

**The Dr. E.H. Johnson Memorial Fund for
The Cutting Edge in Mission
2015 Annual Mission Luncheon
6 June 2015 Vancouver, British Columbia
141st General Assembly of
The Presbyterian Church in Canada**

Presentation by Loly Rico, President, and Janet Dench, Executive Director
Canadian Council for Refugees

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.” Deuteronomy 30:19

Two weeks ago, Archbishop Oscar Romero was beatified in El Salvador. For me, Archbishop Romero is a model and an inspiration. He saw the sufferings of the people of El Salvador – the human rights abuses that directly touched my own family – and he spoke up courageously for the oppressed, using his authority as a church leader to call for justice.

He was assassinated – martyred – for his actions.

My family and I survived – we were lucky to be able to come to Canada as refugees.

I wanted so much to be in El Salvador for Monseñor Romero’s beatification, but I knew that I had to be at the Canadian Council for Refugees’ consultation in Winnipeg. That was the only way to be faithful to the principles he lived and died for – working in solidarity with others for justice for the oppressed. In his words and actions, Romero challenged us to walk with the poor – and walking with refugees – who are among the most vulnerable in society – is exactly what the Canadian Council for Refugees does. The Canadian Council for Refugees has become the voice of the voiceless as Monseñor Romero was in hard times in El Salvador. And we are currently living in very difficult time for refugees and immigrants in Canada.

Moses and the Israelites knew what it was to be oppressed. They had spent 430 years in Egypt [Exodus, 12:40] and still they were not accepted as equal members of Egyptian society. They were marginalized, excluded and exploited. The Israelites were always the “other”.

Today, refugees and other newcomers too often feel excluded here in Canada.

It was not always so – as Canadians we are lucky to have strong traditions of welcoming newcomers. Most people who came were encouraged to stay and become citizens.

But in the past few years, we have seen a rise in precarious status, with “temporary” replacing “permanent”.

- Workers started being brought in on a temporary basis – and were recently told that after 4 years in Canada they had to leave.

- Husbands or wives sponsored by their spouse can now be deported if the couple separates within 2 years of arriving in Canada. Even though they have “permanent residence”, it is not really permanent, since the end of the relationship can mean the end of status in Canada. This is harsh for anyone, but particularly worrying because it can trap women in an abusive relationship.
- Refugees also have recently learned that “permanent” no longer means “permanent”. A change to the law made in 2012 means that they can lose all status in Canada, even if they have lived and made their homes here for years.

This was the threat faced by a woman who fled Iran because she was persecuted on the basis of her religion (she is Baha’i). When her elderly father was gravely ill and there was no one else to care for him, she snuck back into Iran for short visits, keeping a low profile to protect herself.

This was enough for the Canadian government to launch proceedings against her, arguing that the visits meant that she no longer needed Canada’s protection. Happily, when she had her hearing the Immigration and Refugee Board agreed that she had not re-availed herself of the protection of the Iranian government. Although she won her case in the end, it all caused enormous stress for her and her family, as they worried about what would happen if she lost her status in Canada, and was separated from her husband and son here.

- Just a week ago the government implemented changes to the Citizenship Act that make it easier to lose citizenship. So now even when we finally manage to become citizens we get the message that our status here is insecure, that we are being watched to make sure we behave ourselves. No matter what status you have, if you are not born in Canada you are considered the “other”.

We have seen how policy changes like these have had impacts far beyond the people who are directly affected. People worry that maybe they will be affected. People who are at no risk of losing status hear about changes and fear for themselves, because all these rules are quite complicated, and information can get garbled.

The consequence is that most refugees feel less welcome than before, less likely to believe that they can be accepted as full members of Canadian society.

We are particularly troubled by the rise of intolerance towards Muslims in Canada, which is certainly affecting Muslim refugees as they arrive here. In the face of increased prejudice and hostility, it is much harder for them to integrate into Canadian society. Intolerance can also affect which refugees are chosen for resettlement. Is Canada going to become a country that has a bias against Muslim refugees? We have already seen some disturbing signs on these lines.

The CCR recently issued a public statement expressing these concerns. We noted that Muslim Canadians are being challenged daily to prove their loyalty to Canadian values: in return, we challenge non-Muslim Canadians to reflect on how well we are living up to Canadian values of tolerance, non-discrimination and openness.

We believe that faith leaders have a particular responsibility to take strong action to speak out and to create a welcoming spirit for all, including Muslims.

“There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.”

These words of Archbishop Romero are very fitting for the area that CCR works in – there is a lot to cry about, and many of the sorrows go mostly unseen.

We want to tell you about some of these issues.

➤ **Family reunification**

The CCR is more than 35 years old – and in all this time there has been a serious problem of long delays for refugees to be reunited with their families.

The Canadian government recently launched a new “Express Entry” program for economic immigrants. For immigrants with a valid job offer, CIC will process applications within 6 months.

And yet refugee families wait **31 months** for immigration processing!

Shouldn’t children be reunited with their parents at least as quickly as economic immigrants are processed?

Let us introduce you to Eduardo. He is 9 years old and is living with his grandmother in El Salvador, while he waits to join his parents who are refugees in Canada.

The village where Eduardo lives is infested by gangs – as is the case in too many regions of El Salvador. Young as he is, Eduardo is already getting to the age when boys are forcibly recruited by gangs – or physically assaulted if they resist.

Eduardo’s mother is terrified that one day she will get a call saying that Eduardo has been badly hurt by gang members.

Eduardo talks to his parents daily on the phone. He tells his mother: “I am so sad. I miss you. I want to be with you in Canada. When can I come?” He has never met his young sister, born here in Canada.

The Canadian Council for Refugees has launched a campaign asking for Express Entry Family reunification so that children like Eduardo can be reunited with their parents in 6 months or less.

➤ **Another key issue is refugee resettlement**

Egypt is a very difficult country for Eritrean refugees to survive in, especially women. A few years ago the CCR got involved in a pattern of refusals of Eritrean refugees by the Canadian visa office in Cairo. Many of the refugees claimed that they were persecuted on the basis of their religion, but they were disbelieved in an arbitrary way.

That left the individuals without a way out. Here is what one of those affected had to say about her situation:

The only type of work available in Egypt for refugees is work in the informal sector and generally for women that means domestic work. I am 47 years old

and I have constant trouble finding work because employers never select me, employers always demand to look at the passport before hiring and I am never selected as they always choose younger women.

Not being able to provide for myself is a great source of anxiety and frustration. I am always really worried and this worsens my stomach problem which requires treatment, so I am morally very down.

Since as refugees in Egypt, we cannot really integrate or have the right to work officially or access any services like other people in the country, I applied for sponsorship but even that did not work. I left my country because of my religion; for the last 25 years I have been Pentecostal, so I became a very active member of my Church and eventually I had many responsibilities in the Church. First thing the security were monitoring me and I was no longer able to practice my religion and I was afraid of getting detained and tortured like many other Pentecostals in Eritrea, so I left. I cannot return home because I might be killed for my faith and I cannot stay in Egypt because there is no hope of ever living normally.

I started the process for the Canadian sponsorship in the beginning of 2008 and I am still waiting, I am scared and I am losing hope.

This woman was waiting in vain for the Red Sea to part so that she could make her exodus from Egypt!

The good news is that after a lot a struggles and a long-drawn out court case, most of the Eritrean refugees we worked with were eventually accepted and are now settled in Canada.

➤ **Other refugees seek protection in Canada by making a refugee claim here**

In 2012 there were major changes to Canada's refugee determination system. The new process is much quicker – this has some benefits for those who are quickly accepted, but it puts enormous stress on everyone, and can lead to wrong decisions, especially for the more vulnerable, such as survivors of torture, women who have fled gender-based persecution or LGBT claimants.

Through our member organizations, we asked some refugee claimants to tell us about their experiences of the refugee claim process.

One woman – we called her Andrea – was put in detention when she arrived. She was given a series of forms in English to fill in. On a Monday an official told her through an interpreter that she must return the forms to him by Wednesday. Andrea told him that she doesn't read English and that she didn't know how to complete the forms. On Friday he came again to ask for the completed forms. Eventually an NGO gave her a Spanish version of the forms so she filled them out. The officer came and an interpreter read him the form. He said that the form wasn't completed correctly and told her to finish a few questions that were incomplete.

She was not released from detention until shortly before her hearing, so she had very little chance to find any documentation to back up her claim. The only evidence that she had arrived only two days before the hearing. The NGO assisting her requested an extension on her behalf, but it was denied. She told us that the Board Member explained at the hearing that her case could not be approved in part because she had no proof.

Here is what she said about the process:

“The system isn’t effective. They don’t give anyone time to organize themselves. I heard that before the change in the law people had more time to prepare for their hearings. The new changes didn’t help me at all.”

➤ **Access to healthcare has become another major issue for refugees**

Many of you, I am sure, are aware of the cuts to refugee health care made in 2012.

One of the many to suffer the consequences was a refugee claimant in Saskatchewan. He had fled Pakistan where he said he faced persecution as a Christian. While waiting for his refugee hearing, he was diagnosed with cancer. Initially, it seemed like he would not have access to treatment, but the government of Saskatchewan stepped in exceptionally to cover the costs of chemotherapy. But no coverage was offered for the anti-nausea medication, leaving the man so sick that for days he couldn’t move from his bed.

The story came out in the news. Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall called it “unbelievable” and un-Canadian.

A Federal Court judge reached a similar conclusion last year, calling the cuts “cruel and unusual treatment”.

The debate over health care highlights the treatment of refugees as “other”. Are refugees undeserving interlopers in competition with Canadians? Or are they our fellow human beings whose basic needs must be met and who must be treated with dignity?

We have told you a bit about the issues that worry us. Some of them are probably familiar to you, some of what we are working on may seem technical and a bit remote.

But we believe that the basic issue at stake is not technical and not only of concern to refugee advocates.

The question is “Do we welcome the stranger?” and “Are we proud to protect refugees?”

Refugees will only be welcomed and protected when Canadians stand up and answer “yes” to these questions.

We also believe that the churches have a special responsibility to be speaking out in support of refugees.

To quote again from Archbishop Romero:

“A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin or a word of God that

does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?"

The churches in Canada have a proud history of supporting and advocating for refugees. The churches were leaders in creating the CCR. Many of the organizations serving the forgotten and unfavoured refugees have been founded by, and continue to be funded by the churches.

Yet, in terms of leadership at the national level, faith groups took a step back in the last couple of decades.

More recently, the CCR has been supporting a faith dialogue on our responses to refugees. This reflects the need of the current times: the fact that the response to refugees has become an urgent moral issue which faith traditions can illuminate.

Having been led out of Egypt by Moses, the Israelites were brought face to face with the choice of life and death, blessing and curse.

Refugees are people who met that choice and chose life.

By walking with refugees, we also choose life.