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Listening to the diaspora church

A conversation in Toronto leads to insights and knowledge

BY ELSIE LO, MARK CHAPMAN AND ROBERT COUSINS

On a cold and drizzly day in November, staff from the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre (TIM) gathered nine immigrant church planters at The People's Church in Toronto to host a conversation about what more established churches can learn from this diverse Christian community.

We felt voices from the diaspora church are often not heard in talk about the state and future of the Canadian Church, and we felt it was time. Our participants came from locations around the globe including Korea, the Philippines, Nigeria, Eastern Europe and northern Africa.

Our friends represented six different ethnic backgrounds and seven denominations or organizations. Some of them were new to Canada and to church planting, and others had planted churches and been in Canada for decades. Over a simple lunch of sandwiches and cookies, we invited them to tell us what it has been like to plant new ministries and work with established churches in Canada.

TIM CENTRE: *What would you like established churches in Canada to know about you?*

DIASPORA CHURCHES: We are diverse. We minister in unique contexts with unique needs. We would love

to have established churches get to know us in all the variety of peoples and cultures we represent. We are not all the same and don't all have the same perspective on ministry.

TIM: *What is most important to you in your ministry?*

DC: Outreach is key in our ministry. We exist because we want to help people from our culture find God and grow in their spiritual life here in Canada. Many of us in diaspora churches see evangelism not as a means for the Church's survival, but as our main motivation for ministry. Rather than asking questions like, "How big is our church?" or "How big is the budget?" we care

DEFINING "DIASPORA" AND "ESTABLISHED" CHURCHES

The term "diaspora" means the scattering and gathering of people from their homeland to other parts of the world. A diaspora church is a church of any ethnic makeup led by a recent immigrant or whose congregants are recent immigrants to Canada.

In contrast, an "established church" is a church of any ethnic makeup that has operated in Canada for more than ten years, according to current working definitions at the TIM Centre.

for lost people. As a result, our outreach is bold and we are not intimidated by political correctness – this is another strength we bring to partner with established churches. We need to take the great commission seriously, so let’s go out there together.

TIM: *What kind of relationship would you like to have with established churches?*

DC: We want to work with established churches as mutual partners. Diaspora churches and established churches are both the Church. Instead of thinking along denominational lines and ministry models, let’s see ourselves as different parts of the body – we need and can benefit from one another. We want more than just a meeting. We would like to fellowship together and learn from each other. We hope that over time established churches will come to understand the way we minister to specific cultures, the needs we have and the gifts we bring to the Church as a whole.

TIM: *What are some of the challenges you face as diaspora churches?*

DC: In our experience, when we have approached established churches for help or partnership, we have found a lack of interest or have been seen as an interruption

“I have never met anyone – and I have been in Canada seven years now – not one church leader who has been thinking, praying or planning to reach my people.”

—PASTOR ALEX (NOT HIS REAL NAME) IS AN EASTERN EUROPEAN CHURCH PLANTER IN TORONTO, PASSIONATE TO BRING MUSLIMS TO CHRIST. WHILE HE AND HIS SMALL CONGREGATION LONG TO BRING THEIR CULTURAL COMMUNITY TO FAITH, THEY STRUGGLE TO PAY THE RENT FOR A WORSHIP SPACE AND FEEL ALONE WITH LITTLE TO NO SUPPORT FOR THEIR CALL TO MISSION IN THE CITY.



The TIM Centre roundtable with various members of the diaspora church working in Toronto.

to their plans. Other times, established churches we have encountered have not necessarily thought about working with others like us. And even when we have found churches willing to partner, we were mostly seen as a rental opportunity. We understand that true collaboration and partnership will require creative thinking about the ways we offer our resources sacrificially to each other.

Some of our other challenges are logistic. As new immigrants, we are not all familiar with how to access or understand different resources in the Canadian context – things like licenses and denominational distinctions. This might mean being willing to partner with us without demanding membership until we are sure of our theological and organizational alignment. We don’t know what we don’t know, and we would really appreciate if established churches would take the initiative to help us navigate our new surroundings.

TIM: *What are some of the gifts you bring to the Canadian Church?*

DC: Our unique perspective as intercultural people is a gift for the

Church. We greatly value our freedom to worship in Canada because some of us have experienced persecution while living in other parts of the world. We know that the free-

A closer look at the diaspora church

We don’t know how many diaspora churches are operating in Canada. Many of these churches are invisible to the general population because they don’t connect with existing Canadian networks, don’t have church buildings, and/or draw from specific people groups. An individual or family may come to Canada for evangelistic purposes, or for a separate purpose and plant a church when they see the need.

The TIM Centre has held over a dozen events for new Canadian church planters since 2012, and have met with dozens of different new Canadian church planters. At one TIM event there were church planters who spoke 18 different languages (including Russian, Swahili, Kataho, Punjabi and Kudhio).

dom to worship should not be taken for granted.

Besides our perspective, we also bring resources to the ministry table such as cultural knowledge, language competency and social capital. We are familiar with ministry among our people groups and we know people who may be living in the neighbourhoods around your churches. We speak their language and know their culture.

Who better to reach Farsi speakers from Iran than the growing Iranian Church in Canada? Who better to reach immigrants from Pakistan or Afghanistan than local churches made up of such ethnicities? We would love to partner with established churches to reach out to their neighbours in more effective ways.

TIM: Do you have any final words of encouragement?

DC: We can't have mutual sharing without knowing and trusting each other. We really hope to build ongoing relationships between and among churches and denominational groups. We hope to be Kingdom partners – we hope our ideas would be listened to and the way we do ministry would be valued. When we are involved in meaningful partnerships with one another, we will all experience fruitful ministry where people come to faith and God is glorified.

A WEEK LATER the TIM staff got together back at Tyndale to talk about the experience. We were excited by the experience we had shared with our friends from the diaspora church and all we had learned. We talked about what confirmed our knowledge from our other work, but also what surprised us, and the very strong emotions expressed as church planters talked with passion about their ministries.

Immigrant church planters in

How established churches can begin to reach out to diaspora churches

▶ Initiate conversations with new immigrant church leaders in your denomination or community, and seek to build trusting relationships.

▶ Consider opening your church facility to a new immigrant church with the goal of developing Kingdom partnerships.

▶ Consider how your church might partner with the diaspora church to reach unreached peoples in your city.

▶ Plan a short-term mission trip overseas in partnership with a diaspora church from your city.



TIM Centre director Robert Cousins (right) discussing gospel outreach in Toronto.

multicultural cities like Toronto are crying out for partnership from established churches, and their pleas for help have sometimes been overlooked. They long to be received more fully as Kingdom partners in Canada rather than only as space renters in empty church buildings.

We learned diaspora churches and established churches have many concerns in common. We learned context matters for effective ministry. Forming meaningful relationships, respecting each other as equals and learning from each other can lead to different understandings of how to do ministry that are contextually appropri-

ate to the concerns of specific people groups and communities.

We also learned both established and diaspora churches need to develop intercultural competency to navigate the cultural and ministry complexities of our urban centres. All this begins with the desire to hear the passion and vision of those who might be described as “the stranger among us.” Let’s put aside our agenda and begin to see how God has brought the global Church to our cities for the upbuilding of His Church and His Kingdom. /FT



Elsie Lo, Mark Chapman and Robert Cousins are all staff at the Tyndale Intercultural Ministries Centre (www.Tyndale.ca/TIM) in Toronto.

ABOUT THE TIM CENTRE

The Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre (TIM Centre) advocates for these intercultural voices among its networks of partners and churches. We come alongside pastors like Alex to provide support as they develop their ministries. As we have listened to these immigrant church planters, their stories of struggle inspired us to bring their challenges and concerns to the table.

The TIM Centre is part of the Open Learning Centre of Tyndale University College & Seminary. Our core vision is “the Church from all nations bringing Christ to all nations.” We believe mission is no longer one directional, “the West to the rest,” but is now from everywhere to everywhere beginning on our doorstep to the ends of the earth.

We have learned new forms of training are needed to respond to the unique ministry context we serve. Over 85 per cent of the participants attending our unique missional training diploma (www.Tyndale.ca/TIM/Diploma) come from the diaspora church. We have also created a unique web portal www.URReachToronto.com dedicated to researching and celebrating the diversity of Toronto.