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~~The~~ Christian response to a multicultural society

As many of you know, I am not a singer, but to put that impression to rest, I want to start with a song. Upon standing here now, however, I thought better of it and decided to read the words of the song instead. - read # 322 - 3 verses. These words encapsulate, I think, what the Christian response in a pluralistic society should be.

I have been involved with refugee settlement for some years, both here and in Rosthern, and so have been privileged to have been exposed to people from different cultures - their language, ideas and perceptions. As well, Lorene and I have had the opportunity to travel to many places, and so be present in the daily lives of people in other lands.

Who is a refugee? The UN defines a refugee as a person who "owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of their country". No one is a refugee by choice. All kinds of people who are forced to flee out of fear for their lives are refugees. At present there are 52.2 million of these people in the world, primarily from 6 countries. How can we get our heads around that number? It is impossible, even in the presence of pictures in the media of tents in the desert stretching to the horizon. It is only an image, and we shake our heads and form a concept of the term 'refugees'. In order to make any sense of it we need to focus on what our senses and emotions can comprehend, such as Yousef's brother Ali and his wife Muna who is approaching the 9th month of her pregnancy and their young daughter Shahed, trying to stay alive in the face of constant bombing, gunfire and exposure to poison gas in a city near Damascus in Syria. A small family, yes, but with a face because

this is the family who NPMC is sponsoring and is anxiously awaiting their arrival in Saskatoon.

Who are these refugees? What are their beliefs? Are they Christian? Yes; some of them are, such as John Kenyi, whom NPMC sponsored in the year 2000 and who arrived with his family here in 2005 and who worked for several years at Ten Thousand Villages. He deserted the Jihadist army in the Muslim dominated N Sudan because he was destined to fight against his Christian families in S Sudan. Because of his actions, his own family suffered torture, rape and persecution. When John went back to Khartoum to find his family, they were gone. Unbeknownst to him, his wife, Elizabeth with baby Mena and sister-in-law Julia had managed to flee to Cairo in Egypt. In trying to find his family, he was recaptured and tortured, but again managed to escape. Under a different name he found his way to S Sudan where he had grown up, but where for the next two years he lived in mortal fear of being discovered. Eventually, however, he found his way to Egypt and while driving in the streets of Cairo, a city of more than 5 million, happened to see a person he thought he knew. This person led him to his family and can you imagine that joyful and miraculous reunion? What a happy ending for a refugee family, now proud Canadian citizens living in Saskatoon, in part thanks to the persistence of people like Benno Ens and Wally Nickel and their committees here in NPMC.

Are refugees Buddhist? Are they Muslim or Hindu? Yes of course. Does that make them different from us? Of the 5 pillars of Islam, we as Christians can and should identify with at least 4 of these. We believe in Shahadah, that there is no other God except God. We believe in Salat, that prayer is the means by which we are able to communicate with God. We believe in Sawm, that meditation and fasting are but two ways of having a closer relationship with God. We believe in Zakat, that we are required to support those in need. Do we believe in Hajj? I am not sure, except maybe a

pilgrimage to the Mennonite World Conference at least once in our life time qualifies! It is not surprising that Christianity and Islam come from the same historical roots.

Yet we form an opinion about Muslims by what we read and hear. Shakespeare said "nothing is right or wrong but thinking makes it so." When we are exposed to the stories of the radicalization of Islam, is that who Islamists really are? or do we know of the moderate Muslims in our community who have the same aspirations and needs as we and decry the violence that is happening today?

Can we learn from the Buddhists? We as Mennonites especially should aspire to the belief in the sanctity of all life and the gentle peaceful coexistence of mankind, which is one of the hallmarks of that religion. Last week we received a letter from Kedar Paudel, our guide during our hike in the Himalayas of Nepal in which he said "Lord Buddha says we are all humans and to be kind to all! It is not surprising that they have a statue of a smiling Buddha with many arms in order to help his people in many ways. Jesus, I am sure smiled as he helped the lame, the sick and the insane.

The point is that we as Christians can reflect the image of a loving God to those around us, as we in turn can learn from those that have a different interpretation of a higher power.

NPMC is one of the leading church sponsorship groups in the country and we should be proud of our openness and what we have accomplished. As of March, 2014 we have sponsored 38 groups of people from countries around the world. There were a total of 115 people in those 38 sponsorships. We are awaiting groups 39 and 40; the Palestinian family I mentioned earlier and a Karen family of 3 from Myanmar who have been in a refugee camp in the jungle at the Thai border for over 9 years.

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These sponsorships have not been without their considerable challenges. These include medical issues such as amputations, deafness, shrapnel wounds, PTSD and depression as well as family turmoil that came with them from their country of origin. The government has also added to the sponsorship difficulties such as discontinuing the IFH (interim health funding) program, essentially making new immigrants start life in Canada as 2nd class citizens and adding to our cost of the sponsorships.

The rewards that accrue to us who are involved in the RAP and to the community at large however far outweighs the challenges That exposure to people of other cultures makes us richer as persons and community for its diversity. We can compare our Canadian identity as living under a mosaic quilt that is warm and has room for all.

I cannot close without telling you the story of the Trung Do family who fled oppression in S Vietnam in 1982 and were part of the Vietnamese boat people. They were a family consisting of parents Trung the father, and Lang the mother, who had seven children. The two oldest, aged 13 and 15 escaped in a boat on their own without their parents knowledge in the dead of night. Trung with three boys and Lang with two children became separated on the night of their own escape, so Trung arrived in Canada in 5/85 with three boys via the Philippines. One of these boys was 13 year old Kiet Do. Trung's wife Lang found her way to Canada as well via Malaysia with two children seven months later. Then through a refugee newspaper, the oldest two boys were found to be living in a Japanese refugee camp. It goes without saying that they had a joyful reunion with the rest of the family in 4/86 in our back yard in Rosthern. The extended family eventually all moved to Vancouver where they now are happy and successful. Thirteen year old Kiet Do later went to Dental College in Winnipeg where he graduated with honours and set up a dental practice in Burnaby. We continue to visit this extended family each time we go to

Vancouver always experiencing their generous hospitality. Kiet looks after my daughter Cindy and her son's dental health. On June 1st he and his family were at our daughter Cindy's wedding where she married a Cuban who at present is trying to get his permanent resident status, the difficulty of which Patrick can attest to. The bottom line is "what goes around, comes around". I continue to be amazed how new connections and relationships continue to develop with people who this church has sponsored over the years. We are in the end one global family who all have the same needs; food, shelter, relationships, freedom and the ability to love one another. May god bless us all. Let's take our hymnal and sing #322.

29/6/14

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.