their birthdays and do social things together was quite a love just jumping in there and being right in their kitchen with them or on their deck watching the fireworks or just right in there playing volleyball with them and helping them get to know the community.

They just want to jump right in to life. Sometimes you never know with people where they're at in life, if life is just weighing them down so much that they're just not able to. But this family is just really open to jumping in. They want to learn, they want to get into classes, they want to socialise. And so anything I would suggest they would, let's do it. So I loved that part that's like,

oh, okay, so let's go pick strawberries. They're like, okay. And they just had so much fun, like picking strawberries. I had a friend of mine, her farm gave them lots of free strawberries, and so we had a lot of fun in the summer.

Christina: The family's very independent. They're exploring the city on their own, taking long walks. After a week or two, we asked them, what is the thing that you've noticed is the most different since surviving in Canada? And they said, the security, the feeling of safety. We get walking around our neighbourhood. We have no fear. We can go and walk. Once they walked all the way into Waterloo and it was like a two hour walk and their legs were falling off and they showed us pictures of how they all flopped down on the grass somewhere downtown afterwards to rest. And they said, just that we can be out, just that we can be out walking without worrying about our security. And our safety.

VO: So far, so good. But MCC has been supporting refugee sponsorship for over 40 years and we know that it's not all birthday cakes and strawberries. The reality is that helping a family adapt to a new life in a very different culture is hard and sustained work.

CHALLENGES

Darlene: It's easy sometimes to Jump into things and it's harder to stay with things. So you just have to go, I don't really feel like doing this - or I should. Or how do you keep up the being community for someone? And what does that look like when it's not always easy? You don't always have the time or the energy or those awkward moments when you don't understand each other, and you just have to be okay with those awkward moments of, okay, now what do I say? I don't know how to say it in Spanish, and how to you not understand. I've said it five times, you still don't understand me. Those awkward moments, you just got to get past those.

VO: There's another factor which can be difficult, and that is, technically, a sponsorship is only 12 months long.

Honest Commitment

Christina:

Sponsors really are their first family here in Canada, the first group of friends. And it can be distressing getting to the end of that 12 months and discovering that for some of those people, a year's commitment was all that could happen. And that doesn't mean they don't care for you genuinely. It just means that that's what their lives are permitting for them right now. And there may be others who have the time and the freedom to continue on with a relationship. I certainly still keep in touch with some of the folks that I've been part of sponsoring over the years. It's not as intense as it was in those first months after they arrived. They don't need that kind of support anymore. They have relatives here now. They have support systems built up, and that's exactly what you want. Oh man. But when those relationships do form that last part, those 12 months, they can be really, really precious.

Darlene: I think when you really get to know people, when you do things with people rather than just for people, you can do things for people from afar. You can give money or you can send somebody's food from afar or whatever. But when you do things with people, yeah, you get under in each other's hearts. So hopeful. So I do foresee a longer relationship with them.

VO: For Joel and Alejandra, there is no doubt that this is more than just a refugee sponsorship project. Joel says it's like he's found a brother in Anderson. Joel said to me quietly after I had shut off the recorder, "I have more feelings than words." And for Anderson, Kelli, David and Samuel, the feeling is definitely mutual:

Alejandra: Their kids said that they are not alone. They're not alone. They're not alone. They have family here. And they said that I and Joel are part of a family. And MCC, Christine, you, Darlene, they're a big family that protect them and help them to settle here and make things easier because they are not alone. They have company and they have a big family that is MCC.

VO: At the end of our afternoon together, Anderson spoke the only English words I'd heard him say all day:

Anderson: We are very grateful for the support, for the friendship with my family and I know - we know that God is here.

CONCLUSION

[music]

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

VO: What's profound about this work, is that the stranger doesn't stay a stranger for long. Christina is careful to note that not all sponsorships turn into lifelong friendships, but certainly there is a depth of relationship that can't help but grow when do difficult, joyful, loving work together - and you know whether or not the relationship continues or fades, that for a special stretch of time, lives were objectively, unquestionably changed.

I want to give a huge thanks to Anderson, Keli, David and Samuel for inviting me into their home and sharing their story with me. I'm also grateful for all the members of MCC Ontario - from program team, to senior leadership, to the core sponsor groups doing the day-to-day work for taking a leap of faith on this undertaking and doing it with joy and generosity. I also want to give a shout out to the thousands of folks all over Ontario and Canada who have sponsored refugees in the past - your legacy lives on. If you have any questions about refugee sponsorship, you can start by emailing refugee@mcco.ca which will generate an auto-response to many commonly asked questions.

Editorial support for this episode from Christen Kong; theme song by Brian MacMillan; cover art by Jesse Bergen. Big thanks to Kindred Credit Union for sponsoring Undercurrents, and finally - thank you for listening. If you have any questions or comments, I welcome the stranger into my inbox all the time - you can write to me at podcast@mcco.ca. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.