



Refugees and faith survey: Summary report

1. Introduction

For several years, the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) has been supporting members interested in exploring questions related to the faith-based response to refugees, with a focus on inter-faith dialogue. A number of workshops, caucus sessions and conference calls have been held to pursue these discussions.

In the fall of 2016, the CCR decided to create a short survey to explore how faith motivates people to respond to refugees and how responding to refugees can promote interfaith understanding. There was particular interest in considering this in the context of the prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims that unfortunately prevail in Canadian society.

The survey

An email was sent out to CCR members inviting them to complete the survey, if relevant to them, as well as to pass it on to others who might be interested in joining the conversation on faith and refugees.

The survey, available in English and French, consisted of four substantive questions, an open question for comments and questions regarding follow up.

Respondents were invited to answer on their own behalf or from what they have observed with others, and to answer as many of the questions as they wished.

The survey was described as short and informal, and makes no claims to being a serious research tool.

Responses

During the three weeks that the survey was open in October and November 2016, **59 responses** were received from CCR members and other individuals interested in refugee and faith related issues.

The high rate of response (relative to other surveys sent out by the CCR) suggests that the questions considered are of quite broad interest. The CCR also received several messages of appreciation for initiating the survey.

2. Summary of findings

Question 1: What role does faith play in decisions (yours or others you work with) to respond to refugees?

Overall, about two-thirds of respondents indicated that faith in the form of religious belief plays a role in decisions to respond to refugees.

For those who explained how faith motivates them, common themes were:

- Welcoming the stranger (often combined with commitments to seek justice, or with an emphasis on full acceptance of the other, including respecting their own faith);
- Loving one's neighbour (understood in a global context, implying social responsibility and requiring concrete action to care for those in need);
- Tikkun olam – repairing or healing the world;
- Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless.

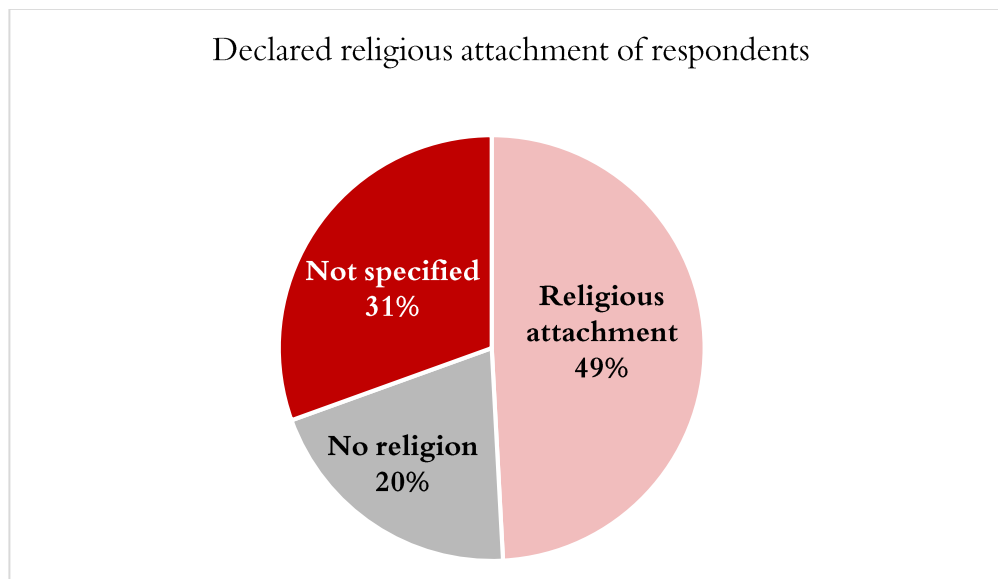
If the parable of the Good Samaritan means anything, it is that we are to “go and do likewise” i.e. reach across barriers of religion and ethnicity to show compassion and care for our fellows.

Several respondents cited religious texts (Bible, Torah); some were inspired by religious leaders (such as Pope Francis).

“It's part of my Jewish tradition to try to heal the world, even with small incremental acts.”

Of respondents who said that faith plays no role, at least for themselves, several pointed to some form of universal principles of common good or to secular humanism. A number said that they had some experience of religion in their own background or that they were working with others who are people of faith.

A few simply responded that there was no connection between faith and their desire to respond to refugee issues.



Question 2: Have you had or observed experiences of interfaith connections in the context of refugee sponsorship/advocacy/support? If yes, tell us about them.

20% of respondents answered “no” or “not yet”. Some respondents were undecided or unclear. However, most respondents (about two-thirds) reported some type of experience related to interfaith connections in the context of refugee sponsorship, advocacy and/or support.

Of those who responded positively, many spoke of interfaith collaboration in a refugee sponsorship (e.g. a United Church and a mosque), or a sponsorship by a faith group of refugees of a different faith (and sometimes both together).

Of those involved in cross-faith sponsorships, some reported that there was hesitation or even opposition from part of the community, at least initially. One respondent, however, saw a real progression in attitudes:

“Some in our community expressed reluctance to engage with Islamic refugees due to settlement and integration concerns. Ultimately we agreed together that our priority was to assist people with significant need and vulnerability - regardless of faith background. With the arrival of a lovely Sudanese and Muslim Family it’s been clear that their faith does not present the obstacles that were expected. This matter is, thus far, unspoken among our group but indicates to me that direct experience provides healthy de-mystification for our community.”

Several people noted that taking on a refugee sponsorship also promotes interfaith collaboration because of the need for specialized help (the implicit context being sponsorship of Syrians). Sponsors reach out to local mosques for help with language interpretation, understanding the culture and so on. One respondent reported that churches and volunteers “worked hand-in-hand to welcome and support the Syrians. There is a recognition that they need each other to support the newly arrived refugees well. Relationships have been forged between Christians and Muslims that would [not] have developed otherwise and from my observations it has been very positive.”

“I have heard of a Jewish group supporting a Muslim family. In preparation, they have been meeting the relatives of the family they are sponsoring who already live in Montreal. They have also been working with local groups to find interpreters and others who can help the Muslim family when they arrive. This puts Jews and Muslims together to help a Muslim refugee family.”

Some respondents spoke about very concrete institutional initiatives to respond in an interfaith way, such as a church that created a staff position to support newly-arrived Government Assisted Refugees, and to set up a multi-faith chaplaincy to provide spiritual care for newcomers. Others referred to community structures or activities that regularly bring people together (such as municipal roundtables or local community events).

A few respondents interpreted interfaith to mean interdenominational and spoke about collaborations between different branches within Christianity.

Some simply reported positive experiences, such as the person who answered: “Yes, I have seen progress in our understanding of the Muslim faith and the way in which we engage with respect.”

Question 3: How has the experience of refugee sponsorship/advocacy/support affected your/other people's faith?

The majority of respondents reported on positive impacts. Not only does action give respondents a sense of purpose, it reaffirms their faith and gives hope. Not surprisingly, many cite a broadened understanding of each others' differences and say they are inspired by a sense of community and communal purpose. Many respondents also revealed a sense of empowerment as a result of their work with refugees.

"I think that the exchange we can have with others of different communities will bring more respect, tolerance, love and support among us."

The main themes emerging were:

- The importance of practical engagement ("It gives me a feeling that I can make a change in the world");
- An appreciation of the commonality of all humanity ("Working together brings people of different beliefs and backgrounds together and breaks down stereotypes of 'the other'.")
- An increased understanding of another faith ("We have made real progress in our interfaith understanding.")
- Increased faith in the goodness of humanity ("Working together with my sponsorship group has strengthened my belief in the basic goodness of people." "Refugees tend to be people of great courage and often of great faith too.")
- Deepened and broadened faith ("I understand faith and God more broadly than when I entered this work.")
- The encouragement of a community working together ("There is definitely a rallying of the whole community around this project.")

"This experience has affirmed our faith and has allowed us to see the many shared values and motivations of our faith tradition and the Muslim refugees we have sponsored."

« L'expérience du parrainage a pour impact de personnaliser la situation des réfugiés; ce n'est plus des chiffres, ce n'est plus des personnes ailleurs. Ceci a pour effet de considérer non seulement la charité comme composante de la foi mais aussi la justice sociale. »

Some respondents (15%) reported no impact on their faith. In a few cases, the respondent said their faith was already strong and not affected by external matters. Other respondents said that faith was not relevant for them. A couple indicated that the plight of refugees has led them to question their faith, or to reinforce their belief that religious faith is irrational ("Faith? Faith in what? I have faith in people inflicting horrors on other people, and in people doing the opposite.")

Question 4: How has the experience of refugee sponsorship/advocacy/support affected interfaith relations?

Most respondents reported positively on the impact on interfaith relations, although a few appeared tentative in hoping rather than affirming that there was an improvement.

A dominant theme in the responses related to the experiences of collaboration. For example, one respondent said: “I believe it has enhanced our interfaith relations -- between our Jewish community and other faith groups, all so engaged and working side by side in this vital humanitarian effort.”

Some focused on the connections established and the unity that comes from working together.

“Refugee sponsorships in this city have energized interfaith relations, as the common commitments to sponsorship and the regular sharing sessions to learn from and to support each other, along with collaboration in specific events or programs, has brought a diversity of faith groups together. While we may not have made any difference regarding theological differences, we have found unity in the praxis of welcoming and supporting refugees to be at home in our locale and are more aware of each other because of the ongoing personal connections.”

Others commented on connections between sponsors and those sponsored.

“I believe sponsorship fosters deep relationships between sponsoring groups and families that cross the faith divide and express deep familial and friendship connections.”

Several respondents commented on increased understanding people of different faith, including the breaking down of stereotypes.

“[W]e have been put in situations where we have got to know people of other faiths (both newcomers and long-time Canadians) in a deeper more personal way. I think this has increased the level of respect for all people involved. The Christians no longer think of Muslims as a monolithic group but rather they think of Muslims as someone like their friend Mohammad or Fatima. This personalized view is helpful in moving away from stereotypes and negative understandings. They now know someone that they can dialogue with and ask questions to when they are want to understand more about Islam. Our local mosques have opened their doors to Christians for visits and Christians are now motivated to visit and to try and understand.”

The breaking down of stereotypes can go in different directions, including those sponsored:

“I would like to believe that the Moslem Syrian refugee family which is supported by our Jewish group might have had some prejudices and barriers removed.”

Another respondent suggested that the experience might lead to mainly secular groups “losing some of the stereotypes that faith groups are disunited and harbour animosity towards each other.”

“Any time people of different faiths get together it is good for the whole of humanity! It dispels the myth that conflicts are generated by different beliefs and not by politics.”

Several people focused on the enhanced connections with people or institutions of other faiths. Some commented on an increased sense of unity over a shared concern: “It helped us realize that we are more similar than different.”

“I feel closer to those from other faiths through this experience - we have enough shared values that our belief in a higher power (or lack thereof) is overshadowed by our humanity.”

From the responses, it did not appear that many had discussed issues of interfaith relations in the context of their refugee work: some respondents explicitly said that the matter had not come up. One respondent noted that the survey question prompted them to think it would be good to discuss this with their group.

On a more negative note, one respondent feared that newcomers who had experienced persecution as minority populations would bring with them prejudices that would reinforce anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada.

Some respondents did not answer the question or said that interfaith relations were not affected. One respondent mentioned being surrounded by people who “were adamantly opposed to helping Muslims”.

3. Conclusion

This survey was intended as a small contribution towards shedding light on faith and inter-faith relations in the context of responses to refugees in Canada.

A few respondents disagreed with the focus of the survey, believing that faith should not be a central concern or interpreting the questions to imply that only faith motivations matter. It should be noted that the CCR survey arose out of members’ discussions of faith and refugees: this explains the focus, which is in no way suggesting that non-faith-based motivations are less valid. Research generally on what motivates people to respond to refugees would certainly be rich and valuable.

The majority of respondents appeared to appreciate the opportunity to discuss the intersections of faith and refugee responses. Some had obviously reflected deeply on the questions, while many others spoke more about concrete experiences.

The responses told a story of mutually beneficial and enriching relationships crossing the faith divide. Respondents cited many examples where different faith groups have worked together to sponsor or support refugees, as well as positive experiences where the persons supported were of a different faith from those supporting them.

Overall, the responses tended to confirm one of the hypotheses prompting the survey: that working to respond to refugees can help to break down barriers between people of different faiths or of no faith. In the current Canadian context, this is particularly valuable insofar as it helps to overcome anti-Muslim sentiment. Many of the respondents spoke about how their, or their group’s actions towards refugees led to increased understanding of Islam, deeper connections to Muslims in the community and the dismantling of stereotypes about Muslims.

The role of faith, however, is complex. As one respondent said: “The discussion of faith vis a vis welcoming people who have lived or are living the refugee experience can be alarming, humbling, beautiful, challenging.”

