Faith & Settlement Partnerships: Setting Immigrants & Canada up for Success

Literature Review Summary Report
October 2017

Chris Brnjas

Faith and Settlement Partnerships: Setting Immigrants and Canada up for Success is a research partnership intended to explore partnerships between faith-based and government-funded settlement organizations in Ontario. This two-year project is led by the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) and funded by the **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)**. More information about this project can be found at:

www.communitybasedresearch.ca/Page/View/Faith_&_Settlement_Partnerships

The project used multiple methods. Case studies were held within the local study sites (Toronto, Peel, Waterloo Region, London). Other methods included a literature review and a cross-site organizational survey. Reports were written for each method.

Research Partnership

Rich Janzen	Centre for Community Based Research
Joanna Ochocka	Centre for Community Based Research
Kyla English	Centre for Community Based Research
Chris Brnjas	Centre for Community Based Research
Jim Cresswell	Ambrose University
Ronald A. Kuipers	Institute for Christian Studies
Héctor Acero Ferrer	Institute for Christian Studies
Michael Skaljin	Interfaith Council of Peel
Huda Hussein	London & Middlesex Local Immigration Partnership
Mohammed Baobaid	Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration
Elyas Farooqi	Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration
Aamna Ashraf	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group
Trisha Scantlebury	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group
Idrisa Pandit	Renison University College
Doug Binner	The Salvation Army
Victoria Esses	The University of Western Ontario
Vera Dodic	Toronto Newcomer Office
Mark Chapman	Tyndale University College and Seminary
Giovanna Heron	Tyndale University College and Seminary
Tara Bedard	Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership
Sarah Best	Wilfrid Laurier University
Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo	World Renew
Cameron Klapwyk	World Renew

Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR)
190 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G5
Phone: 519-885-1460 ext. 25293
E-mail: rich@communitybasedresearch.ca
Website: www.communitybasedresearch.ca

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Introduction

The following report was compiled in 2016-17 and reflects the findings of an international literature review on partnerships between government-funded settlement agencies and faith groups. This literature review was one method conducted in year one of a two-year national research project entitled "Faith and Settlement Partnerships: Setting Immigrants and Canada up for Success". The purpose of this project was to explore the role of faith and settlement partnerships in supporting the integration of newcomers, immigrants, and refugees across Canada. This literature review summary presents findings organized according to the project's three main research questions:

1. **To what extent are faith/settlement partnerships viewed positively? (vision)**
   *What are the perceived opportunities and pitfalls for partnerships?
   *What underlying motivations, values and aspirations inform these opinions?
   *How and to what extent can differences in motivation/value/aspiration be navigated within policy and practice?

2. **What types of partnerships presently exist and how could they be improved? (structure)**
   *What benefits and challenges have emerged as a result of partnership activities?
   *What types of partnership activities seem particularly promising? Why?
   *What service gaps could faith/settlement partnerships be most effective in addressing?

3. **How can effective partnerships be better facilitated? (process)**
   *What roles could faith and settlement leaders each play in partnership building?
   *How could collaborative program planning and policy development be encouraged?
   *What training and professional developmental activities could be developed or shared?
   *How could partnerships that support immigrants of faith be best evaluated?

The literature is still very new; there are many sources from 2015/2016 when the Syrian refugee crisis became an urgent issue on Canadian soil. As such, there is still much learning and documentation needed on this topic, particularly in terms of observing long-term implications and difficulties of faith and settlement partnerships. An increasing amount of literature exists that observes immediate activity, but more time is needed for information about the long-term effectiveness of partnerships between faith groups and government-funded settlement agencies.

Throughout the literature review process, hundreds of academic and grey literature sources (such as news articles and magazines) were reviewed. In the end, 52 pieces of literature were included because of their relevance to aiding and responding to the three main questions of vision, structure, and process.

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Vision

To what extent are faith/settlement partnerships viewed positively? (vision)

Vision gives background to why faith and settlement partnerships are pursued in the first place. How are these partnerships viewed, and what is the background that makes them easy or challenging to implement? Within the literature there is broad material about vision, particularly from a theoretical perspective, that transcends the specific topic of faith and settlement partnerships. It is important to investigate cultural, religious, and bureaucratic systems that enable these partnerships or make them more challenging.

Difficult definitions…

Faith and settlement partnerships can be difficult to evaluate due to the complexity of narrowing down terms. Faith-based groups/organizations are incredibly complex and difficult to define. What makes a faith-based group? When is something religious and when is something ethno-cultural? Is there any difference between the two? The literature articulates a publicly-held fear around religion; religion needs to have concrete boundaries to avoid harmful practices. In Canada, Western categories are often used to create boundaries between religion and culture that do not always make sense within and among immigrant communities.. However, like any sector (culture, education, government), it is impossible to completely avoid harmful practices on such a large scale. As the literature revealed, understanding religious groups requires similar nuance and benefit-of-the-doubt that other pillars of society receive – particularly if faith and settlement partnerships are to succeed.

It is possible that defining groups as "religious" or "faith-based" is not always helpful going forward, as these definitions create divides that often make it difficult for a government to develop partnerships *and* appear to maintain ideological neutrality. Perhaps it would be better to use language of community groups, and treat religious groups as equivalent to other community groups (though with certain nuanced sensitivity). Regardless, the literature reveals the need to redefine some key terms to help break down barriers to collaboration.

Respect for faith groups…

Regardless of how they are defined, the contributions of faith groups ought to be measured by more than the general material benefits they possess (e.g., social capital, neighbourhood connection), but also by the benefits they provide to people (e.g., providing meaning in their lives, promoting resilience). Faith groups need to be treated by government-funded agencies in more than a "what can you do for me?" manner and be respected on the basis of their mission. The mission of many faith groups offers a uniqueness that can squeeze into contextual spaces that broader organizations cannot. Just as faith groups are expected to respect the mission of government-funded agencies, so the mission and reasons for existing (beliefs, practices) of faith groups should be respected and even learned from as the source from which their generous action flows.

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Secular bias…

Deeply-held ideologies can sometimes be barriers to partnership. Therefore, it is essential for employees in secular organizations to understand the biases and assumptions of their organizations when engaging with the religious other. This may be difficult because secular bureaucracies often value control, superiority, and tangible results. Creative thinking is required to move past bureaucratic barriers and understand how structures with different values and emphasises can work together. For instance, one article in the literature review focuses on municipal spirituality – which asks the question of how to give municipal governments language for places that have little instrumental value (graveyards, community meeting places, memorials, nature itself, etc.). If government-funded agencies can learn how to embrace a broader and inclusive spirituality on a local level, they might have more resources for finding common ground for partnerships with faith groups.

If we are indeed moving towards a post-secular existence (as some in the literature theorize) where government is more interested in engaging faith groups and communities, then there is significant work to be done in addressing ideological residue from the secular period. This residue is what makes partnerships between government-funded settlement agencies and faith groups an uneasy and sometimes awkward alliance.

Systemic Limitations…

Furthermore, more dialogue is needed around the limitations of liberal ideologies in our political system. These ideologies were designed in an Enlightenment era with the assumption of a homogenous societal culture. This ideology universalized equality without context; that equality was to be found in the effect – not in the cause. This means, for instance, if a government-funded agency extended an invitation for partnership to only one specific religious group (regardless of whether it was a majority or minority group), there will always be concerns that the government is playing favourites. Yet that may be the religious group that most naturally fits with the specifics of a certain project. Furthermore, if an agency extended an invitation for all religious groups to participate in an event or project – and only one or two groups chose to participate – this could also be perceived as favoritism (even if all groups were invited).

However, the concern of perceived favouritism runs counter to strengths-based community-building, which focuses on the assets in the community and attempts to utilize them. For faith and settlement partnerships to succeed, a new paradigm is required; one that moves away from broad and general negative equality to dynamic and specific positive equality.

Government policy also needs to shift from a negative to a positive approach towards religion and religious groups. A more diverse religious infrastructure has developed in Canada, which can be a natural preventative measure from the domination or monopoly of a particular

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religious group. Thus, more education is needed for workers in government-funded agencies around religion, and policies need to reflect the need to engage religion more holistically.

Faith and settlement partnerships are perceived as a positive development, however, significant societal, ideological, and bureaucratic barriers that limit their potential remain on a higher level. Thus, there is a need for more research and investigation into the topic, particularly with regards to long-term benefits and challenges.

Structure

What types of partnerships presently exist and how could they be improved?

Structure helps us to understand what is currently happening with faith and settlement partnerships. Whereas vision often skews to the abstract and theoretical, structure skews towards the practical and concrete. Specifically, the literature reveals examples of faith and settlement partnerships and learnings and challenges to be gleaned from them. Both structure and process are currently more difficult than vision to find material on, and this is where more recording of these partnerships in action is needed.

Early Insights…

There are a few insightful early returns in the literature that are worth mentioning. Mostly these returns come in the form of stories of successful partnerships. For instance, in Mission, BC, the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) mobilized local faith communities to welcome 24 new refugees or permanent residents into the community. The LIP did this by leading a forum in January 2016 that was attended by 150 people who shared how they were willing to contribute. The LIP then started working towards finding ways to leverage that energy and worked specifically with faith groups who had already worked on a family settlement project.

Another example is the Canadian government partnering with the Baha'i community to develop a program geared towards increasing the number of Baha'i newcomers in Canada. The program facilitated networks within the community where newcomers were connected and given guidance by Baha'i members in Canada. This program helped to speed up integration and community involvement.

The literature offers many examples of inter-faith groups taking it upon themselves to partner together. Although these do not include settlement agencies, they offer opportunity for continuing a spirit of collaboration.

Challenges

Complexity of working with faith groups…

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Partnerships with faith groups are very complicated; the literature points out that these partnerships seem to work better with focused, short-term projects than more complicated long-term ones. Faith groups are very effective at mobilizing for immediate action, but communication and participation can be challenging for broader groups. For instance, it often seems that faith groups struggle to give out correct information to newcomers; this means that agencies often play catch-up. Religious volunteers need to be trained, which requires even more resources to ensure that communication and messaging are consistent and accurate.

Competitive Environment…

Partnership in an environment that is competitive for resources is also very difficult. Partnership and competition often struggle to go together and the literature indicates that both faith groups and organizations feel that resources are increasingly limited.

Decline in religious involvement…

Religious volunteerism is down as religious participation in Canada goes down, which puts even more pressure on social service agencies. Often religious volunteers feel like their work is underappreciated, while social service agencies often feel over-stretched with dwindling resources and increasing restrictions. There is common ground for collaboration but the environment is not getting any easier.

Privacy…

Privacy is huge bottleneck. How do service providers partner with faith groups to integrate immigrants, refugees, and newcomers when confidentiality must be maintained? This slows down the potential of partnerships as settlement agencies are unable and unwilling to be fully transparent with the faith groups they are partnering with.

These challenges can be overcome; they require creative solutions that the literature has not completely resolved. Some of these challenges have deeper ideological precedents that were referenced in the "Vision" section. Partnerships are a wonderful opportunity to understand the strengths that each side brings to the table.

In response to the issue of religious groups giving out faulty information, there is a need for more education for volunteers in those groups who would be 'early communicators' with immigrants, newcomers, and refugees. This is a strength for government-funded agencies as they have resources to educate people in standardized ways, as well as access to coaching and training for volunteers. As well, government-funded agencies can be objective and effective evaluators.

Faith groups have strength in numbers; they can mobilize a group of volunteers extremely quickly (especially ethnically-rooted faith groups). They also have access to resources, housing, and property that can be extremely helpful in the settlement process. Also,

since generosity is a cultural value in most religious faiths, it springs naturally from their community. This generosity can provide an example to the surrounding community about volunteering and community involvement. Partnerships can succeed through a strengths-based approach, but they require a significant amount of intentional work to be effective and worthwhile.

Process

How can effective partnerships be better facilitated?

There is a limited amount of information to answer the question of how partnerships can be better facilitated. As mentioned earlier, much of the information is still new, and this affects process more than any other category. Since the Syrian refugee crisis is still relatively new and the idea of faith and settlement partnerships is also relatively new, much of the literature on the topic is telling stories of partnerships that exits. Very little evaluation (especially long-term) currently exists on the topic.

Becoming contextually grounded…

The theoretical issues mentioned in "Vision" impact how partnerships can be better facilitated. But settlement organizations work best as the facilitator when they are creating informal networks between faith group and newcomers. Instead of government-funded agencies continually trying to distance themselves from religion, it would work better for these agencies to be more integrated with the *entire* dimension of the values and experiences of its citizens and immigrants, refugees, and newcomers (which include religion and spirituality).

To do this well, the local context is especially important for LIPs to discern. History, demographics, and organizational ecology are all factors for religious-secular collaboration in a local context. The Vancouver Immigration Partnership, for instance, employs what they label 'localized ground-truthing' to bring together diverse community perspectives into a coherent whole. Instead of treating religious groups as competition for each other, a culture of collaboration can help with the process of giving local communities an inclusive spiritual identity.

More investment in religious stakeholders…

A need remains for Local Immigration Partnerships to be even more invested in pursuing religious stakeholders. Although there are more difficulties in pursuing relationship with religious groups, they are relatively stable communities that could yield long-term benefits for the community at large. Thus, more representation is needed from ethnic and religious organizations as stakeholders in LIPs nationally. More representation might help to develop stronger comfort with religious and spiritual language as well as the unique contribution of faith groups to newcomer settlement.

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Less bureaucratic red tape…

Perhaps these partnerships need less bureaucratic red tape and more room for creativity to succeed. There is no pre-cut form for creating successful partnerships; they are as diverse as the contexts themselves. Although this runs the risk of perceived favouritism, it is an essential risk to ensure that partnerships ultimately succeed for the benefit of Canada's immigrants and refugees. Not all activities of agencies need to be specified by context, but a blend of the contextual and the standardized can ensure strong partnerships which would continue Canada's development as a world leader for successful integration for its refugees and immigrants.

Conclusion

The literature has shown that faith and settlement partnerships are still a relatively new concept, and that much of the literature and knowledge of the topic is still being written. Much of the most relevant literature comes in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis, which is still a relatively recent event. However, there seems to be energy and excitement over the possibility of successful partnerships. In the Canadian context there are some LIPs that have shared information about the successes of their faith and settlement partnerships.

There are many ideas in terms of vision, particularly around the idea of the state's relationship to religion and changing ideas that can make these partnerships more feasible. There were also on-the-ground examples of current partnerships and their successes and challenges. However, due to the still fresh and recent nature of the research, the process section contains limited information. This can be accounted for by the relatively new nature of these partnerships and it will be interesting to observe the long-term impact of these partnerships. That knowledge is important to gather to gain more clarity regarding the overall impact of faith and settlement partnerships.