



# A House of Understanding and Cooperation The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers' Trinity Manor

By Paula E. Kirman

The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers(EMCN) helps recent immigrants to Edmonton meet their basic needs while seeking access to work, housing, education, and other services. Clients of the EMCN come from all over the world, including refugees from regions of Africa and South America.

The organization operates several housing projects in central Edmonton. Housing is an urgent need for new Canadians. "The struggle for decent housing is fought in every community, whether in Edmonton, Canada, or around the world," explains Delmy Garcia-Hoyt, who is a Coordinator with the EMCN's Supported Housing services. "The Mennonite Center plays a key role in the struggle to house newcomers to Canada; first by taking a position and giving a voice to refugees, and second by educating the community at large about their special needs."

Trinity Manor is one of the EMCN's housing facilities. As Garcia-Hoyt explains, it is "actual housing, with modest, well-built apartments in which support services are offered by caring professionals. As workers we have been given a wonderful opportunity to hear, to see, and to live the context in which our tenants live, struggle, adapt and learn to walk in their new life in Canada. Trinity Manor is a place where each and everyone is embraced."

The background of the residents of Trinity Manor are varied. They include a number of Muslims and Christians both present and former clients. "We want tenants to be able to express their faith, their gratitude, their care, their hopes, and their love," says Garcia-Hoyt.

The EMCN has been able to build bridges of understanding between residents of different faith groups through the work it does with the tenants. "Through formal and informal groups we work with people from different cultures and backgrounds. This interaction leads to learning from each other and being better able to establish good lives in Canada. People also begin to create new opportunities to learn together," Garcia-Hoyt explains.

"We don't let individualist theology trap us into thinking, 'It's all up to you!' or, 'It's all about us versus them.' We are in this world together. As we give and take, treat each other as we want to be treated, remember that each of us is part of all of us, we achieve much more, and, most especially, we notice the same divine spark burns in each of the souls that make up the Trinity Manor Housing Program."

Garcia-Hoyt is easily able to relate numerous instances of interfaith cooperation between tenants. In fact, in most cases, one's individual religious beliefs do not even come up in the specific situations. "A young single woman originally from Sudan lived with us for awhile and became very ill. She was placed on bed rest in a local hospital for almost three weeks. Another tenant, an Eritrean woman in her sixties learned of this tenant in the hospital through other tenants and she began to visit with her. She borrowed from us a thermos to take tea as well as sweet bread to the young woman. Neither of them spoke a common language to communicate, but both of them knew that they needed each other. So during the visits they drank the tea, held hands, and prayed, to make company together."

Even when language barriers exist, faith can be a unifying element between tenants. "A Moroccan woman found herself having to adjust to a new life in Canada while also learning how to be a new parent far from the practices and customs of her homeland," Garcia-Hoyt tells. "A young single woman, originally from Somalia, decided that after school she would go to her place to assist her with the cleaning and cooking of the apartment. These young women found unity through common experiences and their Muslim faith even though neither can speak the same language. They looked beyond these differences to find common cause in looking after each other and enjoying each other's company."

Most of all, EMCN realizes and respects that faith is central in the lives of many of its tenants at Trinity Manor. "As EMCN staff we believe that the best vehicle for the transmission of faith is not to be found in printed reports or numbers of activities done in a year. Faith moves through the commitment of staff and tenants to community who together are the protagonists of this project," Garcia-Hoyt explains.

She continues, "In all our programs at Trinity we try to take into account what came before in the life of every tenant, whether it is the life and death of a loved one or tenants' memories of persecution in far away lands. And so every part of every program becomes an opportunity to breathe hope. We witness the tenants in new environments and contexts evolving with new thoughts and discovering and believing in the possibility of renewal. For many of the tenants such faith as this has been the only thing that has sustained them to live and carry on."



*Edmonton's Memnonite Centre for Newcomers*