

## Project Title

From Suspicion to Reparation through a Relational Practical Theology:  
Transforming The United Church of Canada

## Project (Description)

Since 2008, The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been engaged in structural change that has been driven by various deficit constraints, which range from diminishing financial realities to a contracting volunteer base. These fiscal and structural constraints are not particular to the UCCan and speak to a generality that is affecting mainstream Christian denominations throughout the North American context of Canada and the United States of America.

This structural change requires the UCCan to confront demographic shifts that leave the institution unmoored from its history, especially its role as a moral leader. For much of the twentieth century, the church was able to influence the development of public policy. Inspired by the social gospel, the UCCan advocated for the social good and highlighted the ethical aspirations that the Canadian social democratic state explored in such areas as social welfare, universal health care, and a social network that cared for the least.

In this shifting landscape, during the late twentieth century, the UCCan was involved in two major theological endeavours that continue to inform its own sense of mission and identity: right relations with Canadian Indigenous peoples and a theology of diversity as articulated through the experience of the LGBTQ\* community. Where the denomination once claimed a role in influencing public policy, it has shifted to a narrative of deficit as it finds itself marginalised in an ever-increasingly secular context.

As the denomination begins to live into its enacted structural changes, there is a sense of both fatigue and malaise in some areas. As the institution has heavily invested in processes and structure to address fiscal constraints, there remains a lack of clarity about mission. When institutional change is driven by an orientation to deficit, it becomes very difficult to nurture an alternative narrative from within the context in which an organisation has been embedded.

By utilising relational construction (RC) as an epistemological stance to navigate the current context of the UCCan, I contend that the UCCan can shift from a structural/financial rationale for change to a missional orientation. This (re)orientation allows the denomination to recognise the important work it has done theologically, in particular, its work around diversity as evidenced in its advocacy for and solidarity with the LGBTQ\* community. By engaging with the sociological insights and learning afforded by RC, the denomination can focus on significant milestones to help it to construct a relational practical theology.

A theology of relationality has implications for both the practice of ministry and the practical organisational responses that are required during the UCCan's restructuring. One practice that operationalises RC, Appreciative Inquiry, demonstrates how the theoretical and practical can assist in this time of denominational change.

By introducing the UCCan to a new conversation partner, RC, space is made for the church to become better equipped to respond in a generative way to both its internal change and the shifting realities of secular Canada. From within a Christian context, this exploration of a relational practical theology has implications for the ways in which the UCCan engages in practical theology both within its communities of faith and within larger relational connexions, such as with regional, national, or international secular, ecumenical, and interfaith partners.

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