

Build homes and settle down

Warden Woods Mennonite Church

January 21, 2007

Readings:

Jer 29: 4-7

1 Cor: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

“Build homes and settle down.” This is Jeremiah's message to his people, in exile in Babylon. “Build homes and settle down.” Not an easy task for a people forced out of their home in Jerusalem by the conquering King Nebuchadnezzar. Not an easy task, in our day, for the 25 000 refugees who come to Canada each year, fleeing persecution, violence and war. Not an easy task, for that matter, for any immigrant to a new and strange land. Whether they come fleeing for their lives, or simply seeking new opportunities, most newcomers have multiple losses to grieve before they can put down new roots. During the first months, or even years, the longing for home can be overwhelming.

What does it mean to settle? Jeremiah writes to his friends: “Build homes and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce.” Settlement is about putting a roof over your head and food on your table. But it is also much more than that. It is about building a sense of home – a place of belonging and participating. One modern day definition describes settlement as a “dynamic process through which, ideally, immigrants would achieve full equality and freedom of participation in society, and society would gain access to the full human resource potential in its immigrant communities.” Marina, one of our settlement workers at the Mennonite New Life Centre, describes the immigration process as a gift exchange. For many, Canada offers an escape from the violence of war, or the violence of poverty, as well as new hope and new opportunities. In return, hard working newcomers inject new energy into an aging population and work force, bringing a wealth of practical and professional gifts, as well as the more intangible gifts of courage, convictions and culture.

This morning's reading from Corinthians describes the faith community as a body, where each part works together for the good of the whole. We read: “God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?” We need each other. Making room for the unique gifts and voices of members is good for the whole body. This is a good model not only for getting along in our churches, but also for living together in a multicultural city. Jeremiah writes to the exiles: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Likewise, the city has a responsibility to care for the wellbeing of newcomers, for if they prosper, we all will prosper.

This then is the work of the Mennonite New Life Centre, building community and helping newcomers to settle. Our settlement workers welcome refugees and immigrants to their new country and help them with a wide variety of practical needs. They offer

clients assistance with immigration issues, helping them through the often intimidating steps to file a refugee claim or sponsor a family member abroad. They may help with finding a doctor, finding a school, finding an apartment. Settlement workers advocate for their clients, making a phone call or writing a letter to the landlord or social worker who only speaks English. They also take time to listen to the challenges and frustrations of making one's way in a new country, reassuring newcomers that adaptive stress is normal, and that they do have what it takes to reach their goals. For some, like Vivian, the New Life Centre becomes a home away from home. Vivian lived for many months in the house next door to the New Life Centre. Regularly, she would visit the Centre to ask for help, or to volunteer her time in the child minding area. When Vivian got engaged, far away from friends and family, the New Life Centre staff organized a bridal shower to help her celebrate this special milestone in her life.

The New Life Centre also helps newcomers in very practical ways, with settlement services, language instruction and child minding, art therapy, anger management and supportive counselling, translation and interpretation services. In addition, we offer newcomers, volunteers and students opportunities to give expression to their many skills and gifts. This morning, I would like to introduce you to one of those students. Jessica first came to the New Life Centre as a newcomer and an English student. Today, as a placement student, Jessica offers her experience to other newcomers as she works with our Seniors Program. Jessica will share with us this morning a glimpse of her own journey of settlement.

Tanya Chute Molina