



ARTICLE | Welcoming the Stranger

Paul Born

In the next 25 years, Canada will accept at least 7.5 million immigrants. Visionary cities taking steps to reduce poverty and deepen community through collective impact will have both the skills and the conditions to welcome these newcomers and thrive.

The Stranger

At 19, as the son of Mennonite refugees, I felt I had two career options: go into business or become a preacher. I made the wrong choice. I am pretty sure the dean of the college said something like, "Paul, you like sin too much."

But, while in seminary, I found and then studied the Hebrew word Ger - meaning stranger or refugee. There are 7 places in the Old Testament that use this word. It was to act as a reminder; you were once Ger in the land of Egypt, therefore care for the Ger in your midst. You were once a stranger - a refugee - therefore remember the refugee in your community. This reminder resonated with me.

My parents and much of my church community in Abbotsford BC were refugees - displaced persons after the war. Our Mennonite community suffered horribly during the reign of Stalin, both my grandfathers were executed, our people were starved, and the women were raped. We are forever grateful to Canada for giving us a new life, a peaceful life. We were the strangers, we were welcomed, and we thrived here.

In the next 25 years - if things go as planned - Canada will accept some 7.5 million immigrants. If things go as planned, we will receive nearly 1.5 million refugees. If things go as planned. How many of us think things will go as planned in the next 25 years?

According to the United Nations, there are 65 million displaced people in the world today. At nearly twice the population of Canada, this is the greatest number of displaced people on record. Of these displaced people, 22 million are refugees and 10 million are stateless. But, this does not explain the whole problem. It is estimated that the effects of global warming will significantly increase the number of climate refugees and accelerate migration.

What will the world ask of Canada under these conditions? How might we get ready as a country? How might our cities and communities prepare?

Embracing Migration by Ending Poverty and Deepening Community.

Some cities might choose to fight and put a virtual wall around themselves. Leaders will speak against the stranger and penalize those who are different, poor or vulnerable. Trump style politics will rise and neighbour will be pitted against neighbour. Vast amounts of energy will go to stopping, rejecting, and judging. The "hell" created by these cities as they decide who is worthy will make them miserable places to live. The poor, unemployed, Indigenous peoples, and even those who put an unusual burden on health care may be singled out. The definition of refugee - Ger - stranger will broaden in these cities.

However, there is an alternative.

Visionary cities will elect leaders that will find ways to welcome the stranger. They will create welcoming conditions by making social inclusion a priority through open government, dialogue and deepening community. Visionary cities will understand that to accept the stranger we must focus on the well-being of all citizens. The very conditions that are good for residents are the very conditions that will make their community welcoming to the stranger.

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I am observing two trends embraced by Canadian cities and communities that are visionary. I have made advancing these trends my life's work: eradicating poverty and deepening community.

First, I am seeing cities and communities of all sizes uniting their communities to tackle poverty by developing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. Mayor Don Iveson and Edmonton City Council, for instance, mobilized their city to develop [End Poverty Edmonton](#). Over nearly 2 years, they gathered leaders from all sectors including Indigenous leaders and people with lived experience of poverty. They built a vision, a commitment to the vision, and then launched a common agenda for change.

Councils and Mayors in 175 cities and communities across Canada including Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, Hamilton, Medicine Hat, Saint John, St Catherine's, Port Hardy, The Yukon and all across New Brunswick have rallied their communities. They are developing and implementing local strategies. As cities, we have bound together through Vibrant Communities - Cities Reducing Poverty.

Why is this work important? First, by developing a common agenda in a community for poverty reduction, we impact the mindset of citizens. They feel proactive and empowered about tackling major social issues facing their community. Second, it creates the skills for collaboration and envisioning and implementing innovative approaches at the scale of the entire community. Third, as momentum builds, so does creativity and many innovations specific to the community start to emerge.

As Nicholas You shared when Vibrant Communities Canada was awarded one of the 40 best practices world-wide by the United Nations, "you have created a people problem solving machine." Executives at Dupont Canada coined this work as community potentialization. I call it building the conditions for welcoming, peaceful communities and in turn social inclusion.

A second trend that communities are embracing, and this may very well be a more powerful approach

to creating the conditions for social inclusion, is the work to tackle social isolation, loneliness and in turn the disengagement of citizens. Cities are doing this by creating plans that deepen community.

Today, more than 37 cities in Canada have developed or are developing comprehensive neighbourhood strategies. The city of Kitchener, under the leadership of Berry Urbanovic, may be one of the best examples of this. Their strategy, best described in their hashtag "[love my hood](#)," was developed by reaching out to neighbours to gather ideas and then mobilize a common agenda for change. Ultimately, this will mean neighbours on a mass scale getting to know each other better, city employees planning for neighbourliness, and more green spaces and community gardens. A more livable city for one of Canada's high-tech hubs.

Kitchener is joined by Hamilton, Red Deer, Saskatoon, Kelowna, Victoria, Dartmouth, Grey Bruce, Wood Buffalo and many others in deepening their communities through neighbourhood engagement.



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Why is this important? Like tackling poverty, we create a momentum for positive change at the community level. We create expectations for neighbours and foster opportunities for innovation. This creates the conditions and builds the skills for inclusion, cooperation and collective problem solving – skills that will be highly relevant over the next 25 years.

I know I am an idealist, and some might be thinking their city, their community is too small, or we are too busy for such ideas.

This country and our communities were built by Ger -the stranger, the refugee. If things go as planned, we will welcome over 7 million strangers in the next 25 years and many more if global warming accelerates. Do we want to live in communities that build walls? Building walls requires certain skills as well. Let's not fine tune fear, hate, and exclusion. Rather, let's actively build the skills of cooperation, collaboration, dialogue, and collective problem solving. These will build communities that are welcoming and open.

In the next 25 years, the world will not go back to the way it was. Migration is the new reality. The idea of borders will be challenged. We have time to work collaboratively and proactively to significantly reduce poverty and deepen community, but not much time. Our communities are hungry for change. let's teach them how to create the conditions for inclusion.

Change is coming; things will not go as planned. Many more strangers are on their way. We need to get ready.

About Paul Born

Paul Born grew up as the son of Mennonite refugees. This is what made him deeply curious about and engaged in ideas that cause people to work together for the common good.

Paul is the Co-founder and Co-CEO of Tamarack Institute and the Founder and Director of Vibrant Communities. A large-scale community change facilitator, Paul is the author of four books, including two Canadian best sellers, he is a global faculty member of the Asset Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) and a senior fellow of Ashoka, the world's largest network of social innovators.



* This paper was adapted from a speech by Paul at the closing plenary of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2018 conference in Halifax.

Further Reading

Case Study: [Social Innovation and Community Economic Development in Vancouver](#)

Case Study: [Oxford County: Leveraging a Community Sustainability Plan to Tackle Poverty](#)

Case Study: [Love My Hood: Kitchener's Neighbourhood Strategy](#)

Case Study: [Kamloops: The Path to an Inclusive and Accessible Community](#)