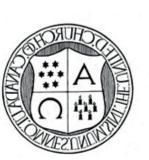# From Suspicion to Reparation through a Relational Practical Theology:

Transforming The United Church of Canada

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Contents

1. An Introduction

The project before us utilises a methodology adopted from Richard Osmer. In particular, Osmer's use of the four tasks of Practical Theology – descriptive, interpretive, normative, and the pragmatic – are utilised as a structured way with which to explore the change in focus of the project. With these tasks employed to shape the project's progress, from a practical theological vantage point, lived experience is preferenced in a manner to better understand The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) theological journey.

The UCCan's theological journey, as the focus of this project, explores how the denomination's experience has recognised the ways in which its inherited theological traditions have caused harm and/or limited people from thriving. This recognition, in turn, has occurred from a perspective informed by a hermeneutic of suspicion. This critical interrogation is then balanced in the project with a reparative orientation. With these two theories in conversation in the project, it is argued that the UCCan's tradition of shaping a theology of diversity is central to its navigation of its current change context that has been structurally driven by orientation to deficit.

I am beginning our conversation, therefore, from my vocational context in the UCCan. From this vantage point, it is important to let you know that currently, after ten years of formal organisational restructuring, the denomination has implemented changes that have not been experienced on this scale since the denomination's founding almost one hundred years ago. The impetus for this reorganising, which has a much longer history that includes less drastic restructuring than what has now been implemented, has been deficit driven. This orientation to deficit has been driven by considerations that range from the financial to dwindling membership, which is comparable to other mainstream North American Protestant denominations within both Canada and the United States of America.

From my viewpoint, I have the privilege currently to be the Principal of St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, SK, Canada. The college is one of the UCCan's theological post-secondary graduate educational institutions. In this role, I have the honour to be connected to both the realities of congregational life and the manner in which leadership is being prepared in a changing and highly secularised Canadian context. In regard to organisational change and development, any corporate body that initiates change from a fear orientation will face great difficulty in shifting away from that focus. Furthermore, change, if it is drastic, directly impacts the energy of those who make up the organisation. For a faith-based community, which relies heavily upon volunteers, this is more acute (Keller 12 & Riffo 15-18).

The intention of this project, therefore, is to help the UCCan—and by extension, other North American mainline denominations—find ways to reorient to a long history of

theological expansivity that preferences diversity. In order to meet this goal, we will set upon the task to construct a relational practical theology that can inform the denomination's self-identity and be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understanding that is grounded in a theology of diversity. This is important because deficit-driven change is not experienced at the local congregational level as relational, which, in turn, can lead to disengagement. This is highlighted when Daniela Riffo observes that "[i]f church leaders face the challenge of retaining members on a regular basis, one might expect this task to be an even greater challenge when the organization is implementing change" (17). From a faith-based volunteer context, one of the primary ways to understand engagement is described by Scott Keller and Carolyn Aiken as being involved in "A Compelling Story" (2). From a missional perspective, therefore, deficit-driven change is unsatisfying for volunteers, as a story of deficit does not compel them to see how they can change the world. Rather, a compelling story, as Keller and Aiken observe, is one that connects with a higher purpose that brings meaning to those involved and, often, can be considered leaving a legacy

It is my belief that by engaging what the UCCan has done well in its journey, in particular its commitment to interrogating its theological inheritance when it harms or oppresses people as evident from lived experience, there is an opportunity to shape a missional identity that allows the UCCan to become nimbler in change. Such change is now a constant reality, and this reorientation has several conversational partners that will help us in our goal: to construct a relational practical theology that can inform the denomination's self-identity and be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understanding that is grounded in a theology of diversity.

One of the longest partners with whom the UCCan has been in conversation, as it began to question its inherited understanding of gender roles during the war years of the Second World War in the twentieth century, has been suspicion. Suspicion, in this long history, has been primarily informed by interrogating assumptions that are shaped in such conversations as "who is in and who is out?" "who benefits at the expense of others?" and "to whom does the benefit gravitate: a few or the many?"

This hermeneutic – lens of interpretation – which has and does influence academic and theological discourses has been highly effective in deconstructing the UCCan's inheritance. As we shall see, the UCCan's theological journey in which it has confronted the tension of lived experience began with the deconstruction of inherited gender norms. In turn, suspicion and the trajectory to deconstruct have helped to shape a theology of diversity. One of the practical lived experiences, therefore, which will be our focus for this discussion, is the denomination's work of advocacy for and solidarity with the LGBTTQ* community.

A new partner that we introduce as a counterpoint to suspicion will be a hermeneutic of reparation. If suspicion has been traditionally concerned with deconstruction, reparation has been oriented to respond to the revelations of suspicion in a manner that suggests and

nurtures healing. Though suspicion has served the UCCan well in examining its inheritance, it has not been relational; rather, it has been deconstructive. By examining the similarities between suspicion and reparation, we will appreciate the reparative nature that is intrinsic to a theology of diversity. This will enable us, therefore, to balance suspicion when it becomes paranoia. In the lived experience of some congregations, the decades-long restructuring of the denomination has affixed their gaze to fear and thus limits the possibility for revitalisation. A reparative intention, therefore, helps reveal the theological milestones we will explore in order to find practical ways to assist, at the local level, the processes of generating new meaning and mission.

It is important to acknowledge that this project of finding relational practices to balance a tradition of suspicion does not purport to speak universally to the church. Rather, as we shall see in respect to relational construction, the project suggests that it is in the micro-practices, in the local context, that specific meaning is shaped, such as between pastoral care giver and congregant and in congregations engaged in exploring and identifying particular missional identity in the context of denominational deficit-driven change. Such identity is found in their particular history of sharing the Good News and how that history allows them to reconnect with their local missional call.

Central to the task before us is exploring what a conversation between practical theology and relational construction brings to this endeavour to shift from deficit to mission. In particular, the epistemological understanding that relational construction brings is central. From this meta-theoretical orientation, the practice of relational construction involves, at the local level, whether that is in a pastoral relationship or in congregations engaged in transformation through such philosophically practical applications as Appreciative Inquiry, the wisdom to navigate change that is generatively healing through narrative means: telling and hearing stories.

The pastoral relationship, which we will reference as one key influence on healing, can be understood in many ways. Often, though not always, it occurs between an individual in companionship with someone on a journey of healing. Whether that is as a pastor, counsellor, or lay leader, such relationships are often intimate and become places in which the generative nature of local meaning-making nurtures opportunities for healing in the midst of harm that is identified. Such harm, for the sake of our project, is concerned with the recognition of theological inheritances that have been experienced as oppressive and marginalising. This sharing of joys and sorrows, therefore, reveals hurts and celebrations.

For the UCCan, however, this meaning-making understanding will help us to more fully appreciate the implications of shifting to a missional orientation that is grounded in a theology of diversity. As the denomination shares its mission, it has, does and will confront stories of violence and trauma that arise from the theological traditions it has inherited. In the case of

our discussion, the traumatic stories upon which we will primarily focus are related to the lived experience of homophobia.

The conversation between practical theology and relational construction will highlight the UCCan's own confessional stance of recognising its complicity in imposing theological inheritances that have caused harm in its role as once being an agent of state. This self-knowing further informs a reorientation to mission and the pastoral implications that arise when members and allies of the LGBTTQ* community consider whether the denomination's relational orientation is a place to risk healing that is revealed in the generativity that arises in sharing lived experience. This generativity – or creativity – is fostered in those local practices that endeavour to address inherited harm and/or when congregations seeks to identify missional identity in the midst of denominational and cultural change.

It is this lived experience, in particular that of members of the LGBTTQ* community, ultimately, which is preferenced throughout this project. As a practical theology, relational construction serves as a barometer that allows the church universal, and the UCCan in my vocational context particularly, to test (reparatively) the lived implications of any tradition that it might foster. This testing, therefore, examines whether lived experience is oppressive or liberative. This preference is directly informed by liberation theology's preferential option for the poor and the marginalised (Freire 44-45). A relational practical theology, therefore, is a conversation between lived experience and theological knowledge creation: a conversation that remains intentionally reparative and constantly experiences meaning that is locally descriptive and not prescriptive.

If the task before us is to construct a relational practical theology, and if story is intrinsic to relational construction, then it feels important to locate myself for our conversation. Allow me to name, therefore, my preference for the use of the first person. I am aware that in this milieu in which we are becoming acquainted, the academic, this is a choice. I would like, therefore, to articulate my choice in this regard.

Vera Caine and Andrew Estefan describe an orientation to narrative in the following manner: "Beginning with a narrative view of experience, as researchers, we attend to place, temporality, and sociality, within our own life stories and the experiences of our participants. Within this space, each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives" (965).

As I have mentioned, there are stories and experiences that I hold in trust that lead me to choose to recognise that though I am conscious of the academic milieu in which we are engaged, I cannot (for myself) claim to be removed and speak through the third-person. I can, however, acknowledge the need to establish a methodology that holds me to account in this choice. Methodologically, therefore (See *Descriptions* below), I will be using both mutual critical correlation (See *Descriptions* and *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational*

Practical Theology) and Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology (4) to navigate through this project.

I recognise from the outset, therefore, that I am intimately tied to this story. As we proceed, I will demonstrate how a relational practical theology can assist in this endeavour to create pragmatic ways in which the UCCan can shift from deficit to mission. From a relational orientation, storytelling is an invitation to creativity. Though this generative orientation is central to our academic exercise, being creative for the sake of creativity does not honour the knowledge production in which we are invested.

Central to the methodology (see below) is a mutual critical orientation that arises from the relational construction orientation we have already begun to discuss. Throughout our project, I will often refer to this as a "correlative conversation." In preferencing personal experience, however, my hope is not to make this about me, but to recognise that my denominational and personal lived experience informs our theological and academic journey toward constructing a relational practical theology. The personal unveils and provides insights into cultural, theological, and social phenomena; there are intimate connexions between the concrete and the theoretical, as practical theology has long recognised.

In respect to location, therefore, let me offer the following:

- I am male, educated, have a mixed racial heritage of being Syrian/Lebanese and French Canadian, and identify as heterosexual and use the pronouns He, Him, and His;
- I am a person of faith who has come to realise that the reality into which I long to walk is informed by a relational sensibility of paradox, as opposed to certainty;
- I am a person who seeks to harness the UCCan's theological journey to invigorate the denomination as it initiates change from a deficit orientation;
- I am a product of a Canadian social democratic perspective in which multiple voices, the gift of diversity in plurality, enrich a society; and,
- I am, at the end of it all, an individual seeking to be unbound by conventions that isolate me. I long to discover relational and generative ways in which we (as individuals and communities) can co-create new meaning. Whether in the context of the UCCan or the larger societal context beyond my vocational workspace, I wish to foster a way of being that is grounded in abundance and mutuality.

In this academic undertaking, I am choosing to speak with more than one voice—or perhaps more clearly, from more than one vantage point. On the one hand, I am speaking from the first person with a preference that is informed by relational construction. I am aware that the use of the first person, as I have mentioned in respect to the academic tradition, is not universally preferenced. Though the third person is often the way in which the academic voice is shared, the first person allows for a certain authenticity for me from a practical

theological orientation. This is because the lived experience that is witnessed in the LGBTTQ* community is greatly personal, as we shall discuss in relation to trauma. As we shall see in respect to the individual as bounded or relational, narrative's orientation is important to explore because it offers a structure by which stories might be organised (Burr 142).

In some instances, narrative is a linear movement from beginning to middle to end (McNamee & Hosking 78). The performance, though clearly varied in creative possibility, nonetheless follows a specified pattern. Furthermore, as we shall also explore the individual story (see Chapter 3. *The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power & Creation*), it can reinforce a person's separation or bounded connexion to their environment/plot.

From a relational orientation, narrative theory

Is based in postmodern/poststructuralist philosophies that include the assumption that our interpretation of reality is reality and that this reality is socially constructed. Realities, according to this theory, are organized and maintained by stories that are personal, familial, and cultural. Thus, a major part of the work of narrative counseling is to help people generate new language and new interpretive lenses and thus create new realities. How people engage with the experiences they have and the contexts in which those experiences occur is fundamental to the way they move forward in life and build their future stories. (Neuger 43)

I am aware that introducing narrative theory from a counselling context may be unorthodox, but I believe doing so is consistent with the larger development within practical theological scholarship that recognises that we are multi-storied people (Madigan *2*). As such, as we find new ways to explore the plurality of our voices in collaborative ways (Caine & Estefan 967; McNamee & Hosking 78*),* we create opportunities for conversations that are either novel or have not occurred for some time. Such conversations, therefore, present choices in respect to co-created understanding (McMillan 719). This co-creation, as we shall explore in the context of the Christian Creation story, is key to the construction of a relational practical theology.

My particularity speaks to a larger generality that occurs when practical theology, as a practice, witnesses many stories, some of which are joyful and others that are scarring. When witnessing reveals that theological inheritances, such as those that have been deconstructed by the UCCan in the context of homophobia, limit and confine people and affect dignity and well-being, practical theology introduces (and sometimes brings back) questions and challenges to the institutional church that must be addressed. They must be addressed because the UCCan's theology of diversity, if it informs a missional shift from an

orientation of deficit, will have to relationally engage with the lived experiences of those who have been harmed by homophobia.

It is this lived experience that itself invites an interdisciplinary approach and one that we will more fully explore through the use of mutual critical correlation or "correlative conversations." Sandra Schneider describes the preference of lived experience, from a practical theological orientation, in this way: "This formal object, the focus on Christian experience as experience, demands the interdisciplinarity of *method* that characterizes the study of spirituality … I would argue that it has an approach which is characteristically hermeneutical in that it seeks to interpret the experience it studies in order to make it understandable and meaningful in the present without violating its historical reality" (Schneider 6). It is in this commitment to understanding that Elizabeth Liebert would continue this line of understanding by suggesting that it is in the meaning of the experience that we are better able to come to a deeper understanding of the Holy (Liebert 31).

It is not enough, therefore, for the UCCan to deconstruct and remain committed to suspicion. Central to this missional shift is a reparative orientation that demands and seeks healing both of hurt caused and hurt shared. As such, if practical theology witnesses theological traditions that cause harm, then reconciling that harm becomes an ethical consideration that must be taken seriously as the church navigates a time in which structural change and missional revitalisation stand in tension.

Reconciliation for the UCCan carries with it a particular meaning that speaks to a generality, which William A. Clebsch & Charles R. Jaekle describe as one of the functions of pastoral care: *reconciling* (Clebsch & Jaekle 56 ff). From the UCCan perspective, it has most often been explored in respect to reconciliation with Indigenous Partners for whom the denomination has issued several apologies (See *2. The Descriptive Task: The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance*). Though this is one particular way in which the UCCan has understood reconciliation, it connects with the LGBTTQ* community and the unfolding deconstruction of its theological inheritances which the denomination has identified have historically caused harm. This particularity, therefore, connects with the two modes that Clebsch and Jaekle identify as the functions of practical theology involve reconciliation as pastoral care: forgiveness and discipline (Clebsch & Jaekle 57).

For the UCCan, reconciliation as an act of forgiveness is important because "reconciliation takes place through forgiveness, which can be a proclamation, or an announcement, or even a very simple gesture indicating that, in spite of the walls of pride and hurt which separate and alienate men, something has occurred to re-establish and reunite persons to each other and, indeed, to God" (Clebsch & Jaekle 57). Those apologies of the denomination, which we will discuss, therefore, are steps of forgiveness that help to re-establish or reconcile relationships that were harmed by theological preferences, such as will be explored throughout this conversation in regard to the LGBTTQ* community.

Forgiveness, however, is not the only manner in which reconciliation functions. Clebsch and Jaekle explore the role of discipline in reconciliation (57). For the purpose of this project,, we are interested in the manner in which they understand discipline as a collective responsibility, such as explored from a collective or denominational practice (62). Such practice, focused on the "cure of souls," is grounded in the discipline that preferences the intention "to share and transmit wisdom gained in concrete experience" (65).

These two modes of reconciliation, forgiveness and discipline, therefore are important components that help us better appreciate the manner in which the UCCan's journey toward a theology of diversity can enrich its shift away from deficit to allow those in local contexts to better understand how the denominational journey can be generative in identifying missional identity from the particularity of congregations/faith communities' lived experience.

This standard or norm for the denomination is, ultimately, grounded in the relational invitation of a theology of diversity. Such an invitation invites people to consider that a theology of diversity is, in fact, a celebration and embraces much of what is rejected and oppressed by the very traditions that the UCCan has deconstructed. If people are to accept this invitation, the UCCan must find ways to make space to witness those stories in a manner that is not prescriptive. Practitioners of relational construction recognise that meaning making, as one component of reparation, cannot be bottled into rigid processes. Rather each local micro-practice will develop contextually, whether that occurs within a pastoral relationship that endeavours to navigate lived experience of hurt and trauma or faith communities that engage in missional identity formation.

This witnessing will ultimately occur in pastoral relationships and at the local and relational level in faith communities. As we shall see, the role of lament, at the local level, is not just a communal practice to witness harm, but it is also an act of resistance. In the relational act, lament allows those who have been disenfranchised to find their own voices that result in meaning making that is contrary to the limiting nature of normalisation (Park-Hearn 55). In this relational act, mission comes more clearly into focus at the local congregational level.

Descriptions

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a methodology using narrative to make space for conversations that are mutual and relational in nature (Ellingson & Ellis 445). It begins with the sharing of stories and experiences that might reveal vulnerability. In such revelation, the implications of lived experience can serve as a gauge to discern larger forces, such as inherited theological traditions, and these might be understood as more than abstract, but that literally affect people's quality of life.

Ellingson and Ellis describe autoethnography in the following manner: "The practice of autoethnography presumes that reality is socially constructed, and that meaning is constructed through symbolic (language) interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Presuming that reality is socially constructed enables autoethnographers to counter accepted claims about 'the way things are' or 'the way things always have been'" (Ellingson & Ellis 449).

Methodologically, I will be engaging in autoethnography by using my personal experience (in the form of Logs and reflections) to expand upon the analysis that occurs in the descriptive and interpretive tasks of practical theology that Richard Osmer has developed, and which are introduced below. These experiences range from pastoral practices to aspects of my own story and experience of The United Church of Canada (UCCan). The purpose of each Log, which arises from my own context and/or personal experience, is to highlight the lived experience I have had in respect to the material that will be explored within each part of our conversation.

Furthermore, the particularity of my experience highlights the opportunities the UCCan will have to address in pastoral practices. These practices will be explored from a missional orientation that preferences diversity, which the Logs reveal in respect to the UCCan's own unfolding theological journey. In these relationships, caregivers will hear stories of violence, whether on account of homophobia, racism, or misogyny. How to respond to these from a reparative orientation is grounded in a relational practical theology.

I am using these Logs as an autoethnographic tool to illustrate the underlying intention of this project to recognise and "resist stigmatizing labels" (Ellingson & Ellis, *Handbook* 445) that the UCCan's own journey has deconstructed. This journey has focused on inherited theological traditions, which from a confessional position have and do recognise that the UCCan, in its role as an agent of state, has perpetrated oppression.

Hermeneutics: Suspicion & Reparation

The theological journey of The United Church of Canada (UCCan), and the academy, are often informed by suspicion. This suspicion can be seen as early as 1932 in the UCCan

report, "The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage." Though the document affirms the heteronormative expectations of marriage as between a man and woman and is intended to produce children, it begins the genealogy (See *The Descriptive Task: The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance*) of the UCCan's deconstruction of its theological inheritance. What is important about the conclusion of this early example of suspicion for the denomination was its acceptance – albeit perhaps reluctantly – that divorce had to be tolerated:

> We cannot think that Jesus, with His affirmation of the worth of every person, would sanction the subjection of a wife to a loveless, cruel husband, or vice versa. In all Christian ages separation has been recognized as the simplest way out of an intolerable and degrading situation. (45)

This position is further addressed in the report when it recognises the role the state had:

> The state should offer protection, easily accessible, to any person threatened with disgrace and the disruption of a marriage tie; and such processes as may be approved for the purpose ought to secure full hearing for a wife who otherwise may be greatly wronged. (45)

This 1932 report, therefore, is one significant example that marks when the UCCan began to take seriously the lived experience of those living within its inflexible theological inheritance. In this case, women who sought the right to divorce and remarry – until this report – had to live within the theology that discouraged, even denied, such an option. Whether in such theological orientations as liberationist or feminist, interrogating assumptions of who has power, who benefits, and who is excluded are just some of the ways in which suspicion has helped the UCCan nurture a theology of diversity.

From this same suspicious preference, a reparative reading is also concerned with identifying how people's lives may be adversely affected by inherited inflexible traditions. Its intention, however, is not solely to deconstruct, which we will discuss further as paranoia. Rather a reparative lens of doubt seeks ways that reconstruction – healing – can be nurtured in the recognition of oppression. This family resemblance, between suspicion and reparations, is important, and in the case of the project before us, I will highlight this significance as we construct a relational practical theology.

I am using a reparative hermeneutic, therefore, to explore how an orientation to suspicion might be complemented in a manner that offers healing from the insights that arise from critical analysis. Rather than spiral from critical insight to further analysis, a reparative

conversation offers ways to nurture creative ways to address the harm identified in the task of deconstruction.

Mutual Critical Correlation

One of the ways in which we will journey toward constructing a relational practical theology is to engage in mutual critical correlation among various conversational partners. Relational construction's conversation with practical theology is expected to be generative and creative, in other words, mutual. This mutuality, as we shall discuss in *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology*, is central in understanding mutual critical correlation in practice. Richard refers to this as "a revised praxis method of correlation" (167).

The reason, therefore, for the use of this method is the manner in which it complements the experience and relationship that is also central to relational construction and the practices of practical theology. As theologian David Tracy states, the task of critical correlation is to "[discover meaning] as adequate to our common human experience [and this] must be compared to the meanings disclosed as appropriate to the Christian tradition in order to discover how similar, different, or identical the former meanings are in relationship to the other" (79).

The history of such correlation traces back to the work of Paul Tillich. Within this tradition that is influenced by Tillich, critical or liberal correlation, extending from Tracy's , "would argue that theological understanding emerges dialogically from many different sources: the received and historic tradition, cultural context (such as science, philosophy, the arts or human sciences); and personal or communal 'experience'" (Graham 7).

There are several conversations in which mutual critical correlation will be utilised throughout our project:

- Practical theology and relational construction;
- Hermeneutics of suspicion and reparation in conversation in respect to lived experience of theological traditions that limit and/or oppress;
- Lament and witnessing (as a practice of relational construction); and,
- Appreciative Inquiry (as a practical application of relational construction) and lament (as a practice of practical theology), are also conversation partners.

I am using mutual critical correlation as a way to explore creative ways in which various conversation partners might better appreciate the theological journey of The United Church of Canada (UCCan). In addition, such partners help address the way the UCCan might shift from a recent orientation to deficit/loss to mission and identity formation as witness in the particularity of the local (congregational/faith community) context.

Practical Theology: The Four Tasks

In order to structure the journey before us, we will borrow from Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology. In the form of questions, he presents them in this way:

- What is going on?
- Why is this going on?
- What ought to be going on?
- How might we respond?

From these four guiding questions, he expands upon them in this manner:

- "The descriptive-empirical task. Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.
- The interpretive task. Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.
- The normative task. Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from good practice.'
- The pragmatic task. Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the "talk back" emerging when they are enacted." (4)

As is evident in the chapter titles of this project (See *The Journey*), these tasks will allow us to utilise the methodology with intention as we proceed throughout the project. One final item to note is that though we are using this practical theological methodology in a linear manner, Osmer makes it clear that though it is an appropriate use, depending on the context in which it is utilised, the tasks can also be conceptualised more like a spiral than a circle. In other words, the tasks are not discrete and prescriptive, but serve to guide the relational nature of practical theology (11). This non-linear context complements the manner in which mutual critical correlation examines the places in which human experience and the Christian tradition come into contact.

I am using these tasks to highlight the practical theological preference that is embedded in our work. Osmer's tasks facilitate a process to navigate the way lived experience (See *Practical Theology: Lived Experience*), as witnessed through the praxis of practical theology, offers one avenue to understand the theological journey of The United Church of Canada. There are certainly other ways in which this has and can be done, but for this project, Osmer's tasks offer a helpful way to structure the work before us.

Practical Theology: Lived Experience

Though this exploration occurs within an academic context, beneath this knowledge that shapes tradition is lived experience. Whether that is my lived experience in witnessing the effects of traditional theological inheritances that cause harm, such as in the pastoral relationship where a member of the LGBTTQ* community wrestles with experienced violence and faith, or in the congregational experience of a faith community, practical theology preferences such experiences as material objects. In this preference, meaning is found in the location of theological construction.

For practical theology, it is the practices of the faith community that require a response when we acknowledge that – in some instances – those experiences are not life affirming. In this orientation, therefore, the norms that we will explore by preferencing lived experience are the criteria of generativity, reduction of harm, and mutuality at the relational level within a pastoral relationship.

Generativity, reduction of harm, and mutuality, in respect of operationalisation, therefore, occur in the various pastoral practices within local particularities. Whether in the pastoral relationship of witnessing and companioning or working with faith communities as they explore opportunities to identify mission as an aspect of identity, it is in hearing stories and witnessing to one another that meaning making is fostered locally. Such meaning is often particular to that context and, therefore, is suggestive and non-prescriptive in regard to (universal) application.

I am using lived experience, therefore, preferentially, to explore the theological journey of The United Church of Canada. Such experience is often first witnessed in the praxis of practical theology. This witnessing has been central to the UCCan's deconstruction of its own theological inheritance. It is helpful, therefore, to recognise that this tradition is continued within the project before us.

Relational Construction

Relational construction is a meta-theory. It is not concerned with engaging in debates about Truth. It is relational in orientation, meaning that it is through individual/collective stories and experiences that we co-create meaning and understanding. It positions itself to question and interrogate cultural assumptions that may go unexamined or unnoticed. Though it does not position itself as a Truth, it does utilise suspicion and reparation to foster conversations that are generative in nature.

Relational construction takes seriously that the words that we use, as symbols of power and knowledge, shape our individual and collective reality. From this orientation, the

words we have inherited are of concern when there is lived experience of harm. In this context of disruption and change, relational construction invites us to engage in relational explorations that will foster new meaning and ways to respond to the turbulence we are experiencing.

I am engaging relational construction as an active conversation partner with practical theology. Both share similarities in the preference of lived experience, and both lend opportunities that help broaden their own rich traditions. As conversation partners, the ideas of creativity and generativity open up ways to explore how these practices can be enlivened both in the context of individual endeavours to seek healing, as well as communal ways to collectively address such aspirations as reparation and reconciliation from identified theological traditions that have caused harm.

Theology of Diversity

The United Church of Canada (UCCan), throughout the course of the twentieth century, has interrogated its theological inheritances. This critique can be traced to such central questions as those that arose around gender roles during the war years, in the twentieth century when the liberated lived experience of women, was in tension with the church's theological inheritance. Over the ensuing six decades, this orientation of suspicion has led the UCCan to shape what might be considered a theology of diversity. Under this umbrella stand several milestones, including an ongoing process of reconciliation with Canadian First Nations and the LGBTTQ* communities It is the latter that is used as a touchstone for this general theological expansion that will be central to our conversation.

I am highlighting the UCCan's theological preference for diversity in our project, as the central way in which the denomination might shift from a deficit focused lens in regard to over a decade of structural change to one that is missional in orientation. In particular, this theological journey that has taken the UCCan from a place of agent of state to advocating for diversity contains an opportunity for local congregations/faith communities to explore particular ways to both celebrate this unfolding exploration and generate meaning that is particular to their experience. This particularity, therefore, can serve as a way for the local congregational context to inform/encourage a denominational shift to vison and mission.

This missional (re)orientation will be explored with a new correlative conversation partner: Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This change philosophy presents opportunities for local communities to build capacity. By capacity, we mean the way that congregations/faith communities can respond to change that is not paralysis inducing. As we shall discuss, when change is motivated by an orientation to deficit, local faith communities (which are volunteer driven) can be overwhelmed and unable to shift and adapt. Capacity, therefore, implies a shift

to mission that is informed by abundance/possibility that is central to the UCCan's theology of diversity.

AI builds on this preference for abundance by drawing from the local community's wisdom about what was done well in the past and bringing it forward in a manner that is appropriate to its current context. This local wisdom/experience, therefore, is central to engaging and emboldening faith communities to weather well the reality that change is both afoot denominationally and may very well be now normative.

The Journey

As we prepare to move further into our journey, the following chapters will frame the project before us as we construct a relational practical theology:

1. *Introduction*
2. *The Descriptive Task: The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance*
3. *The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power & Creation*
4. *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology*
5. *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*
6. *Conclusion*
7. *Appendix (Logs & Vignettes)*
8. *Appendix (Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the Provocative)*
9. *Appendix (Social Media & Evangelism)*
10. *Bibliography*

As we shall explore, after a brief discussion of the limitations of this project, the core chapters, 2-5, build upon the project before us by utilising the four tasks that Richard Osmer has shaped in respect to 'doing' practical theology.

Limitations

Prior to transitioning to an exploration of what each chapter will discuss, it is important to make explicit the limitations of this work. The project contends that it is at the local level – in this case, faith communities either within (micro) pastoral practices or communal ones – meaning can be made in regard to recognising theological traditions that have caused harm. Meaning can also be made in regard to the need to engage congregations in ways that can shift them from a deficit orientation to one that seeks to shape missional identity. The limitation, however, is that this contention does not claim to be universal.

By universal, as we shall discuss in *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*, this project does not offer a prescriptive response to heal harm identified or offer process that claim to be 'cookie cutter' like in regard to addressing the current organisational change within The United Church of Canada. Though suggestive, it is not the intention of this project to be prescriptive. Central to relational construction, a revised praxis of critical correlation and practical theology, is a preference for experience.

As such, each pastoral relationship, whether individual or communal, is particular in its own history and context. As such, responses that arise will be generative (creative) based on that particular locality. This project, therefore, does not intend to offer a 'fix' to the complexities we shall discuss. This project does contend that in taking seriously the role of

relationality and witnessing, those in Lay or Ordered leadership can nurture resilience based on the particular strengths identified in the unfolding of pastoral relationships.

2. The Descriptive Task: The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance

"Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in
particular episodes, situations, or contexts" (Osmer 4).

In this initial chapter of the descriptive task, we will discuss the current change context in which The United Church of Canada (UCCan) finds itself. In particular, we will discuss the deficit orientation that has consumed much of the denomination's structural change rationale. This orientation to deficit, as we shall see, has had an impact on the local community's ability to vision and develop a missional orientation in a changing Canadian secular culture.

We will then describe the UCCan's historic deconstruction of its role in imperial theology. This historic description will allow us to then trace the trajectory of the denomination's mission as it deconstructed its theological inheritance from an orientation that, in some local contexts, has felt 'top down.'

This hierarchical tradition is a paradox as the denomination has aspired to be a conciliar decision-making body. This paradox can be seen in the 1932 document we have already briefly discussed, "The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian." The deconstruction of its inherited theological understanding of marriage, which informed heteronormative understanding of gender relations, occurred at the same time that it aspired to be the 'church of Canada.' While in a cultural position of authority, therefore, the UCCan was also challenging the various theological inheritances in which it had been complicit in fostering in connexion to such historic influence.

As it has moved along its theological journey, the UCCan has nurtured a theological preference for diversity, while not necessarily being able to share in accessible ways in regard to local congregational contexts. This highlights the disconnect between a macro focus (theology of diversity) and micro- and congregational realities that do not have the capacity (which can range and include resources, time, energy, and interest) to explore the injury that becomes evident from deconstructed imperial theologies (such as those that preference heteronormativity) when they cause harm in lived experience (such as for members in the LGBTTQ* community).

Prior to discussing mission, we will then explore two autoethnographic Logs that illustrate the interplay of trauma and an imperial theology. We will introduce how relational experiences of trauma come into conversation with the UCCan's deconstruction of its theological inheritance.

The final descriptive task in this chapter will be to explore mission. In particular, we will discuss how focusing on mission, through the local witness of faith communities and pastoral relationship, through lament and reparation can enliven the denominational conversation about structural change.

3. The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power & Creation

> "Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring." (Osmer 4).

In the descriptive task we will have explored the context of The United Church of Canada (UCCan). In this task, therefore, we will endeavour to understand that context. In this interpretive task, therefore, we will begin by investigating the harm caused by the inherited theological tradition that the UCCan has interrogated. We will do this through such dimensions as trauma, power, Creation, Sin, and Blessing.

The use of two autoethnographic Logs in the interpretive task will illustrate harm and the mechanisms that promote it. One way in which we will do this is to explore the theological inheritance of Original Sin.

We will then journey further in this interpretive section by exploring the theological reasons that historical injury continues to limit the church in regard to the micro reality of the local faith community as understood in both pastoral realities and congregational contexts. This interpretive exercise will then allow us to advocate for a hermeneutic of reparation, at the local level, that can influence the denominational structural change as a missional exercise and not a deficit response.

4. The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology

> Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice" (Osmer 4).

In the descriptive and interpretive tasks, we will have explored the context of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) and engaged with various partners to understand the denomination's historic development of a theological orientation that preferences diversity. In this next task, we will begin to engage in mutual critical correlation conversations that include what the Christian tradition says about a hermeneutic of reparation, through such practices as lament and witness. We will also explore what it is that relational construction and organisational change say about moving beyond a focus on the past and on deficit. In this

normative task, therefore, we will also engage practical theology and relational construction in a mutual critical correlative conversation. The final task in this part of our project, therefore, will be to outline and contrast the contours of a relational practical theology that is able to embolden The United Church of Canada, from a local level, to embrace change from a missional orientation.

5. The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry

> "Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the 'talk back' emerging when they are enacted" (4).

In the previous task, the normative, we will have constructed a relational practical theology. In this final task, the pragmatic, we will introduce Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which can be considered an operationalised relational construction process. AI, as a practical philosophical change process, is consistent with the relational practical theology that we will have outlined as the good practice that Richard Osmer suggests should complete the normative task. The pragmatic task is not to offer a universal response to the structural change in which The United Church of Canada is engaged. Rather, the task is to explore the pragmatic nature in which AI and relational practical theology can build capacity at the local level.

As with a general relational construction orientation, AI is not utilised to be prescriptive. Rather, the inherent nimbleness of the philosophical change process is able to reflect the contextual particularity in a way that makes space for individual creative and generative responses to reorient toward mission, as opposed to deficit.

As a final conversation in mutual critical correlation between AI and the Christian tradition, we will explore how such practises as witnessing, lament, and reparation offer the local community ways to respond relationally to the larger denominational deconstruction of inherited theological traditions that have caused harm.

The last part of this pragmatic task will allow us to propose a curriculum to assist the local congregations to both recognise their historic complicity in Empire and be able to witness harm through utilising lament and reparation. From this confessional orientation, the curriculum will allow local faith communities to then engage with the generative nature of AI as an operationalised relational construction practice.