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## Defining the Other:

### *Reflecting on the Syrian Refugee Crisis*

Early in the Syrian refugee crisis, I was asked by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) to be part of a delegation meeting with Chris Alexander, Minister of Immigration. We indicated that the church was ready to do what it could to respond to the crisis. It was a natural impulse of the church.

But as the crisis continued to unfold and governments struggle to know what to do, I have found myself pondering further.

Defining the “other” is a common way to strengthen group identity. By articulating those who do not belong, you also identify the traits and characteristics of those who do belong. It often begins with general attitudes found in statements like; “They are not like us”, or “They are not our kind of people.” Left unattended and unchallenged these general attitudes can grow into specific expressions of racism and bigotry - expressions inconsistent with Christian values.

Jesus challenged the common definitions of the “other” by regularly welcoming Samaritans. He purposefully elevated the status of women and children. He refused the rejection of lepers. This is the example we ascribe to as followers of Jesus.

To follow the example of Jesus is to radically erase the definition of the “other.” Cultures are recognized as different expressions of the human experience. Borders are recognized as merely geographic identifiers. We are a diverse expression of people under the grace and love of a common Creator. In this we are a global family.

So a global refugee crisis, like that facing us now, is an opportunity for all humanity to reflect on our capacity to welcome one another. How well do we accept difference? Are we willing to acknowledge various understandings and experiences?

To only open our borders to people who seem most like us is to deny our commonality. We are all created in the image of God. We are all filled with the capacity to love. We all long for safety and well being for ourselves and our families.

The Christian Church is seeking to reflect the attitude of Jesus. In our Mennonite Church Canada family of congregations, this is expressed by our ecumenical memberships in the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) and the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). In both these relationships we commend Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) as our response platform in helping our congregations become places of welcome for Syrian refugees.

But let us not leave responses only to church organizations. This crisis is also an opportunity for each of us to help erase the definition of the “other.”

Some simple suggestions include:

- *Inviting someone new to share a meal*
- *Trying a different ethnic meal*
- *Watching a movie with subtitles*
- *Listening to non-English music*
- *Reading books from non-Western authors*
- *Access study material from CommonWord via [www.commonword.ca/go/319](http://www.commonword.ca/go/319)*
- *Invite a Mennonite Church Canada Witness Worker/Staff member to share understandings and insights from their experiences.*

See the **Speaker’s Bureau** at  
<http://www.commonword.ca/go/126>

While these steps may appear simplistic, they will help strengthen the capacity to appreciate differences. This in turn will help broaden our understanding of God. Then as a part of our human family requires a safe haven, our doors will naturally swing open in welcome and embrace.