

**Kaylee:** Yeah, I love this work. It's I think important work, especially in our world right now where we've just reached another consecutive record breaking high, where there are 26.4 million forcibly displaced refugees in the world today. And it's an it's an overwhelming reality. But I think that the private sponsorship program is a program that provides a really practical way to respond to this overwhelming refugee crisis and it gets at the core of what we need in our world right now, which is breaking down fear of the other.

**Meghan:** That was Kaylee Perez, MCC Canada's migration and resettlement associate, and also our guest for today.

On this episode we're talking about refugee sponsorship. And how relationships between people from different cultural backgrounds can be powerfully transformative.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

Kaylee Perez helps facilitate private refugee sponsorship for MCC Canada.

A small note that the Canadian government enables MCC Canada to facilitate private sponsorship. The US refugee settlement landscape is different and MCC U.S. does not currently run the same program. However, we think this conversation will still be interesting and feel relevant to people on both sides of the border.

Now back to Kaylee. Kaylee Perez was raised in a multicultural family. Her father was born in Cuba and her mother is Palestinian and Colombian. She joined MCC in 2015, when there was a significant response to the Syrian crisis. She hit the ground running and has been busy ever since. Kaylee joins me via zoom today from her home in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

**Meghan:** Hi, Kaylee.

**Kaylee:** Hey

**Meghan:** Thanks for being here.

**Kaylee:** Thanks. It's great to be here.

**Meghan:** I'd like to hear more from you about the private sponsorship program. And maybe you can start by talking about why this work is so important.

**Kaylee:** Ooh I'm gonna get emotional. I think this work is the heart of God. And I think that I'm an ordinary person, that's called to serve an extraordinary God. And I love getting to bring ordinary people together to accomplish extraordinary things as we serve and act as the hands and feet of Jesus. And I think that this is work that God is calling not only us as individuals but his church to do. Especially at this time where there is so much polarization and fear of the other. And I think that part of, part of why I also personally love this program and also love the role that the church has played in this program is that it started in Canada in 1979. MCC was really instrumental in the creation of this program back in 1979. And it was churches back then and churches now who have continued to play this key leadership role in resettling refugees. Our church constituencies are really the key base sponsors who have year

after year after year committed to building these relationships and to resettling refugees in need. And in 2016, so this program used to be unique to Canada. But in 2016, it began as a model for the world. And there, our government partnered with the UNHCR, with the University of Ottawa and a few other partners to basically take Canada's private sponsorship model and share it with other countries to begin to adapt their own versions of it.

And I just think that that is an incredible testament to the power of what churches can do to impact a real need in our world. And MCC sees the private sponsorship program in Canada as a long-term peace building program. It's really this program that transforms individuals and communities where through the process of getting to walk side by side with somebody who you've never met before, who's from a different culture, sometimes a different faith, a totally different way of seeing the world. When you get to do life together, it breaks down fear and it strengthens not only us as individuals who are involved in that relationship, but also the communities that we get to be a part of, and then also the country that we get to live in, and then the world.

And so it has these incredible ripple effects. And I think that the, the refugee crisis can be super overwhelming. It's millions of people in need. It's a very complicated issue that's multi-layered. And I know oftentimes people can feel very overwhelmed by "where do I even begin, how, how do I respond." And I think that this program provides that really practical way to respond, and to get to do life with someone. And I think refugee resettlement, it's powerful because it puts a face and a name to the overwhelming statistics that we hear and read about. There's this incredible woman named Mary Jo Leddy, she's the founder of an organization that supports refugees here in Canada, and she wrote a book called *The Other Face of God, When the Stranger Calls Us Home*. And in that book, she, she writes, "I have come to see that there's a world of difference between a problem and a person with a face and a name. You see things differently, and you solve things differently. You believe differently." So I think that that is the face the name, the getting to do life with someone and to mutually be transformed as a result is yeah, I forget what you asked me, but it's why I love this work. And why I think it's important.

**Meghan:** Oh, that's exactly right. You stayed on topic the whole time, even if you forgot the question. I'd love to hear more about some of the people that you've met, doing this work, can you can you tell me about somebody who made a particular impact on you.

**Kaylee:** So when I think about the power of refugee sponsorship, and how transformative this experience can be, a story comes to mind about this amazing sponsorship group that I got to work with. They were a group of mostly retired people who were friends from a very small town in northern Ontario. They had never done sponsorship before. But they came together and they decided that they wanted to sponsor a refugee family who they had never met before. And so through MCC, we did some training, we got them ready. And they were matched with a Congolese family. And so all of a sudden, in this small town, very homogenously white, predominantly white community, they this sponsorship group came together and they rented a house. And two weeks before the family arrived, went to the house, they were starting to get the furniture moved in, do some painting, some cleaning. And all of a sudden the, the neighbour noticed what was going on and came out and approached one of one of the members of the sponsorship group and said, "Hey, what, what's what's going on? I live next door, I see you guys are moving in here, what's happening?" And so the sponsor explained, well, we are part of a sponsorship team who's come together, and there's actually a refugee family from the Congo, who will be arriving in two weeks, and they're going to be your neighbour.

And all of a sudden, this neighbour reacted with anger actually, and said, “How dare you move this refugee family next door without consulting me and our community?” And so the sponsor was kind of shocked, didn't really know how to react, basically said, “Okay, see ya.” Went back to their sponsorship team and said, “Hey, we've got a bit of a hostile neighbour situation. We should keep an eye out. Kind of we're worried about the family moving in next door and how that was going to go.” But basically, they had no other choice. This was the house that was getting set up and all of a sudden, within two weeks, the, the newcomer family arrived, they moved in, and being as most newcomers are, they live their hospitality out loud, and basically would say hello to their neighbour on a regular basis. They actually would bring over leftover food, and knock on their neighbour's door and say, “Hey, we have some food here for you.” And, and, and, and just really live that hospitality out loud.

And within a month of arrival, they ended up having a barbecue outside in their backyard where the sponsorship group came together, the newcomer family was there. And as they were all together in the backyard, the neighbour actually came out and approached that same sponsor that he had spoken to previously and said, “Listen, this family has completely changed my idea of who I thought refugees were. And I owe you and your group an apology, I'm sorry for the way that I reacted. This family is incredible. And I'm actually inviting them over for dinner, and I love having them as my neighbour.”

And so that story to me like, who knows how long this this neighbour carried that, that prejudice for and literally within the span of a month, with this family living face to face right beside them, this man's perception and prejudice was broken down. And to me that just shows that the response to fear, the response to fear of the other in particular is proximity. When you get to do live face to face with somebody who you've never met before, who thinks differently, who's from a different culture, they don't become as scary and it's just a really simple, practical but so powerful of an example of how private sponsorship and this experience is just this really practical way to build community and to respond to a time where fear of the other is increasing. So yeah, that's that's the power of this program, and it's life changing.

**Meghan:** Wow, that's yeah, remarkable to hear that story. Thanks for sharing that. Now, I know Ukraine's top of mind to a lot of people right now. It's receiving a lot of media attention. And there's a lot of, also a lot of political will to help people seeking asylum resettle in Canada, I'm thinking specifically. I'd love to hear from you, how have you seen the government response to Ukrainian refugees differ from the response to refugees from other conflict areas?

**Kaylee:** I think I'll start by saying that it's been great to see our Canadian government play this global leadership role in refugee resettlement over the past few years, Canada has consistently grown, our government has consistently grown our commitment to refugee resettlement in the midst of so much need, and that this particular response to forcibly displaced refugees fleeing Ukraine is needed. But I also want to give a bit more context on what the responses have been like over the past seven years here in Canada. So if we start in 2015, that really marked the beginning of Canada's response to the Syrian conflict. If, we'll recall, there was a lot of media coverage. There was the death of Alan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy who drowned and washed up on the beach of, of Turkey, and he had links to an aunt in Canada. And so that was in the forefront of our media and the Canadian government made a commitment to resettle just over 25,000 refugees over the course of four months. So between November 2015, and February of 2016, there were 25,000 refugees who arrived, many more who continued to arrive in the following years. Then, if we fast forward to August of 2021, just last summer,

that was when Canada's emergency response to the Afghan crisis began. Also a crisis that has received a lot of media coverage. There are many Canadian veterans with links to this particular population. And so in August of last year, the government made the commitment to resettle 40,000 Afghans by December of 2023. So now we find ourselves in March of 2022, eight months later, where approximately 8,000 Afghans have arrived. And we are still continuing to await details on the full plan for how all 40,000 will arrive, but are anticipating that it's going to be a mix of government sponsored refugees and privately sponsored refugees.

So what we see with both of these responses is that the government has mainly used existing humanitarian pathways through which refugees normally arrive to Canada, which is basically they arrive either as government sponsored as privately sponsored or as a part of a blended programme. So, now, we have the Ukrainian refugee response, less than a year after the Afghan response was announced, and is ongoing. And this response is definitely different from Syria and Afghanistan, as the government has opened an immigration pathway, which is different separate from the humanitarian pathway, where basically Ukrainians get access to an expedited temporary visa, where the government has waived common requirements like language and labour-market impact assessments. And through this temporary visa, they get to stay in Canada for two years. And then while they're here, they can explore other pathways to permanent status.

This avenue, this immigration pathway is a pathway that refugees are not normally, they don't normally have access to, because a fundamental principle of Canada's immigration system is not to allow people to come on a temporary basis, who likely won't leave when their visa expires.

So I think getting to compare these responses so closely together is interesting, it's important. It's also complex and layered. And there are a lot of details that we won't have the time to get into today. But I'll do my best to get at the core of what I believe this response has surfaced. So when we think about this Ukrainian response, on the one hand, this approach points directly to systemic racism. So we can't ignore that these refugees are predominantly white people, and therefore have received preferential treatment. We've all been watching on, via media sources, how they've described Ukrainians as not your typical refugee, which is such a stark contrast to the ways that Syrians, Iraqis Eritreans, Afghans are often de-humanized in by these same media sources. We also can't ignore that between the Afghan and the Ukrainian response here in Canada, there is this crisis in Ethiopia that has been ongoing, with thousands of refugees in need. This has not garnered western media attention, nor significant action. And so that is also a reality of this dynamic. And so that's the one hand.

On the other hand, this response is setting a new precedent that I and my colleagues in our sector really hope can inform a new emergency crisis response framework. So right now, our sector is really calling on our government to develop an emergency response framework, and a framework that sets objective criteria that could have the opportunity to steer Canada's response to refugee emergencies around the world, free of political or racial bias. I think it's also important to note that our humanitarian refugee resettlement pathways are backlogged. And we want to push the government to ensure that when an emergency response that focuses on a particular population takes place, that it doesn't come at the cost of the thousands of other refugees, who are in just as much need. And so all of this to say that equity in the strategic use of resettlement is, is really important. And it is something that MCC works hard to prioritize and to facilitate to the best of our ability.

**Meghan:** Thanks for that really clear explanation. And I think that it's so helpful to hear it explained in that way. I know the last couple years, have been really difficult for lots of reasons. What have been some of the challenges of resettling people since the pandemic started?

**Kaylee:** Yeah, it has been, as you said, a challenging past two years. And really, too flagging here that despite the pandemic, conflicts around the world have continued and millions of people have continued to be forcibly displaced. And really, that this pandemic has only further compounded the challenges of the lives of those who are most vulnerable, which includes refugees. But here in Canada in terms of resettlement through our private sponsorship program, we've had very few arrivals. So given the, the border closures and again, this system wide impact of the pandemic. We've had few arrivals to give you a sense of that through our national program pre-COVID we were welcoming around 600 refugee-newcomers a year to Canada. And we've had less than 200 arrive in both 2020 and 2021. For those who have arrived, it's been incredible to see sponsors and newcomers being incredibly resilient in preparing and following quarantine plans, learning how to build community at a distance, having zoom parties, porch drop-offs, video tutoring. So many different creative ways that support has continued to be provided. And this whole aspect of building community at a distance is something that that refugee newcomers know. It is a dynamic, and that given their lived experience of often being forcibly separated from their families by war, making use of technology and staying connected at a distance is a necessity. And so we've intentionally wanted to, to encourage our sponsors to take some time to listen and to learn from newcomers in the midst of this time. And I remember I got to hear the story of a man who had been separated from his family for about two years. And then the pandemic hit, and he's continued to be separated from his family and he talked about needing to be a dad at a distance. Parent his young children at a distance and the, the reality that, that requires intentionality. And it requires not just talking when you feel like it or when it's convenient, but really being intentional about building that community at a distance. And so it's been challenging, but it's also been really amazing to see the intentionality through which sponsors have committed to stay connected and support the families that have arrived and in safe and creative ways.

**Meghan:** So what would you say to somebody who would like to get involved in this work and support newcomers, and I guess you would speak specifically to Canadians, because that's what you're familiar with.

**Kaylee:** So MCC is currently looking for sponsors. So that is one practical way that you can respond. The story that I shared of the family, the Congolese family who was resettled, they came through a program called the Blended Visa Office Referred program. It's not a great name for a program. But basically, it's called a blended sponsorship program because of its cost sharing arrangement, where sponsors like you and the Canadian government share the expenses. While you also provide social and logistical support. MCC is there to guide you and walk with you every step of the way. And this program has been on hold since COVID began. But it's really exciting, it's going to be resuming on April 5 of this year 2022. And there is a list of refugee individuals and families who've been identified by the UN Refugee Agency and the government and are waiting for a sponsor to say yes to bring them to Canada. So what MCC does is, is we help you get ready, we provide training tools and resources, we help you with the application and the paperwork. And then once you as a group are matched with an individual or a family, they can arrive within months. So if you're interested in learning more about this opportunity, I would encourage you to get in touch with your local MCC office. That's definitely a great starting point where we can provide more information and tell you about how you can practically be involved in this program.

And if you can't sponsor, maybe you've sponsored before and you need a break, or if that's just not within the realm of what you have the capacity to do. I think you can also consider giving to the many ways that MCC is actively engaged in supporting refugees all around the world. I think what's awesome about MCC is that we're not only involved in refugee resettlement. We're also actively involved in refugee source countries and also in refugee host countries. And so there are many ways that you can get involved in financially supporting the work of MCC with refugees around the world.

**Meghan:** And we also have listeners who are from the U.S. who won't have the same option to help in this way. Can you talk a little bit about how refugee sponsorship fits into the bigger picture of people being displaced around the world?

**Kaylee:** Yeah, so when a refugee is forced to flee, they will often flee to a neighbouring country because their desire is to be able to return home as soon as possible. And so the reality is that protracted conflicts are keeping refugees in exile, and 86 per cent of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries. Resettlement to a third country like Canada only becomes an option when local integration in that host country or repatriation back to their home country are not options. And so the UN refugee agency has the very challenging role of identifying who of the refugee population is most vulnerable. So some of the screens that they use include survivors of violence and torture, women, youth children at risk LGBTQI+ individuals who are at risk individuals and families with medical needs, single parent families. So these are these are some of the categories of vulnerability that the UN Refugee Agency identifies. And so refugee resettlement to a country like Canada is an option for less than 1 per cent of the refugee population. And in 2022, so in this year, the UN has identified that 1.47 million refugees are in need of resettlement. So there's, there's great need, and yes, Canada is one of few countries around the world who has a pathway where refugees can be resettled. And I wanted to recognize too, that that refugee resettlement doesn't address the root causes of forced migration. But it is an important piece of this puzzle and it ultimately does save lives. So in terms of how listeners from the U.S. can get involved with MCC, and the ways that our MCC U.S. office is involved in supporting refugees. I'm not sure of the specific details, but maybe you could share that with listeners afterwards.

**Meghan:** I'll definitely I'll add something in the show notes that people can refer to. My last question for you is, what do you see in the future for refugee sponsorship?

**Kaylee:** I would love to say that it eventually would not be needed. But I don't think that that will be the case anytime soon, though, I do pray for its end regularly. And specifically the end of the plight of refugees and the need for their resettlement. When I when I think about the future of this program, I see circles. The big and the small spaces where people come together to meaningfully listen and serve one another. Where we get to see models of support that wrap around and centre the needs of an individual or family. I see mutual transformation, as we've talked about, through our conversation, the recognition that, yes, refugees need our support, but we also need them, their wisdom, their gifts, abilities, perspectives, hospitality and love. There's so much that they can contribute to our communities or society here. I also get excited thinking about the ways that we can strengthen and grow, how we invite community into refugee resettlement so that our work becomes a whole of society approach, growing our circle, and deepening our commitment to refugee welcome and integration. And I think that as, as more and new people get to engage in this work, that is the foundation of breaking down the fear that then enables public opinion to shift and that influences policy and political will. And that opens more doors to refugee resettlement, but also to addressing the root causes of forced

migration. And so I really see this as a grassroots movement that begins small, but grows and has these, these beautiful ripples circle movements that that go beyond. So I think yeah, I think most, more of us need to dream of circles and think about the ways that we can move toward one another and not further apart.

**Meghan:** Thank you so much for being a guest on the show today and for sharing all of this. MCC is so lucky to have you working for us.

**Kaylee:** Thank you honestly, it's been great getting to connect and have this conversation with you. Thanks so much for having me.

**Meghan:** That was Kaylee Perez, migration and resettlement associate for MCC Canada.

That's it for this episode.

You'll remember that Kaylee talked about the ongoing crisis in Ethiopia that also has many refugees in need of resettlement but isn't receiving the same media attention as Ukraine. Next month we'll look a little deeper into what's happening there. We'll speak with a pastor from Ethiopia about the conflict in Tigray and the surrounding area. And hear what MCC is doing to help.

If you like this podcast, consider subscribing. You can also rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

#### *SHOW NOTES:*

*For people in the U.S.: There are many ways to get involved in welcoming our new neighbors through church sponsorship, fundraising for legal and housing support, and advocacy in your local community. To learn more about how you and your community can welcome, contact MCC's Newcomer Connections Coordinator, Charity Stowell, at [welcome@mcc.org](mailto:welcome@mcc.org).*

*You're also invited to join the webinar "Welcoming Refugees in Your Community" on Tuesday, April 12th 2-3 PM EST. Join MCC US and Church World Service to learn more about the refugee resettlement process in the United States, challenges and opportunities facing refugees, and ways to welcome refugees in your community.*

*For people in Canada: If you'd like to learn more about refugee sponsorship, call your local MCC office and visit: <https://mcccanada.ca/learn/what/refugees>.*