

# COPING WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF DISPLACEMENT: THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES WITH HAITIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

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# Introduction

2017: 7 300 Haïtiens = 30% of the asylum seekers arrived in Quebec



Source: *Le Devoir*

A research built on interviews with:

- 10 pastors of Haitian Churches in Montreal (9 Evangelical and 1 Catholic)
- 20 Haitian asylum seekers, most of them arrived during the summer 2017

# 1

The context of  
intervention

# 2

The different fields of  
intervention

# 3

Discussion: Churches  
as protection factors

# First section: the context of intervention

## a. Christian Churches and Haitian diaspora in Montreal

Since the 1960's 3 waves of immigration. In 2011, 120 000 people with an Haitian origin.

94% of them live in the Montreal area.

## b. Trajectories of Asylum seekers

Three main categories of Asylum seekers: (1) those who had chosen Canada and directly arrived from Haiti; (2) those who lived in the US after the earthquake of 2010; finally (3) those who spent years in South America and traveled to Canada in precarious conditions.

# Second section: the fields of intervention

## a. The Churches as key actors

3R: “refugee, respectability, resources”

## b. How asylum seekers get in contact with the Churches

- contact through a friend
- contact through a family member
- incidental contact

*A pastor: “la plupart des demandeurs d’asile venaient par les États-Unis. Et il se trouve que nous avons aussi des contacts avec des Églises soeurs aux États-Unis. Il est arrivé que je reçoive des appels de pasteurs américains qui me disaient qu’ils allaient m’envoyer un de leurs paroissiens”.*

### **c. Role of Churches with administrative procedures**

« ils arrivent, ils ne connaissent pas encore le pays, à qui se référer, ok, on dit, il y a tel autre pasteur, tel ami, qui est dans l'immigration; la maison x, la maison y, l'organisme, et puis, on les accompagne pour qu'ils puissent entamer la démarche pour faire la demande d'asile. Si la personne est refusée, on dit ok, il y a une autre étape. D'autres qui ont réussi avec certains avocats, qui font très bien la job, [...], ils ont été accompagnés sur référence par d'autres. [...] En fait, c'est en termes de réseautage et de soutien communicatif, informatif ».

### **d. Material support**

An asylum seeker: « Je peux dire que l'Église oh! Elle m'a beaucoup aidé dans la recherche de logement et au niveau du déménagement, l'Église m'a aidé à ce stade [...] Oh! L'église me donnait ces chaises-là, ces sofas, le salon en général vient de l'Église »

# Third section: Churches as protection factors

## a. Resilience and religious coping

“Psychologists define resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors” (Source: APA)

Religious coping : “religiously framed cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses to stress, encompassing multiple methods and purposes as well as positive and negative dimensions” (Wortmann J. (2013) Religious Coping. In Gellman M.D., Turner J.R. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine*. Springer, New York, NY.

Different purposes: achieving meaning in life, taking control of a situation, well-being, intimacy with others, transformation of life.

## b. Haitian Churches, spaces of resilience?

« the faith which has come to be regarded as the essential, the substance, of religion, is first a relation between individuals », Georg Simmel (1905) “A contribution to the Sociology of Religion”. *American Journal of Sociology* 11.3 : 359-376.

“The Kosovars conceptualized their suffering as a spiritual experience and turned to Islam to recover from war trauma”, Elzbieta M. Gozdziaik (2002) “Spiritual Emergency Room: The Role of Spirituality and Religion in the Resettlement Kosovar Albanians”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15(2): 136-152.

“I developed the notion of **cultural mediation** to indicate how Haitians’ religious faith provides them with narratives of hope in situations where they have little status or political voice » Margarita A. Mooney (2009), *Faith Makes Us Live: Surviving and Thriving in the Haitian Diaspora*, Los Angeles : California University Press



# Conclusion

- Two levels of resilience: social and spiritual
- A capacity to mobilize quickly the entire community with a common goal
- The difficulty to intervene in a secular context in which religious organizations do not appear legitimate to work with refugees and asylum seekers.