

# From Suspicion to Reparation through a Relational Practical Theology:

Transforming The United Church of Canada

Richard Manley-Tannis

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Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. K. Sijsma, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie in de Portrettenzaal van de Universiteit op maandag 17 februari 2020 om 16.00 uur door Richard Michael Guy Manley-Tannis, geboren te Ottawa, Canada.

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## Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	vi
<b>1. An Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Descriptions	9
<i>Autoethnography</i>	9
<i>Hermeneutics: Suspicion &amp; Reparation</i>	9
<i>Mutual Critical Correlation</i>	11
<i>Practical Theology: The Four Tasks</i>	12
<i>Practical Theology: Lived Experience</i>	13
<i>Relational Construction</i>	13
<i>Theology of Diversity</i>	14
The Journey	16
<i>Limitations</i>	16
<i>The Descriptive Task: The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance</i>	17
<i>The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power, &amp; Creation</i>	18
<i>The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology</i>	18
<i>The Pragmatic Task: Lament &amp; Appreciative Inquiry</i>	19
<b>2. The Descriptive Task:</b>	<b>20</b>
The United Church of Canada's Theological Inheritance	
An Unfolding Historic Movement	21
Inheriting Empire	23
A History of Deconstruction	27
<i>Preferencing Diversity</i>	32
<i>Intercultural Theologising</i>	33
<i>White Privilege</i>	35
Suspicious & Reparative Hermeneutics: Family of Resemblance	40
Logs #01 & #02	43
<i>Log #01</i>	43
<i>Log #02</i>	46
Summary	49
<b>3. The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power, &amp; Creation</b>	<b>51</b>
Story as Interpretation	52
Violence in Interpretation	54
<i>Violence: Political</i>	57
<i>Violence: The Individual</i>	59
Holy Saturday: The Trauma of Homophobia	62
Logs #03 & #04	67
<i>Log #03</i>	67
<i>Log #04</i>	69

Creation: Blessing & Sin	71
<i>A Child: Grace &amp; Freewill</i>	76
<i>Diversity</i>	77
Summary	81
<b>4. The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology</b>	82
Practical Theology: Multiplicity	84
Practical Theology: A Relational Orientation	85
Practical Theology & Relational Construction: Bridges	88
Why?	91
<i>Deductive &amp; Inductive: Unfolding Stories</i>	93
Assumptions, Truth & Objectivity	96
<i>Truth &amp; Objectivity</i>	98
<i>From Assumptions to Mutuality</i>	100
Why is it Important?	104
<i>Imagination</i>	104
“T”ruth	109
“t”ruth	111
<i>Knowledge, Meaning-Making, &amp; Epistemology</i>	113
Lament & Witness	114
Constructing a Relational Practical Theology	121
<i>Relational Practical Theological Values</i>	123
<i>A Constructed Practical Relational Theology</i>	124
Summary	128
<b>5. The Pragmatic Task: Lament &amp; Appreciative Inquiry</b>	129
Returning to Lament	131
<i>The United Church of Canada</i>	133
Appreciative Inquiry	137
<i>A Relational Change Philosophy</i>	137
<i>Appreciative Inquiry: One Final Correlative Conversation</i>	142
<i>The United Church of Canada</i>	147
<i>Curriculum Framework</i>	149
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	152
<b>7. Appendix (Logs &amp; Vignettes)</b>	157
Log #01	157
<i>Vignette: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin ...</i>	159
Log #02	162
<i>Vignette: A Statistic Waiting to Happen</i>	163
Log #03	168
<i>Vignette: 1988</i>	169
<i>Scene 1: The Hall</i>	169
<i>Scene 2: The Other Hall</i>	170
<i>Scene 3: The Soap Party’s Finale</i>	172

	<i>Scene 4: Awakening</i>	174
	Log #04	176
	<i>Vignette: Is Love Enough?</i>	177
<b>8.</b>	Appendix (Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the Provocative)	180
<b>9.</b>	Appendix (Social Media & Evangelism)	187
<b>10.</b>	Bibliography	193

## Acknowledgements

This work is the culmination of many journeys and explorations, which have been filled with awe and doubt, wondering and wandering. In each times and places that have informed this project, Creator has always been present. That presence, which defies being bound to words, has always been intimate and relational. I have experienced care and affirmation, challenge and encouragement through this presence. As well, I am honoured to have been able to navigate a path, through various untold stories, that has led me to this particular accomplishment.

By way of offering gratitude and acknowledgement for support in the completion of this project, I first must recognise my mentor and friend Maureen McKenna. During my introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI), her own choices to risk and play with “tradition” were an inspiration to embrace failure and chance as the seeds planted in fertile soil of the mind and imagination.

My introduction to AI led me to a rich conversation with my doctoral sponsor at Tilburg, Dr. Sheila McNamee. From the outset, Sheila’s insight and wisdom, engagement and relationality made it eminently clear that I had found a philosophical home in relational construction. Without that initial conversation, what has unfolded would not be the story that I am telling.

After meeting Sheila and with her intention and nurture, I have had the great blessing to have shared this journey with my advisor and mentor, Dr. Duane Bidwell. Duane’s patience and ability helped me to reframe my musings that were percolating, but which could not always be articulated. He helped crystallise what I was seeking yet could not always reach. His playfulness and affirmation helped buoy me when waters seemed turbulent. The completion of this project would never have seen fruition were it not for his embodiment of midwifing this dissertation.

Along the way, I discovered a cohort of PhD peers to whom we affectionately refer to one another as the Winged Ones: Heather, sam and Kim. For several years, once a month, we would meet in the digital realm. At times, when courses and schedules permitted, we shared physical space. On each of these occasions, their care and love, kindness and inquisitiveness made this journey not one of isolation, but of community and sharing. To them, the words “thank you” are inadequate, yet they are the richest gifts I have to give them.

To Jeannette (may her memory be eternal) and Glorie, your gifts for detail and editing made the first submission of the project that much more accessible. Thank you for not just being editors but engaging as interested readers!

Finally, to my spouse, life partner, and companion on this revolving solar adventure on a wee blue dot, I am blessed to know love. Shelly’s choices to support me on this journey defy words, whether prose or poetry, to impart my gratitude. I am who I am, this project is

what it is, because of her presence to help me become the person whom I believe Creator sings into being.



## Abstract

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 LGBTTTQ\* 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 LGBTTTQ\* 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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## 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 Rizzo 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 LGBTTTQ\* 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 LGBTTTQ\* 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 seek to identify missional identity in the midst of denominational and cultural change.

It is this lived experience, in particular that of members of the LGBTTTQ\* 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 LGBTTTQ\* 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 vision 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.

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

[T]he descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation is grounded in a spirituality of presence. It is a matter of attending to what is going on in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

(Osmer 34)

In the project before us, I am arguing that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has used a hermeneutic of suspicion to begin decolonizing itself from its imperial commitments. This has not been an easy journey and continues to be a challenge for the denomination. I believe that a hermeneutic of reparation is necessary to complement and resolve this process. The first task in this descriptive section of this journey, therefore, is to locate the UCCan in its current context, then illustrate its doctrinal shifts from 1925 to today by examining its stance toward gender, sexuality, and White Privilege. Then I will demonstrate how a hermeneutic of suspicion allowed the UCCan to make these changes and argue that it is insufficient to achieve reconciliation. Then I will suggest that a hermeneutic of reparation could be useful to resolving the tensions in which the UCCan finds itself today. This establishes the groundwork for my larger argument that a mutual critical correlation of relational constructionist ideas and practical theology can lead to practices of relational practical theology that allow the UCCan to be driven by mission rather than deficit.

This correlative component will be first evidenced in the initial use of autoethnographic Logs. These Logs will serve as examples to address the implications of a shift away from deficit to mission. As we shall see, the theology of diversity that the UCCan has nurtured as it has interrogated its theological inheritances has the potential to inform how local congregational contexts shift to missional endeavours particular to their situation. This shift, however, highlights that the UCCan orientation to suspicion has not been relational. The Logs illustrate this.

Finally, in this descriptive task, I will argue that the denominational conversation about structure has modelled a “top down” form of leadership. Though this is not consistent with the denominational aspiration to be a conciliar church, it has nonetheless been experienced in this way in some quarters. This hierarchal experience is also consistent with the manner in which the denomination has shared its unfolding deconstruction of its theological inheritance. While a hermeneutic of suspicion has served the UCCan theologically well, it has not been transmitted in a manner that has equipped local faith communities to be prepared to engage in the relational realities that arise. I will describe and foreshadow the manner in

which such practices as lament and witness, which will be more fully introduced in the normative task, can help focus mission in order to enliven the denominational conversation about structure.

### An Unfolding Historic Movement

Much of The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) theological journey has been informed by challenging inherited theological assumptions, such as those related to gender and sexuality. This challenge has often occurred from a feminist and/or liberation orientation and has been informed by suspicion. One of the central commitments, as evidenced in the denomination's unfolding theology of diversity, that has arisen from the UCCan's interrogation of its inheritance has been the aspiration of living into solidarity with the LGBTTTQ\* community. This commitment will be one of the primary touchstones as we proceed through the descriptive task before us and within the remaining interpretive, normative, and pragmatic Tasks. This commitment, as evidenced in the UCCan's relationship with the LGBTTTQ\* community, illustrates what we have recently discussed in regard to reconciliation. This touch stone illustrates how forgivingness and discipline (as practices of reconciliation) have assisted the denomination in its history of deconstruction.

As an institution, the UCCan has been engaged in a process of self-reflection and structural change. This institutional exploration occurs in a context in which there is an ongoing Canadian cultural shift to secularity (Meighan 276). The denomination's journey has highlighted the potential resilience that arises from embracing diversity, yet at the same time recognises that such resilience occurs as the concept of Christendom becomes incompatible with this cultural shift (Airhart 153 & 223). This tension – resilience in regard to diversity and the reality of Christendom – is evidenced when the church both supports such opportunities to celebrate diversity, such as in regard to public Pride events as acts of solidarity, while also recognising that there remain legislative and political barriers that are oppressive. These oppressive and systematic barriers are often informed by a Christendom, even in a post-Christian secular context, that are reinforced by theological traditions that deny dignity to those within the LGBTTTQ\* community.

This journey, when complete, will have taken no less than ten years (UCCan *United*). Furthermore, this change has been predominantly motivated by financial constraints (Kim-Cragg & Schweitzer 9; UCCan *United* 37). These fiscal considerations and structural changes, therefore, have led to a sense of unmooring from the identity that the denomination has nurtured since its establishment in 1925.

Briefly, the UCCan is the only mainstream Christian Protestant denomination that was established by a federal act of the Canadian Parliament. This act and the UCCan Basis of Union recognised that the new denomination was a merger of the following (initial) Canadian

churches: Presbyterian, Congregational Churches, and Methodist (UCCan *Basis* 1; UCCan Act MB; UCCan Act SK).

The very act of union was pragmatic insofar as the denomination recognised that choices of personal faith had implications collectively: “Church union was an ambitious undertaking that tested the limits of inclusion by bringing together networks of missionary enthusiasts, social reformers, and Christian educators. Rather than the theological modernists or social radicals their detractors made them out to be, the most prominent among them were pragmatic progressives whose liberal evangelical theology held that personal faith had social implications” (Airhart xix). Though there can be no denying that the union was grounded in an agenda to become the “national church” (Kim-Cragg & Schweitzer 38; Schweitzer 280), the merger occurred within a larger cultural awareness of an evolving sense of Canadian nationalism. Nonetheless, the union, itself, foreshadowed the challenges (and potential) present when the boundaries of inclusion and diversity are explored: “Church union was an ambitious undertaking that tested the limits of inclusion by bringing together networks of missionary enthusiasts, social reformers, and Christian educators” (Airhart xix).

Created by an act of the Canadian Parliament, therefore, the UCCan’s roots are historically bound to the structures of state in a way that hearken back to the role the church had in maintaining and perpetuating that which was culturally normative, such as gender roles and racial assumptions in regard to Indigenous relations and sexual orientation. Though it is important to recognise the danger of conflating gender and orientation, the UCCan’s theological journey follows a trajectory of exploring theological traditions that shaped gender expectations and which, in turn, led to deconstructing such inheritances that informed sexual orientation.

The UCCan’s intimate relationship to the mechanisms of state is clearly ironic, perhaps even paradoxical. While the UCCan can be connected to the infrastructure that enforced/enforces and perpetuated/perpetuates cultural expectations, as framed through emerging twentieth-century nationalism within most western democratic contexts, the church also began to question the foundational expectations of what was normative.

This questioning, as we shall see, has occurred at a denominational or macro-level. Often the learning or insights that have benefitted the denomination in the shaping of a theology of diversity have not, however, been well transmitted to local congregations. As with the structural change that the UCCan is currently experiencing, there remains a disconnect between a faith community’s ability to fully integrate theological developments when it must engage in the relational implications of those shifts through pastoral leadership and congregational ministry. This is only complicated by the cultural realities that local congregations must navigate in an ever-increasing secular context.

Finally, with these pressures in mind – ongoing theological deconstruction and interrogation within the context of secularisation – local communities of faith have had to



also recognise and accept that the structural change in which the UCCan finds itself has been driven by deficit, which might be understood as oriented to the past. With this orientation in mind, there is a sense that mission development has been abandoned.

### Inheriting Empire

From the vantage point of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) and many mainstream North American Protestant experiences in the Canadian and American contexts, the historical critique and theological lens of Empire has been well articulated. The UCCan has described Empire in the following manner:

The term “Empire” is used to describe the ways in which power is exercised unjustly and causes suffering and disempowerment through interconnected systems that benefit a minority of people. Empire can be found in relations between states, international trade agreements, and institutional governance, including within the church as well as interpersonal relationships. It affects all levels of human relationships, and all people participate in Empire in some way. “Empire” helps us understand that injustice is often caused by different systems working together in interlocking ways. It helps us to see how power is used, abused, or concentrated to benefit the minority through these systems. An Empire lens helps us broaden our understanding and analysis, so that our actions, strategies, and solidarity contribute to transforming systems that oppress ourselves and others. (UCCan *Toward 2025* 2)

Walter Wink helpfully adds to this work by observing that the system of power not only utilises violence, which is connected to trauma (ii), but also allows us to see Empire as a ‘domination system.’ From his book *The Powers that Be*, Wink describes this domination system in the following manner:

In that system, even Powers that directly compete with each other for territory or markets preserve the system by the very interactions by which they try to destroy each other. Like a massive family system, no institution or organization is allowed to “get better” without repercussions from other, more pathological Powers. The Domination System does not permit deviations from its values. If we are to take seriously the redemption of the Powers, we must follow their track into the labyrinth of the Domination System. (36)

I believe, therefore, that this system that Wink explores allows us to better appreciate the Powers as Empire. As the UCCan has journeyed theologically utilising a hermeneutic of suspicion, it has been able to both recognise its own role in Empire and also ways it can begin to nurture reparation. Such reparation, as we have already suggested, begins in relationality.

For the sake of our particular UCCan conversation, the denomination's orientation to suspicion has helped it recognise its role in fostering heteronormativity. The following UCCan examples help illustrate the denomination's complicity and acknowledgement of its involvement in perpetuating violence. Though violence can be understood as external or *physical*, what Foucault calls 'classical' (Foucault *Society* 240-41 & Özpolat 20.n4), violence is also experienced in ways that limit or deny and oppress others for the benefit of the few. In regard to gender and sexual identity, therefore, laws, cultural practices, and the practices of physical violence are all violent in that they reinforce that which is limiting.

In 1988, the UCCan recognised the following in *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry*:

The voices of women now leave no doubt that the traditional experiences of marriage, family and sexual relationships have not always led to happiness and fulfilment, but often to fear, loneliness and pain. There is growing awareness of the sufferings of women and children through family violence and sexual assault. Questions are now asked about the changing roles and expectations of women and men as they attempt to live in relationships of justice, mutuality, respect, and care, with or without a partner of the same or the other gender.

(17)

In 1995, in *Together in Faith*, the UCCan issued the following encouragement to the denomination as it sought to address the marginalisation experienced by the LGBTTQ\* community:

encouraging social issues and social justice committees to make connexions with the gay and lesbian communities and to become actively involved with issues of concern to these communities. Such concerns may include:

- AIDS support and prevention
- development and enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation in areas such as employment, medical care, and housing
- encouragement of strong community organizations for gays and lesbians and their families

- legal recognition of same-gender relationships, including same-gender insurance and pension benefits, child custody rights, adoption rights
- cessation of violence against gays and lesbians (e.g. “gay-bashing”). (13)

One final example, which was part of the 2007 *Living Faithfully* report, the UCCan confessed its own role in imperial violence:

Acts of confession are absolutely critical to the integrity of our faith. Confessing our complicity with empire is a crucial first step, in order to turn in another direction (to repent). Our unique and often quoted Affirmation of Faith (“A New Creed”)—that we are not alone, that we live in God’s world, and that we are called to be the church—is deeply compromised if we fail to take into account the breadth and depth of our complicity in imperial violence. (26)

The lens of Empire helps us to question the outcome of relationships that are, in part, a function of power in our current context. When we are able to appreciate how power exists and is manifest within relationships, we can not only question its structure, but also explore it as a challenge to equality or, from theological viewpoint, a question of justice.

Empire, through its ways of excluding and isolating some, establishes an implicit hierarchy. As we shall discuss shortly in the descriptive task of the UCCan’s *Preferencing Diversity*, through a gendered model based on the Creation stories, men occupy the apex, then women, then nature. Furthermore, this hierarchy is not only gendered, but also is racial and cultural (Bishop *Becoming* 84). As we shall explore in the following section, *White Privilege*, the identity markers of Christian and white inhabit the top of the pyramid within Western (North American Canadian and American settings) democratic contexts, and every culture and race find its position accordingly (UCCan *Reviewing* 26).

Empire, however, confronts resistance when we utilise a theological lens that does not see the Creation story as a basis for control, but rather as a relational and collaborative model. This theological lens is an example in which suspicion and reparation can be appreciated as complementary:

Theologies of Empire have understood God and men as separate from and superior to women, indigenous peoples, and nature. The Bible, however, paints a picture of the mutual interdependence and interrelationship of God and all creatures. Mutual relationship characterizes God in the creation stories of Genesis 1—3. God creates in and through relationship by empowering other parts of creation as co-creators . . . Interpreted in this way, the creation stories

are a poetic picture of the interdependence and interrelationship of God, humanity, and creation, which is necessary for right relations, blessing, and abundant life. (UCCan *Reviewing* 26)

This challenge is often further articulated through the interplay of economics. As consumers, we become complicit individually and collectively in how we engage in the marketplace (UCCan *Living* 2 & 26). The way people are excluded and framed as *good* and *bad*, *in* and *out*, and *right* and *wrong* becomes further entrenched when that which we identify as acceptable is mediated through “competition as the supreme good” (UCCan *Living* 4).

It bears reminding that we cannot divorce ourselves from our context. Furthermore, identifying the structures that articulate and inform how power interacts requires recognition of complicity. Such recognition can understandably create a sense of guilt, especially for those who benefit from their complicity (UCCan *Living* 27). If a reading of suspicion can (even if hesitatingly) reveal this, an orientation to do good, to make reparations, stands as a response to move forward.

Theologian Douglas John Hall, in the UCCan report *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire*, articulates this hesitancy, in respect to Empire and the church’s role, with his overview:

Christianity came into the world half a century after the founding of one of history’s greatest Empires, the Roman, and throughout most of its own 2,000-year history the Christian religion has functioned as the cultus of imperial peoples. Yet at its biblical and doctrinal roots, Christianity is fundamentally incommensurate with the concept of Empire. There is indeed something almost ludicrous about a faith at whose very centre stands the cross of one executed by Rome becoming, in the short space of three centuries, the official religion of the Roman Empire. (UCCan *Living* 35)

Though ludicrous, as Hall observes, it connects the “whiteness” nature that is historically embedded in North America and the manner in which Empire shapes that which is normative. By becoming the religion of empire, the white ‘plumb-line’ in our current context comes into focus as ‘incommensurate’ with the gospel as Good News. In turn, resistance or hesitancy regarding this intrinsic reality becomes something we must take seriously. This hesitancy is sometimes termed as White Fragility: “White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing

situation” (DiAngelo 54). If the normative cultural expectation is based on such privilege, to *rock the boat* can serve as a destabilising factor in respect to cultural expectations of universalism and stability (DiAngelo 59).

Privilege, therefore, requires stability. Reviewing the institutional church’s role in establishing privilege, therefore, is destabilizing. As Hall suggests, the Christian endeavour, after being adopted as the religion of Empire, is domesticated by Empire, and it is an effective belief system that accommodates well power’s trajectory to normalise. Specifically, for structures and systems that support Empire, Christianity provided, historically, three significant components:

- 1) The emphasis on the collective as a cohesive unit;
- 2) The focus on the individual in a way that can be framed to disavow corporate complicity. In some Christian contexts, this is described as placing primacy importance on the personal relationship between a believer and Jesus or the Divine; and,
- 3) Central to the Christian tradition is the tension of authority. By becoming complicit as the religion of Empire, the authority of the state and Divine are easily blurred. (UCCan *Living* 36-38)

For the Christian tradition to be co-opted, if you will, its prophetic tradition would have to be suppressed. This historic tradition has always existed in tension with power as it has endeavoured to speak truth to power (UCCan *Living* 38). This tension becomes more apparent in the following descriptive task that explores the UCCan’s history of deconstruction and its current theological trajectory.

### A History of Deconstruction in The United Church of Canada

The following description of the deconstructive history of The United Church of Canada is not meant to be exhaustive. It is intended, however, to illustrate the manner in which its theological trajectory has evolved from 1925 to its current theological preferencing of diversity and intercultural theologising. These two preferences have also been influenced by the UCCan’s exploration of White Privilege.

As we described in *An Unfolding Historic Movement*, the UCCan was established by the Canadian parliament’s *The United Church of Canada Act* in 1925. The denomination’s 1925 *Basis of Union* is important because it reflects the choice of the founding denominations (Methodist, Presbyterian & Congregational Churches of Canada) to come into union. In this act, they demonstrated a need to be both flexible and open to the theological differences.

The *Basis of Union* laid a foundation on account of the diversity that the founding denominations collectively represented.

Within a short time, following formation, the denomination issued the 1932 report *The Meaning and Responsibility of Christian Marriage*. From 1932-1958, the church witnessed the changing involvement and expectations of gendered roles on account of the two world wars and the economic uncertainty that gripped North America. As a result, the UCCan found itself exploring long held theological assumptions, such as the role of women.

In 1946 and 1958, the denomination released two reports respectively: *Christian Marriage and Christian Home* (1946) and *Christian Marriage and Divorce* (1958). These reports continued to explore and question the denomination's inheritance of gender norms as evidenced in such institutions as marriage and home.

In 1946, the UCCan identified that marriage, as understood within the second Creation story in Genesis (2:4-24), was normative as heterosexual in orientation and was primarily concerned with procreation (UCCan *Marriage* 1946 109-110). Even that document, however, recognised an inherent challenge that arose out of the lived experience of women after World War II. In particular, the study recognised that the freedom attained by women as they entered the workforce during the war years of the Second World War had led to conversations about equality (*Marriage* 1946 112). This tension between normative gender roles in respect to heterosexual marriage and the movement toward equality in respect to employment and social norms, such as in respect to the ability to divorce and the role of women in the workforce is the departure point from which the UCCan moved successively toward a theology of diversity.

Beginning with the 1960 report *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage* and extending to 1984, the UCCan would continue to explore the role of gendered assumptions. Furthermore, as the expectation of procreation, as an underlying assumption of heterosexual marriage, came under examination, the role of sexuality became a significant point of creative conversation and tension. In turn, these discussions led to further denominational reflection about the normative nature of heterosexuality and the lived experience of those who were unable to "fit." In turn, the church began to listen to the stories of the LGBTTQ\* community that evidenced the harm and trauma of heteronormativity.

The reports that would be published during this seminal 24-year period included: *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding* (1962); *Gainful Employment of Married Women* (1962); *The Permanence of Christian Marriage* (1975); *In God's Image - Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality* (1980); *Gift, Dilemma and Promise* (1984: this report continued to expand the UCCan's articulation of sexuality and intimacy).

The titles for each of these reports, as part of the descriptive task in which we are currently engaged, clearly illustrate the manner in which both the changing cultural Canadian

milieu and the UCCan's suspicion of theological inheritance came under scrutiny in respect to gendered norms. This period of theological interrogation is fundamental to the denomination's next shift to apply the same hermeneutic to its inheritance of heteronormativity.

A complementary denominational conversation was occurring about race. The 1986 *Aboriginal Apology* was not directly connected with the gendered and sexual aspects of the UCCan's deconstruction, but anchors another way in which the UCCan began to deconstruct its theological heritage. This milestone publication highlights the UCCan's recognition of its role as an agent of the state and its complicity in confusing the Christian call with the trappings of cultural assumptions propagated by Empire (See *White Privilege* below). Furthermore, in this initial apology, the UCCan was introduced to the language of reparation at a denominational level.

The 1988 report, *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, is the pivot, if you will, from gender deconstruction to the reality of theological inheritances that were limiting to the LGBTTTQ\* community. The 1988 decisions, which inform much of the timeline moving forward, mark the culmination of the UCCan's journey of examining theological preferences that caused harm, such as to the LGBTTTQ\* community. Though this decision continues to reverberate denominationally, 1988 marks the embracing of a theology that celebrates diversity and which, from a vantage of a hermeneutic of reparation, is suggestive of the role of relationality. The denomination, in accepting the recommendations of this report, declared that leadership was open to all members, regardless of sexual orientation.

Between 1988 and 1992, the UCCan would release three more reports: *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry* (1988); *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* (1988); and *Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992). As the denomination continued to shift and challenge theologically exclusionary preferences, it began a process that helped it further embrace diversity. This preference is significant as it is central to our task to construct a relational practical theology. This is well illustrated when, at the beginning of the report on scripture, the denomination states: "The nature of the document was thus conversational and not dogmatic" (UCCan *Authority* 2).

As a continuation of the denomination's confessional tradition, the 1997 report *That All May Be One* reflects the ongoing UCCan interrogation of its previous complicity in propagating normative expectations around race. This report, therefore, marks the denomination's further broadening of diversity as an expansive exercise to engage in Christian Ministry as intercultural in orientation, in which gender, sexuality, and right relations begin to be synthesised in a cohesive theology that the UCCan calls intercultural theologising.

We have mentioned the 1986 *Aboriginal Apology* above. In 1998, the *Aboriginal Apology: Residential School* marks the UCCan's recognition of its role in imposing a colonial

theology on Indigenous peoples, reflecting the denomination's acceptance and recognition of the active ways in which it helped support state systems that were intended to perpetuate cultural genocide.

From 1999 – 2005, the UCCan published further reports that continued to explore sexuality, marriage, and gender norms: *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry* (1999); *Of Love and Justice* (2003); and *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding* (2005).

In 2006, the *Song of Faith* was released. This doctrinal statement, which would historically in the Christian tradition have been declarative, was an exercise to express faith through poetry. This intention can be understood as an expansive use of the poetic as relational in the sense that the poetic cadence can be more broadly engaging than simply doctrinal statements that can be experienced as inaccessible. While attending to the “t”ruths that are central to the UCCan’s faith understanding, it intends to remain open to the ‘t’ruths and understanding of others, whether that is reflective in the internal diversity within the denomination, or externally with interfaith and secular partners.

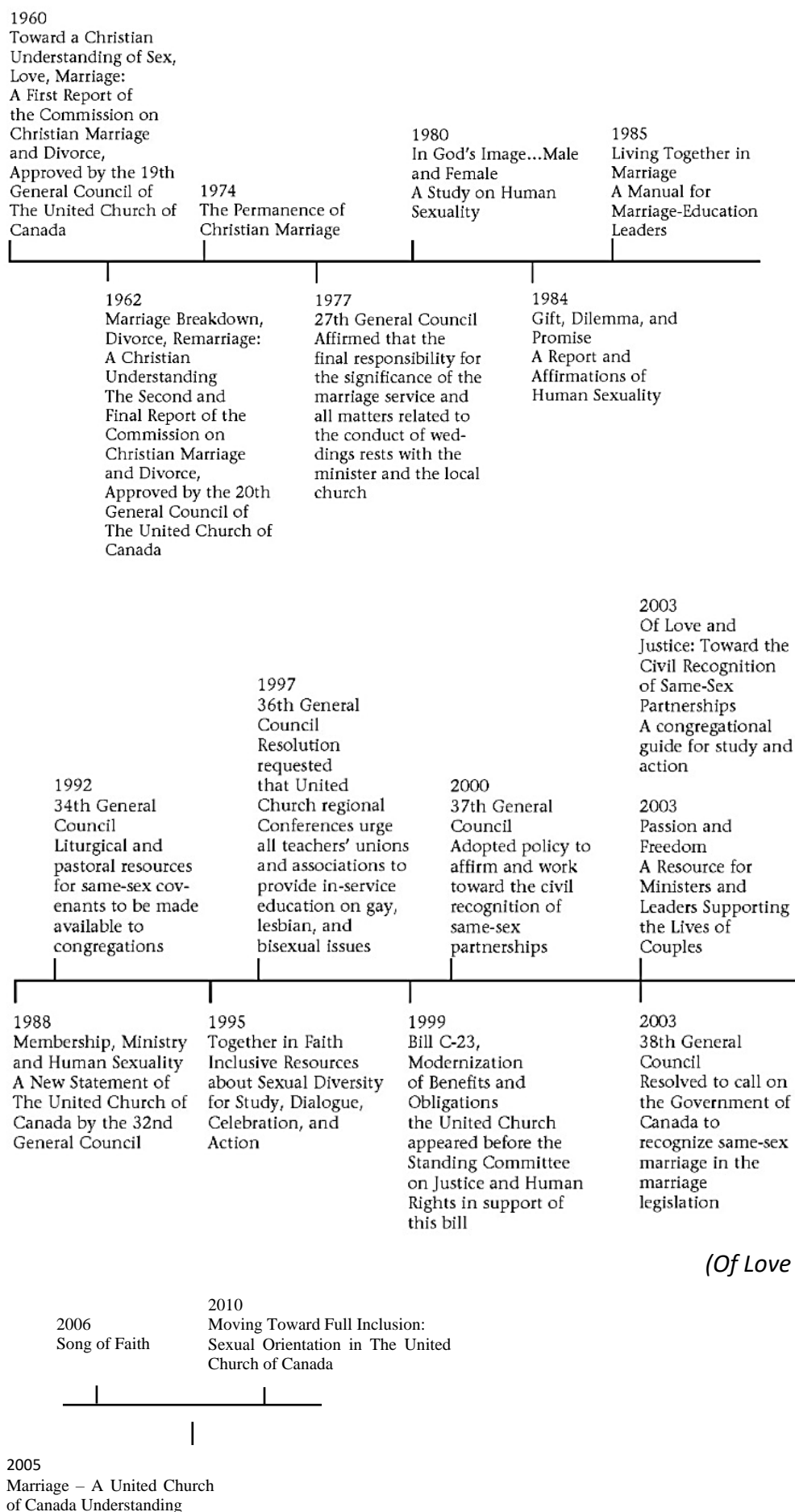
The *Song of Faith* was an attempt by The United Church of Canada to add to its official statements of belief and doctrine. The UCCan describes the *Song* in this manner:

This statement of faith seeks to provide a verbal picture of what The United Church of Canada understands its faith to be in its current historical, political, social, and theological context at the beginning of the 21st century. It is also a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its convictions in relation to the world in which we live ...

This is not a statement for all time but for our time. In as much as the Spirit keeps faith with us, we can express our understanding of the Holy with confidence. And in as much as the Spirit is vast and wild, we recognize that our understanding of the Holy is always partial and limited. Nonetheless we have faith, and this statement collects the meaning of our song. (UCCan *Song* 2)

The following timeline highlights the descriptive shift to diversity as momentum increased from the 1960s in the following manner (UCCan *Of Love* 34-35):





(Of Love 34-35)

## Preferencing Diversity

This deconstructive timeline illustrates that The United Church of Canada has been asking itself fundamental questions about the way matters of faith have become articulated as doctrine, as well as such questions as who benefits and what are the embedded assumptions that privilege some at the expense of others. This suspicion, if you will, is core to The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) unfolding theological journey. Such doctrine must be examined and interrogated in a manner that embraces a hermeneutic of suspicion:

- Who benefits?
- Who is harmed?
- Where do our words oppress?
- How do our words oppress?
- How will we respond when liberty is denied?

Though it is easy to ask these questions now (especially considering the ongoing work in respect to power and authority, diversity and dignity, which can be found in Christian endeavours such as feminist and liberation critiques (Schweitzer 154-155)), it is easy to forget that such inquiries have evolved, and the UCCan's journey is no exception (Schweitzer 140-41).

As we have briefly mentioned above, and which we will explore more fully as the project unfolds, central to the UCCan's movement toward diversity has been the reality of violence that pervades theological inheritances that cause harm.

In *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, Airhart observes that even at the outset of the union, the UCCan was asking itself fundamentally pastoral questions that had practical theological implications in respect to the paradox of an institution that was both intimately connected to the mechanisms of state and, at the same time, required to care for those deemed as "different":

In seeking to Christianize the social order, the United Church worked in partnership with various levels of government to "Canadianize" immigrants and indigenous peoples. Efforts to create a common culture by providing pastoral care to those who were 'different' were accepted as necessary and constructive, a way of creating a better nation. (Airhart 84)

As the UCCan has shifted from its founding, in which it was intrinsically connected to the mechanisms of state and thus an agent in perpetuating normative expectations, which

we will continue to explore shortly in respect to *White Privilege*, the denomination also was clearly situated in a paradox. In order to establish its union, each denomination had to make space to accept the differences, the diversity, of their partners. This historic UCCan reality, if you will, continues to influence the church's theological trajectory.

The UCCan journey has a long history, therefore, of recognising 'relationship' as a theological category. Though this relational category can be understood as intrinsic to its understanding of theological preferences that have caused harm, it remains aware of this owing to suspicion. In order for the denomination to explore reparative healing, therefore, it will have to find a way to balance its history of deconstruction.

### Intercultural Theologising

In the timeline that we have explored, The United Church of Canada (UCCan) now finds itself weaving a new tapestry: Intercultural Church. Much of this discussion, which has occurred ecumenically and within interfaith contexts, has yet to be well introduced within local congregational conversations. These local conversations, which range from those already vibrantly occurring to those mired in the resistance that *White Privilege* (see below) affords, are the places that offer the denomination ways in which to step away from previous deficit thinking and embrace an emboldened sense of shared and collective possibilities. From *An Introduction to The United Church of Canada*, Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer summarise this emergent moment: "The United Church is in transition, from being a denomination seeking to become a national church, to something else, which is not yet apparent" (27).

The potential, in this time of transition, involves embracing the reality of being an Intercultural Church, which Kim-Cragg describes at length:

Cultivating this kind of orientation is not simply a matter of justice and obedience to a moral demand. It can also be a source of personal enrichment and a way to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ. In the shared identity space of an intercultural church, through the dialogue, debate and innovation it requires, the perspectives of different cultural groups on Jesus Christ and what it means to be the church can cross-pollinate each other. Through cross-pollination, each can be enriched by the other, discovering things about themselves and others that they might otherwise not learn. Language and culture are not simply tools that people pick up as needed and then discard afterwards. Rather, they help constitute our identities, who we are as people. The shared identity space of an intercultural church puts these identities into dialogue. This dialogue about who we are and what God calls us to be, that is intrinsic to an intercultural church, should yield new perspectives on the

cultures and identities of all concerned. Being an intercultural church is not about shedding one's identity. It is about being open, through faith in Christ, to having one's experiences and world view deepened through living and worshipping with others in a shared identity space. (Kim-Cragg & Schweitzer 88-89)

In order to pivot to this reality, however, it is important to note that for much of its history, as Bartlett and others make clear, the UCCan has often responded to external changes that have been financially driven (Schweitzer 168, 170 & 281; UCCan *United* 4 & 37). Whether changing demographics or institutional disillusionment, the UCCan's catalysts for change have been primarily structural and fiscal but not always followed by missional or passion-driven reflections. This model of organisational change, however, has not necessarily been aligned with a philosophical orientation that begins from a place of abundance.

In 2009, the UCCan began to imagine transformation in the following manner: "[T]he importance of transforming church structures and systems was re-emphasized, and cultural Empire was identified as a challenge to becoming a truly transformed intercultural church" (UCCan *Intercultural* 146). With this in mind, it is clear from the report *Intercultural Ministries* that the UCCan connected its ongoing work in respect to diversity and Intercultural Ministry in this way:

Individually and in community, we do everything through the lenses of our cultures: there is no such thing as a culture-free perspective. Our experiences and understandings are shaped by our cultures. Since we cannot capture the complexity of God through our limited cultural understandings, our understanding of God is limited when we see this God through only one dominant cultural perspective. Instead, our understandings of God and our scriptures can be deepened when we come together, as disciples of Jesus Christ, in all of our differences and diversities to acknowledge intercultural reality and richness. (UCCan *Intercultural* 148)

By recognising that the church continues to wrestle with pluralism (*Intercultural* 152), and has from its very formation, the UCCan has attempted to avoid articulating this next step in diversity as a noun: intercultural theology. Rather it has positioned this transformative work as a verb: intercultural theologising (*Intercultural* 150). In this place of action, reflection, and reflexivity, the church acknowledges that there is no end goal, in and of itself, but rather an ongoing and unfolding process (*Intercultural* 151).

As such, diversity can hold varied aspects of culture, such as race, gender, and sexual identity, under a flexible theological umbrella (*Intercultural* 165). The deconstructive lens of

Empire has revealed to the UCCan a tentative theology of diversity or an intercultural theologising meta-narrative. This framework possesses the flexibility both to be reparative in ongoing theological deconstruction and to address the embedded nature of an orientation toward deficit. In this potential, which will become clearer in the construction of a relational practical theology, change becomes contextual at a grassroots level and transformational at a structural level. This framework allows us to create space to appreciate being an intercultural church that exists in a pluralism of interconnected intercultural communities (*Intercultural* 150 & 153).

### White Privilege

The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) exploration of Empire is specific to its own Canadian context. This ongoing journey has not been restricted to an analysis of gender and sexual identity or orientation. In many ways, the work also explores how the UCCan endeavours to foster right relations with First Nations peoples and nurtures the role of intercultural ministry in a pluralistic society. Each of these steps, for lack of a better metaphor, has allowed the UCCan to recognise its role in the normalisation process and its own complicity.

Yet even in this formidable and sometimes difficult work, there remains a nuanced challenge. At the heart of the historic tension within the UCCan is its role as a state agent or an agent of change. Though these two roles do and can coexist, they also highlight the challenge Douglas John Hall articulates in respect to Christianity's "incommensurate" relationship to Empire (UCCan *Living* 35).

It is easier to name the symptoms, sometimes, than to identify the underlying disease. Exploring Empire critically and suspiciously connects us with liberation and feminist analyses, which allow us to articulate the practical theological implications perceived in the lived experience of the LGBTTQ\* community as one example of those who suffer historic persecution and exclusion within the context of Empire. Anne Bishop observes the following in respect to the cyclical nature of the oppressor-oppressed paradigm: "We reproduce the social, economic, and political system that formed us by playing out our internalized oppression against ourselves and each other" (Bishop *Becoming* 46).

Reaching back to our earlier conversation, however, even this hermeneutic, itself, becomes problematic if it drifts toward paranoia. Empire allows us to see ourselves as the objective observer, while perpetuating our role as oppressor (Bishop *Becoming* 51; DiAngelo 59; & Engles 137). From this position, we continue to place ourselves in the role of those best able to recognise hurts and harm. This stance, though intellectually satisfying, perpetuates such mistakes as colonialization understood as Christendom. We still can position ourselves in a paternalistic role that is relationally unidirectional. We can claim to possess Truth and

subsequently prescribe solutions. This ultimately maintains our dominant role (Bishop *Becoming* 89).

To make space for and create opportunities to mutually generate new meaning, those engaged in such pursuits must do so willing to be reflexive (Bishop *Becoming* 115 & 117). To do this requires letting go of control. For those who are engaged in this endeavour from the perspective of the UCCan, where the denomination has been both change agent and state player, the underlying dis-ease needs to be explored.

The challenge is that those who have benefitted from the ways power is used will find this work difficult. This is particularly evident if we do not possess the language to fully explore the challenge. Addressing this challenge, therefore, begins with exploring the socially constructed (Kendall 61) elephant in the room: White Privilege.

The system of the supremacy of whiteness was created to serve white men who were heterosexual, able bodied, Christian, wealthy landowners, to keep power and control in their hands. If we truly want to understand white privilege, the intersections of identity elements on which privilege systems are based and how each serves to support the others are an essential puzzle piece. (Kendall 105)

This discussion about White Privilege might seem like a shift away from heteronormativity and sexual orientation. It is important, however, to better appreciate the context in which people have been excluded and the manner in which that has been enforced. In this discussion, therefore, White Privilege helps us to better appreciate the current context of the UCCan and the limitations that arise by solely relying on suspicious reading of inherited theological traditions.

The growing academic body of work that explores White Privilege is both hopeful and varied. The nuances of the various explorations mirror the adoptions and adaptations that have occurred within liberation theology as it has engaged in global pluralism (i.e. Black, Feminist, Minjung, and Dalit). There are, therefore, many tangents and directions that this facet of our discussion might take. I would like us to focus, therefore, on meritocracy as one way that establishes/perpetuates those who are beneficiaries of White Privilege (Kendall 109).

White Privilege connects power (Empire) with one's relationship to the economic marketplace. For those of us who benefit from White Privilege, it is not unusual to believe that the commitment to one's work or study, play or vocation, is the primary gauge by which "success" is measured. John Dorhauer observes, "When I apply for a job in the church, I assume my education and skills are the reasons I am considered for the job--and never does it cross my mind that being white had anything to do with being hired in a denomination that

is still well over 90% white” (Blackmon 30). Dorhauer’s observation above is important because part of the resistance to this provocative critique stems from the ideal of meritocracy, the assumption that one’s hard work will enable one’s attainment of goals, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity. This ideal is well entrenched within North American culture.

Furthermore, education is often positioned as the means of changing socio-economic status, whether moving out of poverty or climbing the corporate ladder. Unfortunately, this does not address the fact that education, itself, is an economic tool/barrier that preferences White Privilege (Blackmon 69). To be clear, education can create opportunity to address the realities of oppression, but within North America, one’s access to education is often connected to the extent to which one possesses White Privilege.

Wrestling with the reality of White Privilege, however, should not paralyse. In fact, Anne Bishop suggests, “[t]he righteous anger of understanding one’s own oppression releases a great deal of energy and propels the process forward” (Bishop *Becoming* 113). Stephen G. Ray Jr. issues this challenge, which is reminiscent of a call to reparation: “Being a white ally is not denying the power and privilege that your whiteness brings you, but rather asking how you can use it in the struggles to ameliorate the effects of white supremacy on Black persons and communities” (Blackmon 105).

And Kendall complements both when he observes:

In the end, those of us who are white can’t choose not to get the privileges we are granted, but we can choose how to use them to make personal and systemic changes. If we choose to live as whole persons, maintaining our head and heart connexion and refusing to anesthetize ourselves, our fears fade about being seen as betraying our race, and our determination is strengthened. (37)

White Privilege encompasses most, if not all, of the UCCan’s deconstructive work that we have explored in this descriptive task. This includes such realities as gender, race, and sexuality that create the environment that fosters social inequalities that are also reinforced through implicit violence, which ultimately contributes to a collective trauma that fosters such reactions as the dismissive, defensive, and/or paralysis. It also nurtures a sense of unconscious bias for those who benefit, which some frame as systemic (Kendall 21, 23, 45 & 100; Blackmon 8 & 11). Furthermore, those who benefit are not solely white.

It is important to realise that this ideological elephant is deeply interwoven into the North American cultural milieu within Canada and the United States of America. This interweaving is referred to by DiAngelo as *Whiteness*, which she differentiates from skin

colour: “Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels” (56), and she further adds, “Since all individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations, this means that all are responsible for either perpetuating or transforming that system” (66). Privilege, therefore, becomes foundational for one’s role within that power matrix (Christian 188). If, therefore, some of the foundational elements of identity of White Privilege accrue to those who are:

- Male;
- White;
- Heterosexual;
- Able-bodied;
- Christian;
- Wealthy; and
- Educated,

then one’s social location in Canadian society is determined by aspects of identity that further highlight the systems of oppression that we have discussed (Kendall 61-62). In this list, therefore, gender establishes a plumb line. In turn, class analysis follows. Kendall offers the following questions, which serve as a reflective tool as one attempts to appreciate the fluidity of one’s place in respect to these aspects of identity:

For those of you who are men, for example, how does the patriarchy serve you, even if you are of color or gay or poor? If you are a woman of color and heterosexual, upper-middle class, and Christian, how do the latter elements of your identity give you access to power, resources, and ability to influence decision-makers even though you are of color? (Preface)

Using Empire as a lens through which to explore and analyse social systems has been and is an important endeavour. For faith communities informed by a preference for liberation theology, using Empire as a lens brings awareness of the various means in which oppression is experienced, as in the case of our project’s focus in respect to heteronormativity and the LGBTQ\* community.

For the UCCan, this ongoing work stretches back to its formation, a time in which it began to dissect normative expectations such as gender, and then included sexuality, and now continues in respect to such topics as the environment, relations with First Nations, as well as the implication of what it means to be an intercultural church in a globalised context. This ongoing work, when understood relationally, leads from critique (hermeneutic of suspicion) to responses that invite creative ways to heal (a hermeneutic of reparation).



This ongoing movement, I would suggest, connects with an evolving theology of diversity. It has allowed the UCCan to further embrace a prophetic tradition that has stood in tension with a Christian history that has been complicit in Empire; the structure and institutions that have shaped the normative are based on theological choices that have been rigid in respect to outliers.

In this work, however, there is a systemic challenge: the intrinsic danger of replacing one system with another, displacing one orthodoxy with another, and positioning one truth in competition with another. The very nature of the critique is, ultimately, grounded in argumentation and repudiation: suspicion.

McIntosh observes the following in respect to the potential that is possible when redesigning social systems with the framework of White Privilege:

To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist. (18)

To live into this aspiration, however, requires a way to balance the historic tradition within the UCCan of deconstruction as an act of suspicion. Within the denomination's history of interrogating its inheritance, it has already named the hope or outcome of the learnings that arise from suspicion: reparation. It is this next descriptive task – exploring hermeneutics of suspicion and reparation – where we begin to appreciate some of the contours of this project's unfolding intention: to construct a relational practical theology that can inform the UCCan's self-identity and be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understating that is grounded in a theology of diversity.

## Suspicious & Reparative Hermeneutics: Family of Resemblance

At the beginning of this descriptive task, I argued that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has used a hermeneutic of suspicion to begin decolonizing itself from its imperial commitments. We have, therefore, located the UCCan in its current context and illustrated its doctrinal shifts from 1925 to today by examining its stance toward gender, sexuality, and White Privilege.

Though this deconstructive history, as informed by a hermeneutic of suspicion, has allowed the UCCan to make these changes, I believe that, on its own, it is insufficient to achieve the aspirational reconciliation named in the 1986 and 1998 Aboriginal Apologies. As we discussed in the *Introduction*, Clebsch & Jaekle offer that reconciling, as a form of practical theology, includes both forgiveness and discipline. The apologies themselves, therefore, would be understood as acts of forgiveness (57).

I believe, therefore, that a hermeneutic of reparation will be useful in resolving the tensions in which the UCCan finds itself today. This establishes the groundwork for the manner in which a mutual critical correlation of relational constructionist ideas and practical theology can lead to practices of relational practical theology that allow the UCCan to be driven by mission rather than deficit.

Though it may go without saying, for most mainstream North American Canadian and American Protestant denominations, a hermeneutic of suspicion has been central to interrogating cultural assumptions in academic and theological contexts. Such theologies range from Latina to Liberation preferences. This orientation to suspicion is, in general, the default for most of the academy (Sedgwick 124).

This default, if you will, traces its way back to the early nineteenth century when Fredrich Schleiermacher endeavoured to understand the mind of the author, which was revitalised in the current academic context in the late twentieth century when Hans-Georg Gadamer introduced the orientation to the “reader-response” hermeneutic (Green *Theology* 4 & Robinson “Ricoeur” 43). The term itself, “hermeneutic of suspicion,” is most often associated with Paul Ricoeur (Robinson “Ricoeur” 44). In this evolution, if you will, the hermeneutical interpretation has shifted “from the interpretation of texts to the nature of human understanding” (Green *Theology* 5).

Though beyond the scope of our current discussion, Garrett Green reminds us that the hermeneutic of suspicion, which we have inherited, began as a theological enterprise that can be seen in the Christian Creation story in the Garden of Eden (*Theology* 1). This endeavour has produced much to celebrate and much upon which to reflect. Our own discussion, therefore, continues in that long tradition as we introduce the lens of suspicion to the lens of reparation. As we make this acquaintance, Green’s own words serve as a reminder of the

place where theology and suspicion meet: “Since Christian hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of the cross, it is there that we must look for the proper criterion of Christian suspicion. At the root of the hermeneutics of suspicion in all its forms is the fear of being deceived, especially by oneself; and it is true of Christian suspicion as well” (*Theology* 192).

It is clear that the UCCan theological journey has directly benefitted from a reading of suspicion. Since almost its foundation, the denomination has repeatedly interrogated its inherited theological understanding of gender roles, gender norms, sexual identity and fluidity, relating them to such issues as colonialism, settler identity, and the confusion of the Christian gospel with its western culture. This suspicion has opened leadership and membership in a way that is now shifting toward an intercultural preference. This faithful work is indeed worth celebrating.

There is, however, a concern that arises when only one lens is utilised. Whether that is as a person, family, organisation, or community, it becomes easy to nurture an echo chamber effect when we utilise just one lens. As we shall see in the later discussion about the practical change philosophy Appreciative Inquiry, which is informed by relational construction, how we see the world is directly impacted by where we look, by what we preference or privilege. If we are only looking in one way, using only one lens, we are likely only to ever see that one thing. In the case of an orientation to suspicion, Sedgwick describes this “one way” of seeing as paranoia:

Subversive and demystifying parody, suspicious archaeologies of the present, the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure: as I have been arguing, these infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling have become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies. If there is an obvious danger in the triumphalism of a paranoid hermeneutics, it is that the broad consensual sweep of such methodological assumptions, the current near profession wide agreement about what constitutes narrative or explanation or adequate historicization may, if it persists unquestioned, unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills. The trouble with a shallow gene pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g., political) change. (143-44)

Sedgwick suggests that a hermeneutic of suspicion, on its own or preferenced by not engaging with other lenses, is on account of it being a ‘strong theory’ (145). She is clear, however, that there is nothing wrong with preferencing a strong theory. The challenge arises when suspicion becomes paranoia. Christopher Bryan offers this further analogy: “If we insist, however, on ‘seeing through’ everything, we end up seeing nothing” (1).

Paranoia encourages less flexibility and openness to dialogue with other theories. Often these other orientations, which might be considered 'soft,' can nurture generative learning when in conversation. For our current conversation, that soft theory is a hermeneutic of reparation:

The prohibitive problem, however, has been in the limitations of present theoretical vocabularies rather than in the reparative motive itself. No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (Sedgwick 150-1)

For suspicion and reparative readings to be in relationship, it is important to recognise that they are not theoretical orientations that have to be considered as in competition with one another. More succinctly, each has a particular role and context in which learning can 'cross pollinate.' This generative relationship is articulated well by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he discusses family resemblances: "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: 'games' form a family" (qutd. in Wittgenstein 67)).

For both a suspicious and reparative orientation, Sedgwick observes that often fear and doubt are shared familially. Whereas suspicion, however, often leads to further deconstruction, a reparative preference "is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (Sedgwick 149).

As we shall explore more fully as our project unfolds, a reparative hermeneutic, which shares the same concerns as its strong suspicious counterpart, complements a relational construction preference. When relational construction engages with practical theology, a hermeneutic of reparation helps connect the roles in which both preference the lived experience of individuals and communities, which ultimately shape local knowledge. This connexion is central to the way in which the UCCan, in its structural change, can begin to seize from its rich history an opportunity to claim a missional identity that is evidenced by its own development of a theology embedded in diversity, as particularly evidenced in its support and solidarity with the LGBTTQ\* community.

## Logs #01 & #02

As initially discussed in *Autoethnography*, the use of these Logs arises from my own lived experience. Though they were originally shaped as story vignettes, which can be found in the first appendix of this project, they have been adapted to illustrate the manner in which the United Church of Canada's (UCCan) deconstructive tradition is inadequate to prepare congregations and their multifaceted ministries, including pastoral relationship, to address the lived experience of those who have been affected by the very theological traditions that the UCCan has considered through a suspicious orientation. The logs, therefore, are one tool to help in the task we have begun: to construct a relational practical theology that can inform the denomination's self-identity and be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understating that is grounded in a theology of diversity.

The UCCan's work of solidarity with the LGBTTQ\* community and its commitment to reconciliation with First Nations people comes out of its deconstructive work, which we have highlighted in this initial descriptive task. This work has primarily been done at a denominational level, and though it has provided educational opportunities for local faith communities to engage in the deconstructive work, it has not been (primarily) a relational exercise.

Both of these initial Logs highlight the disconnect between the theological practice of deconstruction and the 'on the ground' reality of how it gets lived out in local contextual realities. In each of these situations, the role of witnessing, which we will more fully explore in *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology*, is helpful practice when addressing the lived implications that arise when the UCCan's theology of diversity is central to a missional response that extends from its history of suspicion.

Orienting toward reparation also allows us to introduce another practice from the Christian tradition that comes into conversation from a critical correlation between suspicion and reparation. Though both suspicion and reparation interrogate, reparation seeks ways to find healing in the context of the insights that arise. Lament, as an act of both confession and reconciliation (See *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*) would be another way to respond to the two Logs.

### Log #01

This Log involves the death of a person who was wrestling with bullying and homophobia. The person was being bullied both at school and online. The person was wrestling with sexual identity and also had a history of self-harm, primarily by cutting and burning. The family context is Christian informed by a literal theological orientation. One way to understand this literal preference is in regard to the idea of Christian salvation occurring

literally after death. Though the metaphor may be extended and explored from this perspective, the literal reading can limit the ability to address the reality of trauma and loss that defy literal readings (Rambo 168). In the case of the young person, they died by suicide.

This event involves an Outreach Minister from a The United Church of Canada (UCCan) Affirming Ministry, which is a ministry that has done intentional work and completed the requirements to be officially recognised by Affirm Canada as a place that is welcoming to the LGBTTTQ\* community. The Minister has been contacted by the parent of the dead young person who is experiencing many presenting concerns:

- Crisis of faith;
- Questioning relationship with family faith tradition;
- Shock and trauma from being the person who discovered their dead child who had used a firearm to die by suicide; and
- Anger at God and is trying to explore if the UCCan Minister can help the family navigate through this loss.

Items to consider:

- What does an orientation to generativity mean in this case for the Outreach Minister?
- How does the UCCan's history and its expansive theology of diversity help in this difficult conversation?
- What is the role of lament and confession for the conversation?
- What does self-care mean for both the parent and Minister during and after meeting?

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (*New Revised Standard Version Lev. 20:13*)

This Log models an explicit example in which The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) deconstructive history, and subsequent solidarity with the LGBTTTQ\* community, can use a reparative reading to foster healing. In this situation, the denomination's deconstructions of inherited theological norms around homosexuality and the UCCan's subsequent orientation to diversity is the 'seed' that has sown this parent seeking out care from the UCCan. This Log is an example of how a local congregation might respond missionally, in the midst of the structural change we have discussed in this descriptive task.

For the young person, the solution to addressing the violence that was experienced both externally and internally was self-harm. To be released from living in a context that "does

not computer,” this young person choose the door of self-harm. This self-policing can serve to isolate those in need from those who might be able to assist, such as the Outreach Minister in the Log. Though this Log focuses on heteronormativity, it could be about other theological inheritances that the UCCan has interrogated with suspicion such as gender, race, class, physical ability, or mental health. Regardless of the inheritance this Log might examine, when we acknowledge that violence is implicit in enforcement, we are reminded that the UCCan’s deconstructive tradition must be about more than suspicion; it must be about the intention for reparation.

If practical theology, as we shall see when it engages in a conversation of mutual critical correlation with relational construction, reveals the stories that are lived with dis-ease, the UCCan (through the lived experience of its care-givers) can recognise the presence of violence in our collective witnessing. In our shared recognition, such witnessing invites the UCCan to begin to reflect on its own role in supporting and shaping such traditions when they have and do cause harm. In reflection that leads to action, the UCCan is able to further its ongoing journey to nurture healing and continually apply a reparative lens to any new theological discourses it nurtures.

This witnessing, however, becomes not just a matter of reflection, but one that is reflexive:

- How do we respond to stories of violence?
- How do find ways to name how that violence connects us?
- What do we do when we accept our interconnectivity?

The word that fits, as way of response, is trauma. If self-policing carries with it the ever-present reality of violence, then that fosters trauma on one level, and likely more for the person who is unable to conform. This is important because the descriptive task has revealed a theological deconstruction that can, unfortunately, seem disconnected from lived experience. Practical theology, therefore, is able to witness and make clear that disconnect.

Whether it is a gay youth in high school confronting bullying, or an Indigenous youth living in contexts of racial profiling, violence is clearly present in those lived experiences. That constant state of violence, when further internalised, nurtures an experience of trauma and will be explored more fully in the next section: *The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power, & Creation*.

When practical theology engages with relational construction, it becomes also important to recognise a collective sense of trauma, yet one that is not easily articulated. This inability to articulate the collective and shared sense of trauma, however, becomes easier from reparative and relational orientations.

The UCCan's experience of deconstructing theological inheritances allows for the operationalisation of practical theology as witness to experiences in which violence occurs. This witnessing, however, is not paternalistic in that the individual must be healed or fixed. Though such succour may be an appropriate response, the next step of a shared witness is acknowledgement, as lament, that we have corporately fostered violence that is intended to marginalise and perpetuate such lived realities of racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

This witnessing occurs in the recognition, from a relational construction orientation, that we are intimately connected to and dependent upon one another. Any healing is not just for the individual, but must include all relations, so as to address the trauma. As well, healing of our collective trauma becomes apparent when we recognise the harm we have done to one another/ourselves. Healing of the individual and the collective, therefore, becomes a both/and response that reparation makes possible when considered relationally.

## Log #02

This Log involves a pastoral relationship that has been nurtured in the judicial system. It involves a pastoral caregiver in the role as a chaplain in a youth detention facility. The chaplain is also a practitioner of restorative justice and is meeting with a young Indigenous person charged with a non-violent criminal offence that includes theft and property damage. The particular nature of the crime allows for the possibility of a diversion into an alternative to the adjudicative process that would likely lead the youth to face incarceration and a criminal record. To be diverted, however, requires the young person to agree to the diversion and, in turn, admit culpability.

The restorative justice process involves the following people:

- The victim;
- The offender;
- A community member who is involved in the local restorative justice committee; and
- A mediator.

The mediated process involves storytelling for both victim and offender. The intention is to navigate (best word?) the crime and explore ways that resolution can be arrived at and mutually agreed upon from the perspectives of both the victim and offender. The decision is binding in the judicial system. The community member acts as witness to the process and also names challenges and concerns both in respect to the crime itself and also is a 'reality challenger,' in respect to resolution options.

The young person is very angry and is unconvinced that the diversion matters. His anger is both externalised at the systems he identifies as oppressive and 'bent to crush his



people' and also internalised. The anger initially is directed at the chaplain as a person from the church, which is a trigger for the young person. The racial stereotypes are explicitly present in the unfolding relationship.

Things to consider:

- What are those stereotypes?
- Consider the paradoxical role of the chaplain: perceived agent of the state and yet offering a possible judicial avenue that would lead to no criminal record of imprisonment.
- What are other tensions for the chaplain?
- What are the tensions for the young person?
- How might you navigate the conversation without anticipating an outcome?

The United Church of Canada (UCCan) finds itself in an odd place: one in which both potential and dis-ease dance. On the one hand, as those who have inherited a tradition that is intimately connected to governance, the UCCan is the only denomination established in the country by an act of the federal government. In this connexion to power, the institution has been involved in designing, supporting, implementing, and imposing the residential school system on Canadian Indigenous First Nations. This involvement in implementing a system of cultural genocide has left deep wounds and, owing to the challenge of recognising this history, sometimes avoidance, guilt, paralysis, and, yes, defensiveness are present within parts of the UCCan.

This second Log reflects a constant reminder of that history. The church has had a role in shaping normative expectations, and recognising that those norms may have caused harm, both intentionally and not, is not an easy journey to begin. Into this history of being an agent of Empire, the UCCan is experiencing diminished attendance and engagement. This shifting reality, as narratives of the 'good old days' persists, points to a deeper dis-ease.

For the UCCan this underscores its orientation to deficit. This deficit, as we have also discussed, is revealed through a hermeneutic of suspicion. Though the UCCan may no longer have a direct line to the Prime Minister of the country, generally speaking, its congregational context mirrors an educated, white, middle-class that reflects White Privilege.

The role for lament, as we will discuss in The Normative and Pragmatic Tasks, has its place in this difficult reality. It is an ancient practice that helps address the danger of getting stuck. If, as we have discussed, that is where the denomination stays focused, then the possibility for change and healing can become difficult, especially when understood in mutuality.

Restorative Justice and the context of the Log do not connect directly with the UCCan's history upon which we have been focused – a theology of diversity as evidenced by the

church's relationship with the LGBTTQ\* community. They do highlight another practical relational theological practice grounded in a constructionist understanding that the congregations within the local context have the capacity to create new meaning that is reparative.

The resolutions arrived upon, though the conversation as facilitated by a mediator, are particular to the agreement shaped by victim and offender. In other pastoral relationships, such as between a pastor and member of the LGBBTQ\* community, in the sharing of stories that involve violence, sexual identity, and faith, the relational act allows the possibility of creating new meaning that integrates those experiences and reorients the participants to a greater understanding of the presence of the Holy while holding multiple truths.

## Summary

There is much that lies before us as we continue to construct a relational practical theology. This intention connects with the goal of healing and hope (reparation) that Irene Rainey and Anne Duncan describe in the quotation below. This exploration is grounded in the learning and insight that occurs when relational construction and practical theology are in conversation, which we will more fully discuss in *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology*. This conversation, as we have already touched upon, is centred on the theological journey The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has (uneasily at times) embraced utilising the deconstructive lens of a hermeneutic of suspicion.

We believe our model makes transparent a way to enable communication within the church as it embraces the call to transformation and healing. It is not a way which is easy, or comfortable. It means living in the chaos of pain and suffering. It means supporting and encouraging people to lament their own experiences of pain and suffering such as: the pain of grief and death, the isolation and hopelessness of addictive behaviour, the trauma resulting from sexual abuse, the demonizing of their sexual orientation, the demoralizing experiences of racism, the fear of illness, feelings of being punished and/or abandoned by God, of isolation and rejection, vilification and abuse by family members, partners, and the church. It means facing the risk of touching, discovering and exploring our own pain. It means encountering the courage and strength of human resilience. It means witnessing and sharing the holy ground of healing and hope. (Duncan & Rainey 53)

The UCCan's historical role as being central to a nationalist movement has stood in tension with the critique that has arisen since the Second World War in the twentieth century. This analysis led to a recognition of the ways and people whom the inherited traditional Christian preferences exclude. This exclusivity first focused on such heteronormative assumptions as gender roles and has since broadened. This ongoing work has identified that these assumptions have also caused harm and oppression. This lived experience of violence has been part of the first two Logs. This reality speaks to a general concern regarding the inflexible traditions that exclude and cause harm.

In this descriptive task, we have also discussed the current structural change in which the UCCan finds itself. This structural reorganisation has been driven by a focus on deficit and has, in many ways, obscured and even silenced missional revival. Organisational change that is driven not by mission, but deficit, saps energy. It is particularly problematic for an institution

that is historically grounded in a collaborative and conciliar model that requires volunteers to live out its vision. That vision is currently unclear.

Arriving at practical ways to address this missional need, which will conclude our project, invites us to consider how a relational practical theology can equip local congregations to recognise the lived experience of those who respond to the UCCan's theology of diversity. This is important as it reveals ways in which the UCCan, within the local context, can embrace its evolving preference to diversity as missional orientation. To this end, we will begin to explore violence and trauma through a reparative preference that understands pastoral care relationally through the act of witnessing.

Central to the Christian tradition is the role of community, in particular, community as a relational experience that is grounded in the lived experience of its members. From a relational constructionist orientation, we will see how when we highlight this tradition, the role of story becomes central to how meaning is formed at a local level. Such storytelling, when understood as an epistemological practice, can be developed to build resilience at a congregational level, while also reparative as a relational practice of Christian caregiving. We will explore storytelling, as an epistemological practice, in respect to Appreciative Inquiry (See *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*). Finally, we will explore storytelling, as a reparative practice, in respect to the power of witnessing. Such witnessing is a practice of practical theology, which is generative in finding new meaning (healing) (Shotter "Wittgenstein Dynamics" 130) when we are "relationally responsive."

### 3. The Interpretive Task: Trauma, Power, & Creation

The interpretive task is based on an attitude of openness to the world. It depends on a thinking faith willing to learn from the intellectual resources of contemporary culture. It is not difficult to recall examples of the disastrous consequences that have followed the church's unwillingness to learn from modern science: treating alcoholics as morally weak, instead of afflicted with a disease; relating to the mentally ill as demon-possessed instead of ravaged by a disorder of the brain. At the same time, the Wisdom tradition brings a theological framework to its open dialogue with the world, and this too is important in the interpretive task. With the acceleration of scientific research, technological innovation, and the Internet, we have access to more and more knowledge. But do we really have more wisdom? The church has something to offer the world about the moral and theological ends that inform the wise use of human knowledge.

(Osmer 93-94)

In our first task – the descriptive – we explored the current context of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) and described its history as both an agent of state and also its trajectory of deconstructing its theological inheritances. This deconstruction, as understood from an orientation of suspicion, has allowed the UCCan to continue to broaden its theological orientation in respect to diversity. This work began with the lived realities of women during the war years of the Second World War of the twentieth century and continued, even accelerated, into the twenty-first century. The UCCan has applied a hermeneutic of suspicion to inherited theological traditions in regard to gender norms, sexuality, the church's role as a colonial agent. Through the course of this project, we will often return to the LBGTQ\* community as a touchstone in regard to the UCCan's deconstructive tradition. This history now finds the denomination considering ways to integrate a theology of diversity into what the UCCan calls a preference for intercultural theologising.

The next practical theological task before us, as we continue to borrow from Richard Osmer, is the interpretive task. We will begin by investigating the harm caused by the theological traditions that the UCCan has interrogated from a place of suspicion. We will examine how people are shaped within story. In that story, especially for those who experience oppression from inflexible traditional theologies, the reality of violence, trauma, and power informs lived experience.

The use of two Logs in the interpretive task will be used to further illustrate harm that arises from imperial theologies. We will also introduce other interpretive dimensions that

arise from the UCCan's deconstructive history: Sin, Blessing, and Creation. We will then journey further in this interpretive section by exploring how theological inheritances continue to cause harm. At the local level, as understood in both pastoral realities and congregational contexts, witnessing such harm can be paralysing, and this interpretive task will allow us to begin to frame how that might be addressed. This interpretive exercise, therefore, 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.

### Story as Interpretation

One of the ways that the theological traditions, which The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has approached with suspicion, cause harm is that the person becomes a flattened story. By flattened story, for example, if you are identified as gay, then all of the ways in which you are interpreted can be limited to the stereotyping that occurs in that regard. The same flattening, therefore, extends to, though is not limited to, race, gender, class and occupation and is most often attributed with negative stereotypes (Adichie). As we saw in Log #01, the LGBTTQ\* character had internalised their flattened story of sexual orientation as sinful, as they had been indoctrinated. The study of narrative, therefore, explores how the nature of our lived experience is to integrate our awareness into a 'story of self.'

Our story of self constantly undergoes revisiting and revisioning. Sometimes this is an act of liberation; other times, it can reinforce the limitations that have been placed as people live within binaries. The story of self, therefore, is an act of socially constructed identity. Theologian Mark Wallace describes this social construct from a relational orientation:

In postmodern culture, the insight into the relational character of human rationality entails further the awareness that the self is a social construct. This constructionist thesis is a formidable challenge to the regnant model of selfhood in the West. Ancient and modern thought begins with the assumption that there is an immutable, interior entity called the "self" which has direct access to the visible world of objects through its powers of mental perception.  
(102)

The *story of self* creates reality. Its development and permutations, changes and adaptations, tend to reflect the Now in which the tale is told. Sometimes, one's story offers counterpoint to the situation in which it is shared. Other times, it complements the particularity of a moment. Sometimes the *story* reinforces our own need for validation. Stories can either undermine or embolden our desire for liberation from what is deemed normal. The *story of self* may be particular to an individual, group, or organisation, but it is

always a reflection of a larger narrative (Estefan 33). And, in all tale weaving, there is power: power to be what is expected, power to challenge what is anticipated, power to free or to oppress.

This resistance to which Kenneth J. Gergen (*Invitation* 87) refers is an invitation to re-examine how we tell our stories. In particular, the narrative of intrinsic brokenness (in the Christian context, this can be understood as living in a state of sin) highlights the nature of power (Adichie). For the UCCan, recognising this is important and has implications for those affected by the theological traditions it has deconstructed in favour of an expanding theology of diversity.

The individual story and who tells it is definitive by nature, whether it is the story of a self or of a community, whether it is told by a priest or an institution (Adichie). As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie both observes and challenges in her 2009 TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” stories have the power to influence both ourselves and our relationships: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie).

This idea of a flattened story is central to the manner in which violence and trauma illustrate the harm of imperial theologies and can be interpreted through such dimensions as violence and trauma. Framed through the lens of negative stereotypes, people can be reduced to one story and consequently dehumanized and harmed.

It is not that any particular story is more or less important. That having been said, our own is nonetheless defined by our own particular experiences. Stories, whether those of individual people (pastoral relationships) or congregations (local contextual communities), when shared, become moments in which that-which-was can be transformed into something new. Such transformation (healing) is, ultimately, what practical theology attempts to do “on the ground.” As we began to explore in the descriptive task, stories are the means in which witnessing and lament point toward a relational practical theology. This construction upon which we are endeavouring can inform the UCCan’s self-understanding and thus be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understating that is grounded in a theology of diversity.

## Violence in Interpretation

One of the pieces that is important to better understand about the role that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has had as an agent of state is the connexion between power and violence. As an act of recognising the church's complicity, the role of confession can assist us in better understanding how imperial theologies, which the UCCan has interrogated, have caused harm through the dimension of violence.

The social theorist Michel Foucault introduces a resource in this part of our conversation: "interpretative analytics" (Dreyfus & Rabinow xxvi). This lens explores power and the manner in which it interacts in social networks. Such an analysis can and does lead to learning that is helpful in understanding how systems evolve, change, and foster the realities into which we live our story.

Such an analysis can lead to a sense of the impersonal. By impersonal, I think that at an academic or theoretical level, it is possible that the implications of the work in real lives can seem distant, perhaps even disconnected by such intellectual construction. In the case of the LGBTTTQ\* community, as framed through the UCCan's deconstruction of its theological inheritance, the reality of the self-harm and external oppression that is lived can be silenced.

Systems normalise and they do so as one aspect of the manner in which power has evolved within a particular context, culture, and/or tradition. It is important to realise and appreciate that normalising occurs, regardless of context (UCCan *Living* 36-38). This recognition is important, in particular, from the praxis of practical theology because it allows for an appreciation of how people can be limited in their ability to thrive. Such limitations can range from access to employment to the acts of self-harm. Being sensitive to this is central to beginning to appreciate how to foster healing.

The implications of how power has tended to normalise, which has been a part of the confessional journey for the UCCan, is an important dimension of the harm caused by imperial theologies. Without an intention to understand this connexion between power and violence, it remains possible that the UCCan might once again act as a state agent. Any preference that the UCCan might embrace must always be explored through an analysis of who benefits at the expense of others. Such an orientation will ensure constant reflection and reflexivity.

Consensus, as an application or tool of power, is clear in the Western Canadian and American contexts through our institutions and those who represent them. Whether that is the government, judiciary, medical, or faith-based establishment, each has its general and particular ways in which it reinforces what is acceptable and normal. There are also certain local agreements as to what normal is that may be a nuance of established convention in a broader context or even significantly different than larger cultural expectations. Some examples of these particular differences might be in respect to gender roles or the manner in



which to parent. As long as citizens do not resist or contravene the collective contract, however, consensus is maintained and often reinforced.

An example of this might be the 2016 US Presidential process. In particular, the polarities that emerged around gender and sexual orientation were highlighted significantly in the debate around transgender rights and identity. The legislative response in some US jurisdictions to classify and criminalise certain actions (i.e., which bathroom to use) illustrated the tension between inherited traditions and an orientation to diversity, as we have explored in the particularity of the UCCan (Stack).

Another aspect of consensus that is helpful to highlight is the role of the expert or professional. In each of the institutions that fosters and nurtures the normal, there are individuals who are designated with particular credentials that enable them to normalise. These professionals operate both with the same generality (i.e. the larger cultural milieu) and particularity as institutions (such as church or government) in respect to our daily lives.

Possessing credentials allows individuals to speak with authority within different discourses and traditions inside Western culture. For example, a doctor can speak with authority beyond the confines of the medical establishment, as can a lawyer or member of law enforcement. These professions within the Canadian and American traditions reinforce the idea of the individual as the central subject of power. Furthermore, it is by means of these people, as they fulfil these roles, “through whom power pass[es] or who are important in the fields of power relations” (qtd. In Rabinow 247). Regardless of the discourse or tradition from which an expert operates, that person is ultimately vested with authority. This authority, whether relational (i.e., a family elder) or vested from an office (i.e., a Member of Parliament) enforces collective obedience to accepted orthodoxy (Arendt 45).

In respect to our conversation, obviously those experts who are responsible within the Christian tradition for propagating normalcy range from laity and pastors to theologians and instructors and faculty within the academy (Alexander 1640). Whether the expert (in this context) utilises the written word, offers individual pastoral care, guides congregational and missional development, or creates liturgy, that person is offering leadership that fosters consensus about and obedience to what is and is not considered normal or “orthodox” within this tradition.

Through communal gatherings, whether that is corporate worship or fellowship events, lay and ordered leadership help the collective understand, identify, and perpetuate what is considered normal. These endeavours operate both within their particular context and, often, within the larger cultural contract that ensures stability. The establishment of consensus, therefore, is concerned with the formation of an identity that does not need to rely upon force. Force is not required as long as people conform to the consensus of the majority (Arendt 51).

When identity and formation can no longer rely upon either consensus and/or there is resistance from the individual or a local discourse/knowledge, then the reality of coercion and violence as an additional means to perpetuate power develops. Prior to this, however, marginalisation can be utilised to separate those who challenge what is normal. Such separation allows for isolation and avoids the discord that can arise in respect to conflict that escalates to violence (Locke & Strong 247; Madigan “3. Theory”; Rabinow 7-8 & 10-11).

As way of example, Indigenous communities in Canada, such as those represented by the young person in Log #02, are often isolated by geography and effectively marginalised. Whether that is accomplished by the use of reserves or urban ghetto-like-contexts, First Nations people are removed in a manner that allows for the perpetuation of stereotypes that establish norm expectations. Furthermore, when there is resistance, law enforcement, especially in urban environments, often relies on force when required.

Though the connexion between power and violence is noteworthy, we are more concerned with the local context as a pastoral meaning making relationship. This is important because it highlights the reality of the UCCan’s choices of confession and intention of nurturing healing (reparation). As those who represent the professional or expert authority through whom power operates in respect to normalisation, what are the moral, ethical, and practical theological considerations that arise when we must confront that those traditionally inherited norms that the UCCan once fostered can and do lead to self-harm, as a manifestation of coercion and violence? What do we do when it is clear that such harm arises from a “normalising judgement” that leads the Self to gauge one’s value on a spectrum of normality to abnormality (Alexander 1755)? Finally, how can the UCCan now nurture new relationships that are different than those created in its historic role as a state actor?

The question of harm becomes central in these new relationships. As the UCCan has deconstructed its theological inheritance, it has been necessary to understand the manner in which such dimensions as power and violence affect people. This part of our interpretive task helps us continue to move toward the goal of constructing a relational practical theology that helps the UCCan bridge its deconstructive history within a reparative model.

As we continue to explore power and violence in respect to the nature of story, the following question offered by Locke and Strong is important. Its significance highlights how we might endeavour to more fully appreciate the implication of violence experienced by people when normalisation is internalised: “If we are not autonomous, encapsulated, information processors, then what are the consequences of the alternative view of who we might be, as socially constructed beings, for how any informed interventions might be carried out?” (Locke & Strong 6).

## Violence: Political

Often, we explore violence in respect to its internal experience within the public commons or within the realm of the political. Whether we examine it domestically through the use of force in the field of law enforcement or internationally in terms of what is deemed acceptable within collective agreements, such as the Geneva Convention, most of our popular discourse focuses upon the external. This, therefore, feels like a helpful place from which to move from the generality of violence to the manner in which the 'moral atom' – the individual – internalises such conventions (Gergen *Relational* 355). This internalisation, though violent in nature, is best understood as the coercive nature of power that intends to ensure stability. This distinction is important in regard to violence in the political sphere because, as we shall discuss, violence is, in fact, adverse to the stability that power attends.

In this next section, we will engage with various conversation partners, but Hannah Arendt's work, *On Violence*, will be of particular import. There are many reasons for this preference that range from the fact that her essay, almost fifty years later, remains provocative, to the reality that she grounded her treatise in the explicit assumption that personal experience must inform our academic pursuit and, in this case, our discussion of violence (Bernstein 4-5).

Arendt's work on violence is provocative because it endeavours to present violence and power as, in fact, antithetical to one another. Whereas power requires constancy, violence is destabilising. This is in contrast to what Foucault contends when power uses coercion and consensus to ensure stability, violence is inherently destabilising (Bernstein 6).

Violence is often seen as the final solution of international discord. Whether that is framed in Machiavellian terms such as *might is right*, or cynical inevitability, as articulated through *just war theory*, technological advances that facilitate violence highlight another tension. Relational construction recognises that interstate conflict poses a clear and present threat to our species as we now have the technological means to eradicate life on a global scale. Furthermore, current technological weaponry also threatens to sterilise all ecological systems, should the existing arsenal of war ever be utilised on a scale similar to previous global conflicts such as World War II (Arendt 3).

Coercion, as a manifestation of power, is the manner in which obedience is achieved by either internal or external threats to the body politic: to the social network. How it is used or experienced might depend on its instrumental nature. Within an internal or domestic context, violence might be exemplified by resistance as protest and physical responses of force or incarceration of communities that fail to be normalised (Arendt 46 & 47). The criminal justice system, therefore, enables the state's use of coercive force to maintain obedience

either through reform or separation/isolation of those who resist through the use of violence (Arendt 51; Foucault *Discipline* 129).

In the case of international relations, obviously the use of violence is manifest in its instrumental utility, whether that is the battlefield or the more obscure places where torture is utilised. When power is threatened by resistance to the status quo, violence, whether domestic or external, is ultimately intended to “increase and multiply human strength” (Arendt 51 & 53). By this, I believe, Arendt is discussing violence in its phenomenology: namely that violence’s instrumental nature is to increase the strength of the user at the detriment of the stability that power seeks.

As we continue this discussion about power and violence from a political (or external) orientation, there are two important points to highlight, if only briefly. Firstly, though violence can be framed as a manifestation of power, the use of force arises when consensus falters or fails (Arendt 56). The challenge is that violence, a response to a threat to power, also contains its own logic, a logic that can, with contemporary technological weaponry, threaten the very system it responds to protect (Arendt 56).

The second political point about power (and violence) is the human nature in which it is grounded. Though Foucault’s analysis implicitly suggests the human construct of power (Dreyfus & Rabinow 220), Arendt synthesises this, when she observes in *On Violence* the following: “Neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man’s faculty of action, the ability to begin something new” (Arendt 82).

This critique by Arendt is important because it suggests that violence is its own phenomenon. Bernstein, in his framing of Arendt’s resistance to the traditional critique of power as an extension of *power over* argues that “[t]his is precisely the conception of power that Arendt challenges – and her point is not merely one of linguistic propriety. It goes to the very heart of her political thinking. Power and violence are not only distinguishable; they are antithetical. Where power reigns there is persuasion, not violence. And when violence reigns, it destroys power” (Bernstein 6).

Often this nuance, that violence is its own phenomenon, becomes murky or confused as violence, when solely understood as a manifestation of power, is framed as causal in nature (Arendt 35). This confusion arises when we discuss and explore violence; it occurs in conjunction with the presence of power within the social network (Arendt 52). Violence is often perceived to be only present when power appears to be threatened.

If such causality, however, is simply superficial as Arendt suggests, the implications as to what that means for the individual take on even greater moral and ethical import from the perspective of practical theology. As we have already explored, if we constantly tell our self a story of self that is grounded in norms that marginalise, then that story cries out for healing.

When we acknowledge that violence for the person who has internalised harmful narratives (such as arise in racial intolerance and homophobia) carries with it the same, if not even more, potential for harm as overt violence, then we are challenged by the ramifications of political (external) violence in its contemporary technological implications for our species: ramifications that lead us to wrestle with the following:

If we can annihilate ourselves collectively, what are we doing to the self when we internalise such violence as an isolated moral atom?

### Violence: The Individual

How we understand violence is related to how we understand conflict. If conflict, and its resolution, is also framed in binary, then resolution must also be bound as either/or. In the ubiquitous reality of power's constant trajectory to normalise, therefore, conflict arises when *sameness* and *otherness* compete (Augsburger 16). Furthermore, the cultural understanding of conflict, which we will explore more fully, will come into play.

Within the North American Canadian and American cultural environment, the approach to conflict is sometimes described as low context. By this, we mean a culture that preferences the individual's rights and choices, as opposed to the collective or communal. Within this milieu, the individual is preferenced and such behaviours as transparency, debate, and frankness are normative. This orientation is different than collective (high context) cultures in which the indirect, cautious, and avoidance of debate are preferenced (Augsburger 16).

It is not surprising, therefore, that in our Western tradition, the individualistic orientation is preferenced as it reinforces the self-sufficiency and isolation of the moral atom. It also perpetuates autonomy, as opposed to relationality, and becomes normalised. Our approach to conflict, therefore, utilises "analytic, linear, sequential logic to define situations" (Augsburger 34).

With the conflict tradition grounded in the individual, therefore, it becomes easier to appreciate that the problem and the person, the tension and the debate, can become one and the same. In a conflict situation, the person becomes the problem. In this relational construct, in which the individual is isolated, solutions are instrumental in nature and are often focused on fixing the person and not the system per se (Augsburger 91): the intention is to help the person conform, even if the system, itself, may be unjust.

If the individual cannot be reformed or rehabilitated, either through coercion or the various ways in which an intervention might occur (i.e., counselling or medicalisation or even, as seen in Log #02, a mediation session), the person might experience violence or become

violent. There arises a logic to violence that is important to note. Augsburger describes it in the following manner:

1. There is a continuity in violence in the sense that one act leads inexorably to another, so that violence begets violence;
2. There is a sameness about violence, so that however high its goals, all practitioners are reduced to the same level;
3. There is a desperation in violence, so that one who uses it will go to any length, even someone's death, to justify both it and oneself; and
4. There is a close link between violence and hatred. Thus violence leads toward death or toward physical or psychological harm. Violence is the antithesis of peace, of life. (131)

Exploring the implications of violence are certainly worthy of consideration. It is the internalisation of violence, however, that stands as a challenge to the UCCan as it seeks to offer reparative practices that live out the theology of diversity that has been nurtured since its deconstruction of inherited gender roles. Such internalisation is often fashioned along bounded assumptions in which either/or, good/bad, and right/wrong are the parameters that define who and what we are.

Many of these limitations, perhaps even all, have resulted from the church's connexion and complicity as an institution within our cultural power matrix. Within the Christian discourse, these binaries are often formulated theologically and doctrinally. Some examples of these, from the UCCan's context and which we have explored, revolve around race, sexual identity, and gender roles. Such formulations have and do inform what is internalised (Foucault *Discipline* 90).

If the metaphor of policing is helpful in respect to law enforcement and consensus as ways in which the individual regulates what is normal, the prison is helpful as a way in which to explore the nature of violence. This allows us to appreciate more fully both the external and internal means as to how normalcy is shaped and reinforced. When that which is normal is resisted, power responds to ensure stability, and violence is particularly evident when consensus and enforcement are an inadequate response.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault explores the history of the penal system within our Western context. On one level, therefore, he traces the use of the penitentiary as an institution that has been responsible for addressing resistance, whether that is seen through a criminal or medical lens (Foucault *Discipline* 79). As such, the penal (and its parallel medical institutional counterpart) system has served to both reform and isolate such resistance (Foucault *Discipline* 182).

Foucault offers this challenge, therefore, in respect to the proliferation of prisons (*Discipline* 306). Though it may (initially) seem to be a political and structural critique, it also connects with the “self-policing” that is present when issues such as race and homophobia are internalised:

If there is an overall political issue around the prison, it is not therefore whether it is to be corrective or not; whether the judges, the psychiatrists or the sociologists are to exercise more power in it than the administrators or supervisors; it is not even whether we should have prison or something other than prison. At present, the problem lies rather in the steep rise in the use of these mechanisms of normalization and the wide-ranging powers which, through the proliferation of new disciplines, they bring with them. (Foucault *Discipline* 306)

In respect to the individual, therefore, we have also internalised this external (penal) manifestation of power (Foucault *Discipline* 202). The implications, therefore, resonate when we stop to consider what harm this may be causing. In particular, when coercion fails, and violence becomes a response to preserve ‘normal,’ how should the church respond from the vantage point of practical theology? How should we respond, when considering Augsburg’s fourth law of violence (131), when that which has been internalised leads to violence that is ultimately the antithesis of peace, of life? How do we respond when theological constructs have been and are the underpinnings of harm?

As we explore imperial theologies that cause harm, through such lenses as power and violence, we are reminded of the need to witness those stories within the praxis of practical theology. In this space, as we continue to move toward constructing a relational practical theology, understanding power and violence’s relationship to imperial theologies help us in this reparative journey. This journey, therefore, is grounded in the relational.

This brief exploration of violence will continue into the next section that explores the manner in which the reality of violence, as a ubiquitous reality of power, can and does lead to trauma. This is important because understanding trauma as a dimension of imperial theologies further emphasises such possible reparative responses as witnessing and lament. Relational theological practices will recognise these experiences. This ongoing project of ours, therefore, is intended to offer language and opportunities for the UCCan to shift from a deficit to a missional orientation grounded in a theology of diversity.

### Holy Saturday: The Trauma of Homophobia

In our current world, we are witnessing ongoing atrocities and different manifestations of suffering. The invisible forces of global capital and the undetectable effects of new wars and their justifications demand that theological accounts of suffering attend to the elisions constituting traumatic suffering. Although some may say that all “suffering is suffering,” there are different expressions of that suffering and its effects that press for renewed theological articulation. I understand this as the increased invisibility of suffering and the power of its erasure, regardless of whether that is the suffering itself or the people experiencing trauma not being seen, the outcome does not change. The discourse of trauma engages these invisible realities, continually calling attention to what falls outside the lines of what is, or can be, represented. The challenge of theological discourse is to articulate a different orientation to suffering that can speak to the invisibility, gaps, and repetitions constituting trauma. (Rambo 169)

As the UCC navigates structural change and also strives for missional identity, its rich history of deconstructing inherited theological traditions must be explored in respect to implications of harm in lived experience. One other interpretative way to understand this harm is as trauma, which continues from our previous discussion about power and violence. One way in which we might understand trauma are those injuries that are experienced due to theological inflexibility that cause not only harm, but are non-linear in nature. What this means is that in relationships of pastoral care or within congregational communities, the memory of such hurts defies an easy fix. That memory can surface in ways that do not fit into logical paradigms. As such, they are disconcerting for the witness and are reminders of the ongoing difficulty that exists in living with such hurt.

As the denomination embraces its preference for diversity, it is important to recognise that there are people who are both hurting from the theological inheritances it has rejected and those still suffering from the fact the denomination was once complicit in that enterprise itself. But this awareness is not academic; it is intimate and real. It has, does, and will occur in the pastoral relationship in which sharing of violence has been experienced.

The harm of imperial theologies requires witness. The power of lament and confession are part of this mutual experience. Though there are certainly joys that occur in pastoral relationships, the stories of harm are what serve as a test of whether theological orientations are liberative or destructive. These relationships, at their most difficult, reveal that in the midst of violence, we share in a collective trauma for which a hermeneutic of reparation demands of us ways to create language to reveal that which is often hidden.



One of the ways we might describe this coming together, in which new meaning is created, is witnessing. In witnessing to one another in a reciprocal manner, which endeavours to be mutual, it is possible that the experience might be both generative and creative. It is also important to note that such witness does not presume outcome or assume that conclusions or answers will be found.

Witnessing to one another, however, is just the beginning. As we have discussed, it is clear that there are practical theological implications. Pastoral theologian James Dittes refers to this as “ascetic witness.” “The pastoral counselor witnesses – steadfastly, undistracted, relentlessly – the life experience of the counselee, the harried pilgrimage of a soul that has too often scurried in shadow. Lucid listener, the counselor beholds what has been averted, attests to what has been dismissed, hopes and shames alike” (137).

In the praxis of practical theology, therefore, it is evident that the traditions that the UCCan has historically critiqued can and do cause harm owing to the rigidity that occurs in any process of normalisation. To courageously engage in the lived experience of these traditions, however, is difficult. It requires not just witnessing to one another but acknowledging the suffering and trauma that have been caused and endured by those who have experienced harm from theological inheritances that the UCCan rejects and acknowledges it once perpetuated as an agent of the state.

The LGBTTTQ\* community has and does experience violence is without question. Violence can be individual, or collective, experienced as remedial therapies and theologies that are utilised to limit and shape expectations of gender and sexuality. To the blatant violence experienced by the LGBTTTQ\* communities in such acts of horror as the beating, torture, and murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 or the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando in 2016, all of these violations speak to a much larger culture of intolerance, discrimination, and oppression. Homophobia as a culturally internalised and normalised form of hatred is tied directly to those theological traditions that the UCCan has interrogated. The import of this uncomfortable reality and the subsequent creative potential is summarised in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, when Rambo discusses trauma and violence:

The challenge of trauma is the challenge of witnessing to a phenomenon that exceeds the categories by which we make sense of the world. These literary readings expose the insufficiency of our frameworks for understanding and also point to a different relationship that we have to language, given these traumatic dynamics. Trauma theory shares with deconstruction a common misperception: that it is a theory to be applied. Instead, trauma theory and deconstruction both enact ways of reading that expose certain dimensions of texts. Trauma theory that draws from deconstruction is a practice of unmasking, unearthing, and tracking what escapes interpretation. (31)

In this unmasking, we are able to discuss the harm caused by imperial theologies through the dimension of trauma. If we are, indeed, to live into the metaphor that the Christian community is a body, then we must acknowledge the harm that has been caused by our creations: “Theology hears itself differently in the language of trauma; in turn, trauma theory hears itself differently in the language of theology. This witness from within a discourse is made possible through another, but this meeting point is the site of trauma” (Rambo 32). Framing theological discourse through the lens of trauma, therefore, allows us to shift away from defensive discourse and apologetic responses. For those who have experienced the implications of these inheritances, there can be no healing if we remain silent.

The Apostle Paul gave the Christian tradition the understanding that when part of the body hurts, all hurt. That suffering is part of the human condition is reflected well from both secular and faith-based vantages. In the Christian tradition, the concepts of salvation, healing, and redemption are often associated with the resurrection story of Jesus. Just one example is the dualistic cultural narrative of a mind/body split where mental suffering is less understood and more feared than physical suffering.

To sit with the realities of homophobia within the church body is not easy. Unfortunately, there is also a tendency to gloss over what Rambo calls Holy Saturday: the day in which Jesus died and went to hell (1 Pet. 3:18-20), also known as “the Harrowing.” This journey was not redemptive; it was both embodied and an act of witness to the horrors of an afterlife in which there was no redemption, no hope.

The Harrowing invites Christians to take time to witness, even in the uncertainty when our anchors become unmoored in light of the hurt and harm in which we may be complicit (Rambo 63): “Holy Saturday reveals a distinct landscape of suffering that cannot be understood exclusively in terms of the passion; neither can it be interpreted in relationship to resurrection. Instead, the experience of God in hell is an experience of death extending beyond its conceivable boundaries” (Rambo 46).

Witnessing the trauma on Holy Saturday is uncomfortable; it’s hard and complex work (Rambo 16). The reality is that we prefer certainty and clarity. Ambiguity and shadows do not help maintain how normalisation has been nurtured. This becomes clear as the UCCan continues to question from an orientation of suspicion. As such, we feel impatient with the soul work that such witnessing requires. Such journeying with those who have suffered trauma is beyond time and space and requires patience. The harm these wounded souls have experienced defies logical convention and requires a compassion that does not expect solutions:

Trauma is what does not go away. It persists in symptoms that live on in the body, in the intrusive fragments of memories that return. It persists in

symptoms that live on in communities, in the layers of past violence that constitute present ways of relating. It persists in the symptoms that fuel present wars. [Deacon Lee] is also speaking about public uneasiness with trauma and the push to move beyond it--an impatience with suffering, revealing a timeline on public attention and sympathy. (Rambo 2)

This act of witnessing invites UCCan practitioners to look deeply into the eyes of those who have been hurt and listen deeply. As well as re-examining what healing means in the light of suffering, it also requires a certain amount of reflection about resurrection. This act of witnessing can help remind the church of our interconnexion and relationality.

Traditionally, the concept of resurrection or redemption has been framed with life and death separated and in opposition to one another. The challenge, however, is that suffering in respect to homophobia as a catalyst for lived trauma cannot be reconciled in such a neat construction. The reason for this lies in the fact that life and death have been framed in a linear manner. Such linearity that promises resurrection after death, however, cannot be maintained when such narratives of suffering do not recognise the ill-defined parameters of trauma. In the face of suffering that occurs within a redemptive narrative, we are unable to recognise the trauma that we are discussing (Rambo 6).

In this creative endeavour, which challenges the inherited theological traditions that oppress, Rambo invites us to see beyond the historic tradition that has seen life -> death -> resurrection as a journey through time. This formulaic conception has silenced those who suffer and preferenced a triumphalism (Rambo 6) that only reinforces homophobia as one example of the harm that the UCCan's theology of diversity has recognised. This is reinforced because to find oneself unable to fit is to experience that triumph (as wholeness through resurrection) is unattainable. The resulting shame and harm silences.

Such silencing, without our witnessing the trauma, results in systems of power and knowledge creating an illusion of normalcy. This predisposition, however, when confronted, allows us to recognise that those who experience trauma do so as isolated moral atoms. This isolation, however, is contrary to the praxis that underlies practical theology: "Trauma forces us beyond a familiar theological paradigm of life and death, and places us, instead, on the razed terrain of what remains. Trauma presses theologians to seek new language to express God's relationship to the world. This is not a new task. In fact, it is the perennial work of theology" (Rambo 14).

If the UCCan intends to continue to explore ways to offer healing of the damage caused by inherited/rejected traditions, then it must recognise that it will not be done quickly or easily. If the denomination is to consider the implications of the pastoral relationship through a relational practical theology, then it must nurture new ways to explore healing that does not perpetuate its previous complicit role.

Rambo's work on trauma prepares those who practice practical theology for such intimate relationships and to understand healing as the way those relationship develop new meaning that holds multiple and often – paradoxical truths. The metaphor of the body has allowed the Christian tradition to recognise the reciprocal and mutual nature of the community. In this relationality, therefore, the concept of trauma and the reality of suffering that occurs in light of homophobia are difficult realities for us to witness and explore. Yet if we respond courageously to these realities, there is hope. Such responses can begin in recognising that it is in the relationship itself, the particularity of a pastoral relationship or the intimacy of a community attending seriously to such trauma that reparation, healing, can begin. The next two logs, therefore, are attempts to illustrate ways in which such relationships can help develop new meaning that exists in the midst of the paradox of trauma.

### Logs #03 & #04

As initially discussed in *Autoethnography*, the use of these Logs arises from my own lived experience. Though they were originally shaped as story vignettes, which can be found in the first appendix of this project, they have been adapted to illustrate the manner in which the United Church of Canada's (UCCan) deconstructive tradition is inadequate in the context of local congregations and pastoral relationships to address the lived experience of those who have been affected by the very theological traditions that the UCCan has considered through a suspicious orientation. The logs, therefore, are one tool to help in the task we have begun: to construct a relational practical theology that can inform the denomination's self-identity and be harnessed, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understating that is grounded in a theology of diversity.

#### Log #03

This Log involves a person coming to a congregation of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) seeking pastoral assistance. The catalyst is the experience of discovering a violent incident. This person is military personnel and came upon the result of a homophobic attack against a fellow soldier. The person is not practicing in a particular faith community but identifies as a cultural Christian. The person has nominal lived experience of a church community.

In the course of the pastoral relationship it becomes clear that:

- The person has questions of faith, which include anger at the Divine and the institutional church;
- The person articulates their understanding of the culpability of organised religion in perpetuating violence against the marginalised, in this case a “gay” fellow soldier;
- The person is drawn to the UCCan owing to their awareness of the denomination's openness and support of the LGBTTQ\* community; and,
- The person is trying to reconcile their experience with the UCCan's paradoxical position in respect to diversity.

It has been my experience that one of the ways in which The United Church of Canada (UCCan) experiences growth is when other Christians (practicing or cultural) come to the denomination. This occurs on account of their awareness of the denomination's orientation to a theology of diversity. This awareness is often connected to the UCCan's work in respect to the LGBTTTQ\* community and/or marriage policies that are not prescriptive as in other Christian denominational contexts.

Though less frequent, it has also been my experience that those who are seekers, secular, or faith-curious also arrive for this same reason. It is, however, owing less to a theological awareness, and more to the UCCan being known as the "gay-friendly" church in the Canadian context. Regardless of whether a person arrives at a congregation as a Christian or a seeker, this log speaks to one of the ways in which the denomination can explore missional identity in its changing structural context.

This missional aspect is better appreciated as we prepare to apply an interpretive dimension of Creation to the imperial theologies that the UCCan has approached with suspicion. Yet even with this new dimension being introduced into the conversation, it is clear in this Log that violence – as an outcome of imperial theologies – illustrates another dimension of witnessing, one that is not easy and that requires language and practices that help pastoral relationship at the local level make sense of the harm caused by imperial theologies.

This means that the pastoral relationship must be generative in that both the Christian caregiver and the person seeking care are able to create new meaning in the tension of trauma's paradox named above. In this place of creativity, lived experience can be in dialogue with the implications of imperial theologies, as well as the UCCan's expansive theology of diversity.

For those arriving at the UCCan on account of the invitation they experience in a theology of diversity, often their lived experience is grounded in violence. This reality, as we have discussed in respect to the interpretative dimension of shared trauma, requires that it be discussed as one that offers (the possibility of/for) healing. Such witnessing is important, at the local congregational level, because even though we are discussing ubiquitous violence that is often experienced within the LGBTTTQ\* context, though particular to that community, it is indicative of other examples of violence related to gender, language, religion, and race. Witnessing (possible) healing can be nurtured by the UCCan in such instances as the intrapersonal, within the pastoral relationship, within congregations, and ultimately at a corporate level.

## Log #04

This Log begins online. A congregation has transitioned its “brick and mortar” pastoral care ministry into the relational medium of social media. Over the course of several years, the Care Team for this The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been able to not only engage with people in respect to conversations about culture, politics, and faith, but also has been able to build enough trust across a multi-generational spectrum that matters of care, whether clinical or pastoral, are often initially broached via private messaging on various social media platforms.

In this Log, a person who has been engaged with a member of the Care Team begins to share their story. Over the course of several months, the care-giver has learned:

- The person’s background is Syrian and French Canadian;
- The person was raised solely by their mother and grandmother;
- The father was never part of their upbringing;
- The person has no church experience other than the cultural distrust that arises from being raised in a patriarchal context of orthodoxy. In this milieu, the person experienced an inflexibility in respect to their birth (unmarried) and racial (father was not Syrian) context; and,
- The person’s story is further complicated as their birth order would have resulted in a higher status in the patriarchal structure had their parents been married when this person was born, and both had been Syrian. This person has been haunted by being “a bastard child” and has asked to meet the caregiver.

After learning this, the caregiver and person finally agree to meet in person. The person is interested in possibly becoming a member of the UCCan because of its orientation toward diversity, but continues to have misgivings about the institutional church owing to the cultural experience in which Christian traditions excluded and ostracised their upbringing.

- What is normal and how is that determined?
- What are the social conventions that establish who is in and who is out?
- How do these conventions get reinforced?
- How do we resist – in the sense of questioning and engaging in conversations that invite reflection and action?
- In the midst of the very systems that reinforce “normal,” whether our family, places of work, or culture at large, how might we imagine “different”?

This Log makes some assumptions, in particular, about the generational divide that exists within most The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) faith communities. In general, the UCCan is composed of members that range from Builder to Late Baby Boomer Generations (those born approximately between the 1940s-late 1960s). For many with this experience, the church has been the place in which both faith and the social have been integrated, what some might call cultural Christianity.

Those born since the 1970s (Gen X-Gen Z) have often had no experience of Christianity. What they do have is mediated through a lens that is hostile. This hostility is framed in a way that sees the church as judgmental. One of the touchstones in this regard is the perceived intolerance of the LGBTTQ\* community. The challenge is that such generational hostility is not warranted. This is because the UCCan's value of diversity aligns with this generation's own principles.

The generational divide in the UCCan context has been described in this way:

- Those generationally born prior to the 1970s have expected people to “believe” before they “belong;” and
- Those born since, seek “belonging” before “believing.”

What is important to note is that both of these generational experiences are relational. The challenge for the UCCan, however, is that those born since the 1970s preference their personal experience, whereas those born prior place import on institutional norms. Neither of these are right, per se, but as we shall see, relational construction, from an epistemological perspective, endeavours to recognise that the personal, the local, can create meaning and healing (hermeneutic of reparation).

The person's experience of exclusion and marginalisation – as a flattened story – in this Log is based on normative gender expectations rationalised from an inherited Christian tradition. The UCCan's own orientation to diversity presents an opportunity for this person to consider that an institutional church might be a safe place to explore identity and faith. By nurturing trust and relationship, the care team member has been able to model the possibility for new meaning and healing as a practical application of a reparative hermeneutic (Shotter “Beginnings” 352-53).

This final Log is important for a few reasons. One, it highlights the role of story that we initially explored as an interpretive dimension of the harm experienced as a result of imperial theologies. The manner in which one's experience and/or identity can be flattened is one way in which the subsequent dimensions we discussed – violence and trauma – become present in lived experience.



This Log is also important as it serves as an example to consider how a hermeneutic of reparation, when it informs a relational practical theology, at the local level of the UCCan, can serve as a precursor for missional change, which will inevitably have national implications. Finally, as we shall discuss below, it introduces one final dimension in our interpretive task: Sin, Blessing, and Creation.

So far, we have explored the manner in which harm is experienced as a result of imperial theologies. One of those inherited traditions that the UCCan has interrogated has been the doctrine of Original Sin. Yet Sin, in the larger context of a Christian tradition about blessing and Creation, offers us an interpretive orientation that aligns with a hermeneutic of reparation. This final dimension, therefore, will allow us to prepare for our next conversation: *The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology*.

### Creation: Blessing & Sin

Wiley suggests that we continue to default to preferencing one position to the other: Sin or Blessing. These two theological understandings were central to the Christian tradition that established the doctrine of Original Sin: “Moderns were closer to the intellectual orientation of Pelagius than that of Augustine. Like Pelagius, they felt the idea that human beings were born already guilty of sin was morally reprehensible” (Wiley 111).

The implications of the Pelagian Debate, which occurred between the two historic personas of Pelagius and Augustine, continue to be relevant today. Even though, as Tatha Wiley observes, modern sensibilities might find more affinity with the Pelagian preference, it, nonetheless, as a binary construction, perpetuates fostering the establishment of traditions that exclude. As such, we simply maintain a system of power and knowledge that will continue to cause harm in the lived experience of many.

We continue to be suspicious and, as we have discussed, when suspicion finds no balance, it can lead to paranoia. Academically and practically, this can be problematic. The lived experiences of people affected by imperial theologies, however, serve as reminders that any endeavour to impose Truth can cause harm. Whether as Sin or Blessing, orthodoxy finds itself always challenged when lived experience is preferenced. This next part of our conversation, therefore, is not intended to reengage in the debate itself, but to further interpret this harm through the dimension of this inheritance. Furthermore, an additional interpretative dimension will allow us to explore balance (as reparation) that complements The United Church of Canada’s (UCCan) own understanding of how Creation can be appreciated more fully in its expansive theology of diversity.

In this next phase of our conversation, therefore, I hope to navigate this tension. By way of reminder, this exercise in interpretation is not to preference either Blessing or Sin. Rather, I believe we can explore how Original Sin, as an imperial theology, is one example that

helps us appreciate the violence and trauma we have discussed. Furthermore, this reveals another interpretive dimension within this tradition: the Christian Creation story. As an interpretive dimension, the Creation Story allows for a reparative examination. This assists in this project's intention to develop a relational practical theology.

The next steps before us, therefore, will be:

- Explore the most recent manifestation of the debate about Original Sin as (re)introduced by Matthew Fox. In particular, his (re)introduction of a theology of Original Blessing;
- Outline the theological nexus from which the discussion is grounded and that finds its continuity connected historically with the Pelagian Debate: The Genesis Creation story;
- Highlight the concept of Original Blessing from the Celtic Christian tradition;
- Attempt to thread the inherited tradition into one that tends to reflect the work upon which The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been engaged and which we have discussed as a theology of diversity. As such, doing so from a reparative orientation will be helpful; and
- Offer some observations that link to our discussion about trauma and Holy Saturday as a way to connect healing and balance as a foundation for a relational practical theology.

The name, or personality, that has become affixed to one of the recent returns to the debate about Original Sin and Blessing is Matthew Fox (Fox "Twenty Five"). As with Pelagius and Augustine, Fox reflects a larger movement of people and personalities, positions and perspectives that have been the catalyst for this return.

In 1983, Matthew Fox published *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-Six Themes*. He describes the intention of the book in the following manner: "This book also represents my continued efforts to reground Christian spirituality in its Jewish and biblical roots, roots that celebrate both our capacity as mystics (awe as the beginning of wisdom) and our capacity as prophets (workers of social transformation)" (*Primer* 3).

Fox continues to preference Original Blessings in this way:

I have come to study other religious traditions, including biblical ones, and have learned how rare a concept "original sin" is among these faiths. Islam rejects original sin (even though they keep the story of Adam and Eve); Judaism

rejects it (even though they created the story of Adam and Eve, and Jesus was a Jew) . . . It was, as I demonstrate below, Saint Augustine who first used the term in the fourth century A.D. Jesus, himself, being a Jew, never heard of the concept. How strange that a religion would sustain itself on a theory that its “founder” never even heard of . . . The church inherited the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and to run an Empire efficiently one needs theories like original sin to keep the citizens and soldiery in line. (*Primer* 5)

Within Genesis, there are two creation stories: one, Genesis 1:1–2:3, offers, if you will, the broad strokes or summary and clearly states that Creation is good and blessed. The second, Genesis 2:4–2:24, is the micro, the relational, and that which centres on the choices of Adam and Eve (Moyers 12). This relational connexion between Adam and Eve also serves as another example within a much larger narrative about Creation: “The theme of Creation serves merely as an introduction to the central motif: God’s role in history” (Lieber 2).

In this interplay or relationship, Adam and Eve are fully embodied and do not reflect such divisions as between body and soul (Moyers 33). God, too, is presented as an engaged actor in Creation and not separate from it (Harmon “Genesis” *Interpreter’s* 482), a distinction that would not be made until the Hellenistic, and specifically Platonic, influence, which became prevalent in the growing Christian tradition that Augustine was cultivating (Phipps 132).

This active role of Creator is also highlighted in the nuance about how the Divine is referenced. In the first creation story, God is referred to as *Elohim* (often associated with justice), which is considered more generic than the use of *Yahweh* (often associated with compassion) in the second (Frick 130-131; Lieber 11). In this manner, it is significant to note the relational construction used in the second creation story owing to its import in the Pelagian Debate and the interconnected theologies of Original Sin and Blessing.

The Genesis creation stories, that of Adam and Eve, are central to the Pelagian Debate as the second, in particular, speaks to human agency and free will. Within the Jewish tradition, the question of obedience and brokenness was present, but it did not lead to a conclusion that the human species was fundamentally broken or tainted by the choices the two made in respect to the Tree of Knowledge. As well, within the Jewish tradition, the Creation story does not ascribe human violence and sin to eating from the Tree of Knowledge, but rather to the act of Cain in respect to the fratricide of Abel (Henry 31).

What was inherited from Adam, therefore, was death (Fox *Creativity* 90-91; Robertson 36-37). The specifically Christian tradition that links the Creation story of the Tree of Knowledge with human disobedience was established by Augustine and has been called the Fall-Redemption cycle (Basden 2; Chelley-Hodge; Fox *Original* 11; Moyers 67-68; Robertson 10; and Wiley 34). The Fall proceeded from the choices of Adam and Eve. Future redemption,

therefore, is completed by the linear or chronological progression toward the restorative action of the resurrection of Jesus (Moyers 11 & Rees *Pelagius* 68).

In this Fall-Redemption Cycle, Augustine believed that the action of Adam ultimately tainted the soul of each person who was born after the events associated with the Tree of Knowledge. As well, as we discussed previously, the Fall-Redemption Cycle contends that salvation, therefore, was only available through the act of Grace, regardless of our own actions or choices as preferred by Pelagius. In *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, Rees describes Augustine's perspective on evil in the following manner:

He was now satisfied that evil was not a substance, a negative force engaged in perennial conflict with the power of positive good, but the privation of that good in the soul, to which all the evil in the world was attributable. At the human level sin, suffering and unhappiness were all products of the privation of good in the soul, a malfunction of the personality manifested in the failure of the human will as revealed in Adam's first sin. (60)

The challenge, however, was that this orientation differed from the Eastern Church and the Celtic tradition. In respect to the Celtic Church's own evolving theological orientation, Pelagius was one of the first people to begin to formulate and articulate a Creation-centred theology (Newell *Christ* 19-20; Newell *Listening* 8-9; Stortz 135). For the Eastern Church fathers, though there was certainly recognition of the reality of sin in respect to human nature, there was neither a formulated doctrine, nor did they connect Adam's actions as propagating an inheritance of sin (Fox *Primer* 48). The Eastern perspective finds parallels with the Celtic Church, both favouring a position in which each individual was born with free will and that they possessed the capacity to choose to be co-creators with God (Fox "Twenty Five"; Phipps 129; and Robertson 36-37).

The Celtic tradition resisted the growing fifth-century institutional church's requirement for doctrine. Though a rough comparison, whereas the increasingly structured Roman Church was formulating creeds, the Celtic Church, similar to the Eastern church, tended more toward embracing the flexibility that could be theologically expressed through poetry (Newell *Christ* 84). If we recall from our earlier conversation, one of the choices for the UCCan in its most recent doctrinal statement, *Song of Faith*, has been to utilise the poetic in a similar manner. The concept of co-creating, as active and relational participants with God, highlights the Celtic Church's perspective of Original Blessing. This active and fluid relationship between humanity and the Holy focused on one specific orientation: a new-born child.

Pelagius maintained that the image of God can be seen in every new-born child and that, although obscured by sin, it exists at the heart of every person,

waiting to be released through the Grace of God. He argued this despite increasing acceptance throughout the Western Church of Augustine's teaching that every child is born sinful. Augustine believed that the image of God can be restored to us only through the Church and its sacraments. He thus developed a spirituality that accentuated a division between the Church, which was seen as holy, on the one hand and the life of the world, perceived as godless, on the other. (Newell *Listening* 6)

Central to the Pelagian Debate was free will, Grace, and agency. One of the central facets of that conversation was the state in which a child was born:

- Was she inherently good or not?
- What was the role of sin in respect to the birth of a new child?
- To what extent did human brokenness affect the innocence one experiences in a newborn?

## A Child: Grace and Freewill

Set in the context of human freedom, the Pelagian controversy asked the perennially radical question of the quality of human behaviour, and the sources of good and evil in the world.

(Rees xi)

These questions, which may be difficult to appreciate in our context, were front and centre in respect to the debate between Original Sin and Blessing. These questions ultimately highlight the significant differences that were present. For Pelagius, a child was born with the ability to choose to do good or bad. The gift of Grace, from his perspective, as illustrated in the goodness of each newborn, was connected to the concept of merit. By merit, he understood that one's work could lead to salvation based on an individual's choices. This interaction between merit and grace, therefore, highlighted that humanity's moral nature remained intact, regardless of the disobedience at the Tree of Knowledge (Wiley 69).

For Augustine, however, the newborn child was inherently corrupted by sin and, as a result, Grace was not merit based; it was an act of salvation that only God could bestow (Wolfson 555-556). In essence, Pelagius preferenced humanity's choice as gifted through Grace, whereas Augustine preferenced God's action, as the agent of Grace. Grace, for Augustine, therefore, was necessary because humanity's moral nature had been compromised through the disobedience at the Tree of Knowledge (Wiley 69).

As Pelagius and Augustine represented factions or positions, as has been mentioned, it becomes more significant when we note that this was also a theological struggle within the church. As the Eastern and Western Empire was already beginning to fracture along geopolitical divisions, as evidenced by the Germanic invasion of Rome (410 CE), the Celtic Church was also experiencing similar distancing as the Empire's anchor in much of the Celtic sphere was also waning (Fox *Primer* 24). Newell summarises this tension between Pelagius and Augustine, and the Celtic Church and the church in Rome, in the following description:

This was in stark contrast to Augustine's thinking and the developing spirituality of the Church in the Roman world, which accentuated the evil in humanity and our essential unrighteousness. Augustine, with his sharp awareness of the pervasiveness of wrong-doing in the world, stated that the human child is born depraved and humanity's sinful nature has been sexually transmitted from one generation to the next, stretching from Adam to the present. Augustine believed that from conception and birth we lack the image of God until it is restored in the sacrament of baptism, and that conception involves us in the sinfulness of nature, sexual intercourse being associated with

lustful desire. The perspective conveyed by Pelagius, on the other hand, is that to look into the face of a newborn is to look at the image of God; he maintained that creation is essentially good and that the sexual dimension of procreation is God-given. (*Listening* 14)

As we have mentioned, and Robertson reminds us, there is certainly an affinity in our current context that resonates with the position offered by the Celtic Church's articulation of a Creation-centred theology, which we have inherited from Pelagius: "Pelagius' views of sin, free will and human nature are more easily acceptable in the present time than the Augustinian views" (Robertson 49). Acknowledging this helps us to note that we are not engaged in an apologetic endeavour in respect to the Pelagian position. Doing so would simply lead to another tradition that would favour Truth, as opposed to the truths witnessed in pastoral relationships, which we will explore in the context of the meaning making that unfolds from a relational constructionist perspective. Recognising this helps us to begin to transition into a discussion about imagining that these two traditions might be explored with an intention committed to reparation.

A reparative reading is important because it allows us to recognise how this one idea within imperial theology – Original Sin – has been a factor in the violence and trauma we have discussed. Through these interpretive dimensions, we are better able to appreciate the deconstructive tradition that the UCCan has fostered as it has nurtured a theology of diversity. This fostering, however, has remained deconstructive as it remains (primarily) informed by an orientation to suspicion. In the next – and final interpretive dimension – therefore, we will engage in an exploration of the UCCan's own work in respect to Creation. This examination will allow us to then prepare for the task of developing a relational practical theology.

## Diversity

As we will explore in Chapter 4, *The Normative Task: Constructing a Relational Practical Theology*, the following is suggestive about the epistemological underpinning that occurs when relationships and stories are preferenced:

1. Blessing, both historically and chronologically within the Creation stories, occurs first (Henry xxvii; Simpson "Genesis" *Interpreter's* 466): "We are first and foremost the beneficiaries of an original blessing and not the victims of an original sin" (O'Murchu 18); and,
2. The Tree of Knowledge, as midrash, was a reflection of the complexity and ambiguity that arises with knowledge. The Creation stories, therefore, are not prohibitive but serve as a warning or challenge (Lieber 15 & 21).

This dialogical or midrashic preference finds similar parallels in The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) own movement away from the harm that arises when theological preferences nurture homophobia. One of those imperial theologies that the UCCan has interrogated suspiciously is the doctrine of Original Sin.

As we mentioned in *A History of Deconstruction*, in 1946, the UCCan identified that marriage, as understood within the second Creation story in Genesis (2:4-24), was normative as heterosexual in orientation and was primarily concerned with procreation (UCCan *Marriage 1946* 109-110). Even that document, however, recognised an inherent challenge that arose out of the lived experience of women after World War II. In particular, the study recognised that the freedom attained by women as they entered the workforce during the war years had led to conversations about equality (*Marriage 1946* 112). This tension, normative gender roles in respect to heterosexual marriage and the movement toward equality in respect to employment and social norms, is in many ways the departure point from which the UCCan moved successively toward a theology of diversity.

This movement is underscored by the study that would follow almost sixty years later. In 2005, *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding* shifted from a heterosexual and procreative lens in respect to marriage as understood in Genesis to one that is intrinsically relational: "God creates us for relationships, and God calls us into relationships. The creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis describe God's creation of a good world—a world filled with the marvellous diversity of God's creation" (UCCan *Marriage 2005* 4).

This celebration of diversity-in-relationship contains a proviso that is key to any hermeneutic that intends to be reparative, and that is the possibility for change: "The creation stories allow room for further development. God evaluates the created world as good, not perfect. God has not created a static world; it is still in the process of becoming. God, continually creating, invites us to experience the new creation unfolding around us" (UCCan *Marriage 2005* 4).

This *unfolding* is important as it highlights a tension in a particular reading of the creation stories as static perfection. The idea of perfection, which traces its way through Augustine's philosophical orientation to the Platonic endeavour (Phipps 132), stands in tension with an orientation that preferences the lived experience, which may (at times) seem ambiguous but is also in constant movement and change. This unfolding, as understood in lived experience, has ancient parallels with the Midrash of the Genesis stories that recognises that the Creation stories do not establish perfection and completion, but that the ongoing development of human activity, as co-Creators with God, is relational (UCCan *Marriage 2005* 5). This relationality, furthermore, is theologically present in the Christian idea of covenant (UCCan *Membership* 2-3), and sin, when framed relationally, can be seen to be central in this part of the UCCan 1988 Confessional Statement:



5. We confess that we are a broken and hurting community. In our search for God's intention, at times we have become fractious and judgmental and have caused and experienced hurt, misunderstanding and estrangement.

6a. We confess before God that as a Christian community we have participated in a history of injustice and persecution against gay and lesbian persons in violation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (UCCan *Membership* 3)

As the UCCan has moved from its founding, in which it was intrinsically connected to the mechanisms of state and thus an agent in perpetuating normative expectations, which we have explored in respect to White Privilege, the denomination also was clearly situated in a paradox. In order to establish its union, each denomination had to make space to accept the differences of its partners. This historic UCCan relational orientation, if you will, has continued to influence a theological discussion that is reparative in nature.

The reparative trajectory would eventually frame the Creation stories as not static in nature, but as embracing the reality that constant construction and meaning are formed in the relational nature of Genesis. This relational orientation, therefore, embraced the foundational stories as "a part of the marvellous diversity of creation" (UCCan *Of Love* 3). This "marvellous diversity," therefore, made space to explore previously exclusive theological positions, such as those informing attitudes toward sexual orientation. Though this expansive unfolding does not explicitly connect violence and trauma that we have discussed, it was nonetheless implicit in the ongoing UCCan theological reflection (UCCan *Of Love* 13-15 & 53).

In this reorientation to the relational, the UCCan has had to begin to wrestle with the ethical implications of previous theological preferences that have caused harm through such interpretive dimensions as violence and trauma. These implications, therefore, bring us full circle to the role of practical theology as one way in which the church continues to be suspicious:

The theme of "relationship" runs throughout the statement of faith. God's desire for relationship is cited as the source of creation and the nature of the Holy Trinity. The statement of faith holds up Jesus' challenging ethic of love as central to Christian faith. And it uses words such as "partnership," "solidarity," "community," and the quest for "right relationship" to talk about the gifts of the Spirit and tasks of the church. (UCCan *Song* 14)

The UCCan journey has a long history, therefore, of recognising "relationship" as a theological category. Relationship, however, in this instance has been revealed through its preferencing of suspicion. Though this preference reveals harm, it does not seek reparation,

relationally, but further deconstruction as we have discussed in regard to a hermeneutic of suspicion. Relational practical theology, therefore, is the construction upon which we are set. Such a construction, therefore, affords the possibility of addressing the harm that suspicion reveals.

## Summary

In this interpretive task, we have explored the dimensions that illustrate the nature of harm that arises from imperial theologies. This has been important because it has allowed us an opportunity to understand the manner in which story, violence, and trauma are part of the lived experiences for those who find such inherited traditions inflexible. Furthermore, this has been important as it allows The United Church of Canada (UCCan) an opportunity to appreciate how its own suspicious deconstruction of its inherited theological traditions continue to affect lives. While these inheritances have helped the UCCan continue to expand a theology of diversity, the church has done so (primarily) with a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Suspicion alone, however, is unable to address what occurs when local congregations must bear witness to lives that are hurt, harmed, and even shattered. Suspicion alone is unable to help faith communities articulate ways to care for those who arrive seeking healing. Ultimately, the deconstructive nature of suspicion is unable to help local faith communities develop meaning and language that allows them to witness and be witnesses as stories are shared about the experience of harm as a result of imperial theologies.

The intention of this interpretive task, therefore, has been to better appreciate this harm. The UCCan has been deconstructing such harm for almost a century. This has led us to an appreciation that the Christian Creation story connects to an intention to seek reparation or healing from the learnings that arise from a suspicious orientation.

This suggestion is important in the current context in which the UCCan find itself. From its orientation of suspicion, it has nurtured a theology of diversity that addresses the limitations of its inherited imperial theologies. This deconstructive tradition has served it well theologically, but it has not, due to the nature of suspicion, been able to help translate that into practices at a local congregational level. In order to do that, a relational practical theology informed by a hermeneutic of reparation promises to help in the intimate reality of pastoral relationships.

As we shall explore next, this ability to nurture resilience locally also promises to equip congregations to engage in missional identity formation in the midst of denominational change that has been driven by a narrative of deficit. The practices that arise from a relational practical theology, therefore, can provide a foundation for denominational change that is oriented to abundance, not the national fear of financial and structural constraints.

#### 4. The Normative Task: Developing a Relational Practical Theology

The conversation between theology and other fields is a part of all the tasks of practical theological interpretation ... [T]he normative task poses the question of practical theology's relationship to other disciplines most clearly. Normative theological perspectives provide interpretive guides with help in determining what they ought to do.

(Osmer 173)

We have, thus far, explored our task to construct a relational practical theology through the descriptive and interpretive tasks as laid out by Richard Osmer. We have done this in order to assist The United Church of Canada (UCCan) to explore self-identity in its structural change context, so it can share its (reclaimed) missional understating that is grounded in a theology of diversity. In the descriptive task, we discussed the UCCan's history of deconstructing inherited theological norms that were found to be in tension with the lived experience of people. This began, initially, as a result of gender expectations that limited the freedom of women who enjoyed increasing liberty as a result of the war years in the twentieth century.

As we continued in the descriptive task, we came to recognise that from the interrogation of gendered norms, the UCCan has continued to expand its theological perspective as a theology of diversity. In this context of theological interrogation, through the lens of suspicion, we also named that the current structural context of the denomination is grounded in a change process that is informed by an orientation to deficit and fear. These two factors, a theology of diversity and deficit-driven change, at the local level, has led to a tension in regard to missional identity.

At the end of the descriptive task, we then moved onto the interpretive. In this part of our conversation, we explored the implications of lived experiences in those traditions that the UCCan has deconstructed and reconstituted as a theology of diversity. In witnessing this lived experience, we were able to recognise, by focusing on homophobia as one example that arises from the denomination's historic deconstruction, harm. Such harm, or trauma arises from imperial theological traditions that are inflexible.

In recognising this inflexibility, we continued in the interpretive task to explore how suspicion, without a reparative intention, does not facilitate the witness of violence and trauma in such lived realities of homophobia at the local level. By introducing a hermeneutic of reparation to the UCCan's tradition of suspicion, therefore, we have suggested that, at the local level, the missional identity of the UCCan might be able to shift. In particular, the denomination, by embracing a relational practical theology, can pivot from its fear-informed

structural change back to one in which abundance, as discussed in the generative nature of the Creation Story, can enliven missional revival at the local level.

Before us now, therefore, lies the normative task. There are many ways in which we might proceed in this part of our work. Richard Osmer offers this synopsis of the normative task:

1. Theological Interpretation: using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, and contexts, informed by a theory of divine and human action;
2. Ethical Reflection: using ethical principles, rules, or guidelines to guide action toward moral ends;
3. Good Practice: deriving norms from good practice, by exploring models of such practice in the present and past or by engaging reflexively in transforming practice in the present. (161)

In regard to the theological and ethical components of the interpretive task, we shall engage in critical correlation between practical theology and relational construction. We have already outlined some of the history of the method of correlation. Osmer introduces us to a further innovation of the practice, which complements the work that Paul Tillich began and which Don Browning further expanded upon (Osmer 165-66). In particular, Richard Osmer presents us with this further revision: a revised praxis method of correlation.

A revised praxis method of correlation, which situates the dialogue between theology and other fields in a broader conversation than rational exchange between academic disciplines. What is brought into a mutually influential relationship is the praxis of new social movements committed to human liberation and the praxis of the Christian community. Praxis is the struggle against some concrete form of oppression and includes theoretical reflection that guides this struggle. Critical social theories, for example, play an important role in critiquing ideologies that legitimate dominant social patterns and in helping social movements become clear about their goals. In the revised praxis correlational model, thus, the first and most important dialogue is between movements and communities sharing common emancipatory goals. The dialogue between theology and other fields is a second step, arising out of transforming praxis and helping to guide this praxis. (167)

It is through a revised praxis method of correlation, therefore, that we will engage practical theology and relational construction as conversational partners. One other

correlative conversation that we will consider is the manner in which relational construction can speak to the current structural change that the UCCan is engaged in. We will also continue to further the previous conversation about lament and witness. Each of these conversations, therefore, are important as they help us to construct a relational practical theology that allows the local congregations to enliven missional opportunities to help shift the denomination away from an orientation of fear to one of abundance.

In the final part of the normative task, we will shift to the Good Practice of this practical theological stage of our discussion. The resulting insights from the correlative conversations will help us to focus on Good Practice as a way to “generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition” (Osmer 152). This Good Practice will allow us to complete this interpretive task by constructing a relational practical theology in which we have been engaged.

### Practical Theology: Multiplicity

Whether on an individual basis, such as those who have experienced the limitations of living within inherited Christian theological traditions, or by engaging the role of the institutional church that has helped shape those traditions, practical theology affords us the opportunity to explore these limitations as lived experience. As we have discussed, The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been doing this systematically since the mid-twentieth century. Practical theology, when engaging in the insights of relational construction, is better positioned to continue the UCCan’s work of recognising ways to offer healing, liberation, and emancipation.

I would like to introduce into our conversation, therefore, the manner in which practical theology operates, often within multiple contexts. In these various locations, knowledge and language that may arise and bloom becomes specific to the “social, cultural, historical, and communal processes” in which they arise (Anderson “Collaborative Relationship” 10).

Anderson refers to knowledge and language as being fluid and not static. This practical observation is, itself, living and changing. Van Der Lans illustrates this as he observes the following: “In living religions, tradition is not a static system of immutable ideas and conventions, but a continuous process of acts of communication. When a living religion is the object of study, then research into tradition-as-process is of primary importance” (31-32).

As a living religion, Christianity is lived out through its practical theological conversations. It is in the practice of faith, as lived examples of the human condition, that practical theology nurtures generativity (Immink 148). This multiplicity, the many complementary and parallel practices of practical theology, ranges from the academic to the interpersonal, from theological exploration to the tangible reality of spiritual companionship

and pastoral care (Cahalan & Nieman 64). This reality, therefore, often precludes the universalising of truths or establishing uniform expectations. As a result, “the context has temporal and spatial dimensions” (Cahalan & Nieman 80).

This lack of universality highlights that practical theology is an “operational” practice (Hiltner 20-21). It is an endeavour that preferences practice, in order to illustrate the implications of the academic within real lives (Miller-McLemore “Practical” 182; Miller-McLemore *Discipline* 1198). Practice becomes the litmus test of generativity and whether historically established traditions are life-giving or soul-devouring.

This ongoing rehearsal, to use a further metaphor, becomes an ongoing interpretive act that presents possibilities that continually create new conversations in which practice and theology interplay (Cahalan & Nieman 82; Miller-McLemore *Discipline* 2585) in what Miller-McLemore refers to as a reconstructing “theological pedagogy” (Miller-McLemore “Practical” 187). It is in the daily lives of Christians, who are endeavouring to live their faith with intention, that we are better able to explore these old traditions in new ways (Bass 33; Bevans 47; Pattison & Woodward 8; Reader 7).

In turn, intentional and critical reflection unfolds within community, personal experiences, and Christian sources (Browning 22). Lartey expresses this in the following manner: “Critical to an understanding of pastoral theology, then, is the insistence that the critical, interpretive, constructive and expressive dimension be held together in creative tension” (*Intercultural* 20). This tension, ultimately, helps us recognise that it is within our daily lives and culture, not outside of them, that the movement of the Holy might be discerned (Northcott 160):

By attending to specific settings, practical theology opens a window onto this larger tradition. At the same time, it enables that tradition itself to be challenged by particular communities, corrected and enriched through emerging local expressions. By standing here and now, the field can launch a mutually critical conversation between any one community and the larger streams in which it stands. (Cahalan & Nieman 81)

### Practical Theology: A Relational Orientation

From a practical theological perspective, theology is a reflexive practice, one in which the relational nature is central to the endeavour. From this orientation, the Christian Trinitarian tradition comes more sharply into focus. Specifically, at the very heart of the Trinitarian model, the Holy is understood and described as fundamentally relational (Cahalan 161).

It is in this relationality, this communion if you will (Bevans 48), that the story of the Divine becomes our story. In turn, our stories become central to how we navigate the doctrines that become orthodox and normative. Our stories are grounded in the community, itself, as a relational body that is ever fluid (Hoggard 1380; Robertson 125). This fluidity, therefore, is the manner in which practical relational theology preferences the local experience and how each particularity finds ways to address that to which it has witnessed. Though such responses may speak to larger generalities, it is in the particularity of communal relationships that reparation and restoration can be nurtured.

By interrogating theological inheritances from a practical theological orientation, we can identify the impact orthodoxy has on the quality of life of those who embrace discipleship. This interrogation, as Hiltner describes it, is a “discriminating dialogue” between faith and culture (22). This dialogue begins operationally by asking questions theologically.

Theological questioning leads us to explore actual lived experience (Hiltner 22 & 24). This inquiring vantage point, ultimately, speaks to a duty of care that requires us to orient ourselves mutually and reciprocally. In this manner we engage in relational construction (Bidwell *Buddhist* 7; Hiltner 197).

When practical theology is grounded in multiplicity, therefore, it is not our intention to establish or reinforce the universal trajectory of a meta-narrative that is doctrine. Rather, from individual experiences, the potential for emancipation occurs (Wallace 98). From a liberationist and feminist perspective of suspicion, the particularity of our stories highlights the ways our theologies might oppress. By highlighting oppression, the next task that we introduce is the manner in which reparation – healing – might occur relationally.

In our endeavour to identify oppression, the next step is to nurture mutual release as a collective act. In *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Pattison and Woodward frame the implications when our theological preferences do not address the realities of the everyday: “If practical theological activity fails to take into account the realities of the contemporary human condition, or if it produces high-flown theory that cannot be understood or applied in practice, it is arguable that it forsakes an important part of its identity and value” (7).

Suspicion as a creative and innovative practice is propelled by imagination that facilitates the sharing of particular stories in public. Often the tendency of orthodox practice and belief is to silence that which does not conform must be dismissed, disregarded, or disputed. Practical theology, however, creates a relational playground that invites communal conversation in which people are understood as both interconnected and autonomous beings (Wallace 100 & 102). This playful exercise includes those too often excluded and marginalised (Miller-McLemore *Discipline* 83).

For some, the practice of practical theology begins in the theoretical: the theological (Pattison & Woodward 12). In this theoretical context, we are beginning a conversation



between practical theology and relational construction. From my experience, I believe that it is in the conversation that arises from the lived experience witnessed in the praxis of practical theology that leads to engagement with the theoretical. From “Losing the Self, Finding the Self,” Wallace shares this observation of practical theology when it engages with relational construction:

Postmodern theology emphasizes both intellectual rigor and creative fidelity to the textual origins of Christian faith. On the one hand, it abides by communal norms of argument and rationality in order to articulate a body of beliefs that can withstand critical scrutiny and possible refutation; in so doing, however, it refuses to be held hostage to any philosophical assumptions (metaphysical or otherwise) that will blunt its move toward understanding the complexity of its subject matter, the mystery we call God. On the other hand, postmodern theology seeks rhetorical resonance to its documentary sources in order to construct a full-bodied vision of the divine life that can engender vitality and well being; in so doing, however, a biblically sonorous theology is vigilant in resisting the sectarian temptation to limit theology to the role of defending biblical or church orthodoxy. Eschewing both philosophical limits and ecclesial conformity, postmodern theology seeks creative and, at times, subversive fidelity to the biblical and historical traditions that can fund visions of liberation and change for a world in crisis. (98)

## Practical Theology & Relational Construction: Bridges

For much of The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) history, it has been an institution that has lived (at least) two paradoxical truths. As it has challenged and deconstructed its inheritance from the Christian tradition, it has been able to identify and name its role as an agent of Empire. At the same time, in this deconstructive enterprise, it has broadened its theological orientation to embrace diversity in response to interrogating imperial traditional norms, such as gender roles. Yet it has also become mired in a deficit perspective that has distracted from its evolving expansive theological endeavour, which has in it an embedded missional identity that speaks to a twenty-first century that is significantly different than the UCCan's birth context at the beginning of the twentieth.

In many ways, practical theology is able to bridge this experience for the UCCan. In particular, as practical theology engages in conversation with relational construction in the lived meaning moments that occur in pastoral relationships, it becomes possible for this paradox to find a balance that recognises the insight of suspicion and becomes future and missional driven by being informed by an intention to reparation.

As we have discussed, relying on suspicion, in times of change, carries with it the danger of paranoia. By introducing a hermeneutic of reparation, it is possible for the UCCan to navigate well times of change. Practical theology has developed complementary orientations that are made explicit from a relational preference through the transition of change (Campbell 82). Though not normative, practical theology has utilised the epistemology, theory of knowledge, that has been nurtured from a relational constructionist perspective within a North American context: "Social constructionism is an epistemological, not ontological, theory; it does not make claims about the nature of private experience or physical reality but about the process of expressing and making sense of private experiences, including experiences with physical reality" (Bidwell "Real/izing" 63).

In "Real/izing the Sacred: Spiritual Direction and Social Constructionism," Bidwell discusses how an orientation toward relational construction complements practical theology, especially in respect to the practice of spiritual direction/companioning (60). The parallel, in particular, connects the vocation of such companioning with secular endeavours such as narrative therapy. In the relational dialogue that exists between therapist/spiritual director and client/directee, the client/directee's wisdom has the potential to create both new meaning and to heal (Bidwell "Real/izing" 60 & 63).

Bidwell threads relational construction in respect to meaning-making within the spiritual companioning relationship ("Real/izing" 67). In turn, this epistemological position then lends itself to potential theological explorations that are (possibly) unbound from previous traditions and/or discourses: "The constructionist idea that an understanding of God first emerges between director and directee through social processes and only then becomes

privatized for later access by both individuals was illustrated for me by another directee” (Bidwell “Real/izing” 67).

And,

Thus, the ways in which God has been real/ized become a relational resource that may provide foundation and impetus for future action in the spiritual direction relationship and in the relationships between God and the directee and the director. This concept may be a particularly pragmatic contribution of social constructionist inquiry to the theory and practice of spiritual direction. (Bidwell “Real/izing” 68)

As mentioned, there are many ways to explore the bridges between practical theology and relational construction. From the vantage of practical theology, we might explore how the UCCan’s current context is that of being both in a place oriented toward deficit and embracing a theological orientation that is missional. One way to do that is to explore parallels that arise from both disciplines, if you will: narrative therapy and spiritual direction/companionship.

This parallel allows for both a particular understanding of knowledge creation (i.e. between therapist/companion and client/directee) and contextual understanding that occurs between groups of people (i.e. denominations, congregations, house churches) as they wrestle for theological meaning from a context that can feel disconnected from inherited theological traditions, which might be experienced as both inaccessible and harmful. By acknowledging that meaning making can be co-created relationally, we can begin to imagine translating previously limiting traditions that have been challenged by the UCCan into accessible (and possibly multiple) truths that become generative in nature.

In *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning describes this context when those with a relational orientation explore “T”ruths, especially those who identify as Christians and attempt to wrestle with the need to (re)understand traditions that seem distant and/or unapproachable (xvi): “We are in a period of social reconstruction. On the one hand, we have relied in recent centuries too much on theoretical and technical reasons to solve our problems. On the other hand, we have relied too much on blind custom and tradition” (Browning xvi).

Browning further describes what this means for twenty-first century Christians and how communities of faith address inherited theological traditions:

When a religious community hits a crisis in its practices, it then begins reflecting (asking questions) about its meaningful or theory-laden practices. It

may take time to describe these practices so it can better understand the question precipitated by the crisis. Eventually, if it is serious, the community must re-examine the sacred texts and events that constitute the source of the norms and ideals that guide its practices. It brings its questions to these normative texts and has a conversation between its questions and these texts. (xviii)

Browning further bridges what we have been attempting to explore. This ability to “re-examine,” as he phrases it, connects the reflexive capacity that occurs, regardless of whether that is on an individual relational basis, as described by Bidwell, or on a larger communal one, such as within a community of faith. In both cases, there is certainly anxiety and uncertainty in confronting crisis, but a relationally constructed approach to dialogue creates space for new meaning in light of old norms. And, in turn, such new meaning ultimately leads to the possibility of practices that are life-giving.

This re-examining and reflexive orientation, which comes into focus when practical theology and relational construction engage conversationally, is important. It is important because it highlights the normative task, as we have discussed, as a revised praxis method of correlation. Osmer connects our conversation, this far, in the following manner:

[A] revised praxis method of correlation situates the dialogue between theology and other fields in a broader conversation than rational exchange between academic disciplines. What is brought into a mutually influential relationship is the praxis of new social movements committed to human liberation and the praxis of the Christian community. Praxis is the struggle against some concrete form of oppression and includes theoretical reflection that guides this struggle. Critical social theories, for example, play an important role in critiquing ideologies that legitimate dominant social patterns and in helping social movements become clear about their goals. In the revised praxis correlational model, thus, the first and most important dialogue is between movements and communities sharing common emancipatory goals. The dialogue between theology and other fields is a second step, arising out of transforming praxis and helping to guide this praxis. (167)

In this observation, prior to moving further into the unfolding conversation between practical theology and relational construction, it is important to name the following:

- Social critical theory, in this conversation, is epistemological in nature. What that means is that though it might advocate that it is in the locality that meaning is made,

it does not, however, prescribe process from a meta-theory orientation. Relational construction, therefore, is (if you will) an operationalising preference that sees in the relationship of the particular the possibility for healing. In this constructionist orientation, we can understand that practical theology, relationally at the local congregational level, is a lived opportunity to create new meaning that arises from witnessing the violence and trauma we have discussed. This, then, is a reparative practice because it attends to what has been witnessed and not the witnessing itself. In this attending, therefore, reparation begins in the new meaning that arises;

- Practical theology brings to relational construction a faith tradition that has a long history of nurturing community. In this orientation, the lived experience of the community becomes a generative opportunity for this constructionist orientation to be more than just a “rational exchange between academic disciplines.” In this “more than” movement, the generative opportunity to expand meaning becomes key;
- This communal context, the place in which the praxis of witnessing occurs, is best understood in our endeavour as the congregational/pastoral relationship. Such witnessing becomes evident in the lived experience within the theological inheritances that the UCCan has deconstructed. In the UCCan’s current context, however, without a reparative preference, it is difficult to offer healing in the particularity of the local; and,
- “The dialogue between theology and other fields” is one way in which a “transforming praxis [can] help to guide this praxis.” (Osmer 167)

### Why?

I suspect there are many questions that can be and are being asked in respect to the change that confronts us all, regardless of religious affiliation, cultural context, or social location. Each points to a paradox: even though we may want to “hunker down,” chaos is often required in order to move through crisis and change and allow newness to emerge. This idea of change and crisis from a relational oriented practical theology is articulated in different ways.

Remembering and forgetting are two ways to express this practical theological perspective. When the traditions and discourses, which have helped reinforce what is considered normative become ubiquitous, the contexts and history that formed them become forgotten. In turn, such traditions and discourses enable underlying assumptions that can lead to stereotyping and oppression in other contexts. Forgetting our past can leave us unable to navigate our future. In “History, Practice, and Theological Education,” Daniels and Smith describe the theological task of remembering as one in which suppressed alternatives

are revisited as ways to invigorate imagination to facilitate the shift from that which binds to that which may be:

Histories of church practices are of more than antiquarian interest. They have the power to demystify practices that have become second nature, and so beyond conscious reflection. By retrieving the historical and social process by which a practice came to be established, we hope to open up critical and faithful conversation. By recalling the reasons given for establishing a practice, we hope to give students vocabulary for sharing in that conversation. And by remembering suppressed alternatives - the losers of historical struggles - we hope to stock the imaginations of pastors with lost treasures. Rummaging through the past can yield historical resources for charting new directions in ministry. But the resources of the past are not endlessly fungible goods that we can use in whatever ways we wish. We believe that the goods of the past also make claims on us. And good histories listen for ways the past addresses the church today. (Daniels & Smith 215)

The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) own journey illustrates a commitment not to forget. It has and does question the imperial assumptions it has inherited, which has led to its trajectory toward a theology not of limitation or boundedness but expansivity. As one engages in the act of remembering or revisiting, it is worth asking about one's intention. What, then, is the impetus or catalyst that compels us to ask questions – to be suspicious?

From both a practical theology perspective and for those who are situated within a secular relational construction position (Gergen & Gergen 923), many recognise that all is not right with the world. Even among futurists (Rees *Century*) who endeavour to imagine where we, as a species, may be heading, there is a general consensus that we stand on the threshold of both great potential, as well as stark challenges. In "Ways of Abundant Life," Dorothy C. Bass describes this tension, perhaps even paradox, in the following manner:

At a time when it is impossible to ignore the harm caused by our own patterns of consumption, how can our life together honor all creation as belonging to God and teach us to dwell rightly and faithfully within this creation? What difference might Jesus' own love for those who are poor make in how we answer these and the many other challenging questions that arise? (22)

Furthermore, in *Reconstructing Practical Theology*, John Reader continues the conversation begun by Bass by observing the following:

Many of the challenges faced by the human species as we enter this new century are global in scope. Many also fall under the heading of sustainability. Whether one is talking about access to the resources which sustain our civilization and economies, such as oil, water, food and other sources of energy, or the supposed impact of humans upon the environment, given fears about climate change and global warming, it seems that it cannot be assumed that “business as usual” is going to be possible. (117)

My intention in dipping into the deep end, if you will, is not to dramatise or sensationalise what seems to be a generally accepted concern. Whether traditional media is reporting on climate change, refugee crises, environmental degradation, or violence and terrorism, the collective (Western) narrative is consistently, even constantly, framed in terms of fear, danger, and crisis (Bass 22). Into this list, therefore, we would add the fear that has driven the UCCan’s structural change: deficit (as fear). If we are to endeavour to address such dis-ease, we need to acknowledge the “elephant in the room.”

### Deductive & Inductive: Unfolding Stories

In the interpretive task, we explored the role of story, in particular, as lived experience. In this part of the normative task, therefore, we will explore what a conversation between relational construction and practical theology might further offer.

There are many ways to explore stories, and often from a Western preference it is the deductive, sometimes expressed through a scientific lens, that is utilised. In the case of climate change, for instance, the use of modelling and deep-sea core samples tracks historic variations to create data. In turn, such data can be studied in order to demonstrate change (aberrant or “nominal”) in a deductive manner that leads to a claim and position that climate change is, in fact, occurring. From a constructionist perspective, this is one way to tell such a story.

Another way, however, is the inductive. Though one critique might dismiss the inductive as inferior, personal experience from a relational constructionist stance can create a similar or parallel narrative. Whether considering collectives of people (i.e., oral tradition of an indigenous people) or the individual experience of a farmer, it is possible that their contexts and experiences inductively identify the weather patterns they confront as different enough to warrant a claim of climate change. Two ways to tell the same story—the scientific data-driven narrative and the subjective experiential reporting of those “on the front lines,” so to speak—when further approached collaboratively create the potential for multiple narratives that might be accessible, as opposed to polarising to the extent of entrenchment, to us.

Practical theology, as a practice or reflective praxis, therefore, allows us to value equally the inductive and the deductive:

One important methodological concept that should be noted is that of induction. Often thinking uses a deductive method whereby conclusions are deduced from authoritative principles or texts. Thus some people would deduce from the biblical example of Jesus caring for the poor and the meek that Christians in the contemporary world should also care for these groups or individuals. An inductive method proceeds the opposite way by looking at the reality of things as they seem to be and then formulating principles or general truths from this. While both induction and deduction can form part of the theological process, induction has a particularly important place. Practical theologians often assume that it is necessary to take the “text” of contemporary reality as seriously as tradition and historically derived principles so that theology is addressed by and addresses contemporary concerns in all their multiplicity and confusion. (Pattison & Woodward 10)

Practical theology and its praxis involve reflection and action, which facilitates mutual liberation that occurs relationally. As Freire demonstrates, it is only by addressing in solidarity the nature of oppression that those who oppress and those who are oppressed might experience freedom from the forces and systems that inevitably arise in respect to normalisation:

This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization—the people's historical vocation. The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. (Freire 85)

In the Christian context, therefore, we must be daring at times to test theological assumptions that lead to oppression. This idea of daring is crystallised when Katherine Turpin describes this choice as an *interrogation of praxis* (“Consuming” 71 emphasis added). This interrogation, therefore, connects both the hermeneutic of suspicion, as we have discussed, and recognises the reparative when we consider the Good Practice component of the Normative Task, which will end this chapter.

From a liberationist position in respect to practical theology, since Freire, the work that has unfolded and continues reminds us that it is in the relational stance of construction



that newness emerges. In turn, generative themes can be identified by courageously and daringly questioning when that which is normative is oppressive.

By claiming and naming the importance of liberative praxis, which is part of the revised praxis method of correlation we are exploring as suggested by Osmer, the binaries that arise from established doctrine become more apparent. Though there can be a tension in such positioning, this liberative praxis allows us to hear people's stories as more than simply abstract data. It is in hearing about lived experiences that we are better equipped to recognise the implications of these inherited theological traditions, which we have explored from The United Church of Canada's (UCCan) commitment to deconstruction. Cooper-White describes this liberative praxis in the following manner:

Binary divisions between Christian tradition and human experience, or theology and practice, are false dichotomies. Theology and the lived situation cannot be pulled apart, except as an exercise of abstract thought. The aim of practical theology is not speculation, but liberative praxis. Practical theology is not merely the application of systematic theologians' abstract conceptions through a refinement of pastoral skills. I would also argue that it is more than "critical theological reflection upon practices of the Church as they interact with practices of the world" (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 5). Practical theology is a constructive theology in its own right, in which all categories of scriptural exegesis and doctrinal formulation are open for ongoing consideration and critique. (24)

This leads us back to the previous exploration of inductive and deductive as it relates to the practice of practical theology. By preferencing, though not excluding the deductive, the inductive, theological, psychological, and philosophical implications of Christian theological traditions can be examined not in a manner to reinforce orthodoxy, but to unravel and question (Cooper-White 23). This unravelling has been part of the UCCan's journey for almost one hundred years.

When inductively approaching theological discourse, knowledge or learning that is created is not always pretty or clean (Bass 23; Miller-McLemore *Wiley* 14). There is and will be ambiguity and often more questions as opposed to the certainty that is often demanded and expected from a deductive orientation (Turpin "Liberationist" 158). It is in the uncertainty that the questions become just as, if not more, important as any revealed learning or tentative answers. In this perspective, practical theology can also be understood as a "dialectical discipline" (Lartey *Intercultural* 20), which highlights the many layers of the lived experience.

This lack of certainty arises because the stories that unfold within doctrine impact real lives: doctrine does not exist in an academic abstract vacuum. Traditional Christian theologies

can and do have implications that affect lives in tangible and concrete ways as people are situated within social, political, and cultural contexts. Without questioning and interrogating these inherited traditions, people's lives and experiences can be taken for granted (Mercer 97).

The people and those who administer church structures that surround and pervade Christian traditions must be as open to us to explore them, just as we review and question abstract philosophical traditions that have and continue to unfold in a dynamic and relational faith. This imperative has been part of the unfolding reality of the UCCan as it has acknowledged its role in Empire and, at the same time, has broadened traditions it has inherited in order to welcome and not exclude.

In "Liberationist Practical Theology," Turpin seems to articulate well this bridge we have discussed in respect to deductive/inductive aspects of practical theology and liberation praxis in these two observations:

Although all practical theology concerns itself with contextual specificity and increasingly faithful practice, liberationist practical theology turns its focus to situations of suffering and oppression that demand redress. Grounding its reflection in the experience of persons who suffer from the oppression generated by structures of unequal power, liberationist practical theology pursues praxis, the rich interplay of theory and practice, which increases justice and recognition of the full humanity and equality of all persons. ("Liberationist" 153);

and

Liberationist practical theologians tend to focus more on public praxis as the starting and ending point of theological reflection rather than focusing primarily on increasing faithfulness and discipleship through the use of Christian practices within communities of faith that are more central in other parts of the field. ("Liberationist" 157)

### Assumptions, Truth & Objectivity

As practical theology and relational construction come into conversation, the role of lived experience becomes central to the endeavour to construct a relational practical theology. This lived experience, which we have sometimes referred to as story, is the way in which the practice of practical theology witnesses the implications of the imperial theological traditions that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has historically questioned. This practice

often occurs within the local congregational community where it has not necessarily been equipped with relational practices to address the implications of the UCCan's theological deconstruction. As we continue along this path, to construct a relational practical theology, the stories that we witness, in the local pastoral context, also invite further correlative conversations in respect to truth and objectivity.

It can be easy to be overwhelmed as we explore a conversation between practical theology and relational construction. The reality is that there is a rich tradition from which to draw. Though I do not intend to become mired in such an exciting distraction, I suspect that listing some of the assumptions that inform this current conversation would be helpful. In particular, as we navigate through some of those principles, we will hopefully lay further foundation for a relational practical theology construction.

At this point, let us review a few assumptions about relational construction. Naming them will help us better appreciate the implication in respect to practical theology. As we continue to move from the academic to the practical, it is important to be clear about the underlying cornerstones or assumptions that will be a part of our conversation.

#### Assumptions (Relational Construction):

- Rejects the position of ultimate "Truth" and structuralism (Burr 11);
- Embraces a plurality of multiple views and voices as opposed to seeing the world through metanarratives or theories that endeavour to cover "everything" (Burr 12);
- Sees the Self as constructed socially and within interconnected relational community(ies) (Wallace 102);
- Holds certain binaries in a both/and manner: uncertainty vs. certainty; change vs. stability; local/historical/cultural contingencies vs. universal laws (McNamee "Postmodern" 57);
- The relationship is central to relational construction. As such, there is no uniform process in regard to meaning making. This is an ethical orientation as it helps highlight the need to recognise that lived experience can expose how some inherited theological traditions have impacted individual lives. These impacts, however, only become apparent or a topic for exploration when the individual becomes the *centre of relating* (McNamee "Postmodern" 57; emphasis added);
- Privileges collaboration in respect to generativity. In order for our narrative conversation to model how new meaning might arise in our postmodern cultural context, collaboration makes space for many voices to be heard and to create collectively. Whether that is between an individual and her caregiver (such as pastor, spiritual companion, or therapist) or organisations (such as faith communities), nurturing collective reflexivity harnesses multiple experiences, which traditionally

might only include what the “professional” might prescribe (McNamee “Relational” 1839); and,

- Understands reality as co-constructed through relationships (McNamee & Hosking 61).

### Truth & Objectivity

The Christian theological tradition has, often, been concerned with establishing Truth. This positioning has a long history that has nurtured a discourse that considers truth through a right/wrong paradigm. It is important, therefore, to recognise that this tradition is exactly what the lived experience of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has confronted. As it has shifted, challenged, and rejected inherited Christian traditions that have bounded “normal” to a broader endeavour of expansivity that we have referred to as a theology of diversity, it has recognised that multiple realities exist at the same time.

I would like to spend just a little more time exploring “truth.” There are obviously many facets that we might discuss, but one particular area connects with objectivity. There is an important nuance that arises in respect to practical theology and the connexion with narrative, as an application of relational construction.

For some, preferencing the lived experience of a story, even from an epistemological orientation, can invite a charge of relativism: a critique that contends that we exist in a libertarian *laissez-faire* relationship to one another where *anything goes as long as it does not infringe upon another person*. This challenge is helpful in articulating a response that is relational in nature.

Rather than being simply individuals who are “absolutised and relativised,” relational construction affords or “giv[es] us [the] tools to know ourselves and our own knowing more accurately” (Cook & Alexander 344). In this self-knowing, we become better able to appreciate that the concern of relativism is addressed by recognising our relational connexion to one another.

A relational orientation in the practice of practical theology, therefore, allows us to ask questions about what has been normalised, relativised, and absolutised. Rather than framing ourselves in relativistic terms, it becomes possible to note our interconnectivity to one another. Furthermore, such a position allows us to recognise that this interpersonal relationality is grounded in theological mutuality (McMillan 889).

In recognising this relationality, the concern about relativism is further addressed with the understanding that knowledge and language are dependent upon our “social practices and social relationships” (Popp-Baier 42) and that any sense of truth is always limited by the symbols we choose to express what we collectively call reality (Cook “Chapter 3”). In “Stories

of Encounter,” McMillan, therefore, makes the connexion between postmodernity, narrative, and practical theology in the following manner:

This challenge is closely linked with Narrative Therapy’s post-modern, social constructionist philosophy. This post-modern philosophical perspective is that we never really encounter reality and that we are denied the luxury or pretense of claiming naïve, immediate access to the world. It proposes that we can never get outside our knowledge to check its accuracy against “objective” reality. Our access to objective reality or Truth is always mediated by our own linguistic and conceptual constructions. Encountering these ideas can be experienced as a significant challenge to people who prize certainty in their understandings of God. (761)

This connexion further assists practices that are relational to assist people in exploring their stories in generative ways, which do not lead to flattened norms. Otherwise, anyone who is so categorised becomes flattened in respect to being “normal” (Arkwright 2889). Our relationship to normal is often gauged by factors such as race, language, sexual orientation, and/or socio-economic location. When one of these factors is considered abnormal, that becomes the flattened story that totalises the individual in a single narrative.

The subsequent implication of this Truth, therefore, is that any other story that might be offered or explored to balance wellness or illness is automatically made redundant by such pathologising of the individual as ill: the subjective experience is always subservient to the objective Truth (Gergen “Theology” 5). In inherited theological language, which has been approached suspiciously by the UCCan, though somewhat of a gloss, the person is her/his sin, and, as such, unredeemable, except by Grace.

We are all, individually and collectively, stories. How we share that story occurs in narrative, and the plot of a story must have movement in which characters and conflict interact and unfold (McAdams *Redemptive* 77). Without movement, there can be no new learning or knowledge (McAdams *Redemptive* 218). Neither a general sense of understanding nor a specific theological sense of awakening can occur.

In the narrative movement, therefore, by looking at memory as an episode or case study, what is and what might be makes space for what McAdams (*Redemptive* 147) calls the *redemptive* and that parallels the *generative*. Rather, we are endeavouring to explore this conversation and the possibility of formulating new meaning that might emerge from a relational orientation with one another. Generative stories unfold when mutually explored and collectively experienced. Through collaboration, therefore, new knowledge becomes apparent as language changes.

Christian theology, as is evident in the UCCan's deconstruction of its inheritance from Empire, has historically positioned itself to establish universal Truths (Wallace 98). Such universality has, in turn, required something to be orthodox and anything else to be heretical. This tendency is obviously not particular to the Christian experience, but it has, as we shall continue to discuss, had universal implications. A theology of relationality, however, suggests ways to emancipate itself (Wallace 98) from this history by embracing such tools as narrative, whether as a way to engage pastorally or methodologically, to explore theology. Practical theology has, in many ways, already begun to establish processes and tools that are flexible enough to engage in this very conversation:

Postmodern theology emphasizes both intellectual rigor and creative fidelity to the textual origins of Christian faith. On the one hand, it abides by communal norms of argument and rationality in order to articulate a body of beliefs that can withstand critical scrutiny and possible refutation; in so doing, however, it refuses to be held hostage to any philosophical assumptions (metaphysical or otherwise) that will blunt its move toward understanding the complexity of its subject matter, the mystery we call God. On the other hand, postmodern theology seeks rhetorical resonance to its documentary sources in order to construct a full-bodied vision of the divine life that can engender vitality and well being; in so doing, however, a biblically sonorous theology is vigilant in resisting the sectarian temptation to limit theology to the role of defending biblical or church orthodoxy. Eschewing both philosophical limits and ecclesial conformity, postmodern theology seeks creative and, at times, subversive fidelity to the biblical and historical traditions that can fund visions of liberation and change for a world in crisis. (Wallace 98)

### From Assumptions to Mutuality

Mutuality, which is something that both practical theology and relational construction share as an aspiration of the liberative nature of relationality, becomes more significant when explored in a correlative manner. As we bring the relational construction assumption that reality is co-constructed to the local witnessing of trauma and violence, which we have discussed in respect to the practice of practical theology, then meaning making in the pastoral context becomes a way to better understand a reparative commitment.

In our current early twenty-first century context in which The United Church of Canada (UCCan) finds itself, it would be easy for it – from individuals and congregations to the institution itself – to feel under siege. With a focus on deficit, the life-giving nature of missional identity can become obscured. Specifically, the certainty that the UCCan has

inherited from once being a national institution it now confronts within a time of constant change characterised by ambiguity. Whether that be the increasing influence of fundamentalism as espoused from multiple faith perspectives, environmental crises that can seem overwhelming with each sound byte that inundates through traditional and social media, to a developing conflict between the secular and faith-based orientations—these realities challenge its ability to reflect collectively and collaboratively. In these challenges and concerns, religion and faith are implicitly and explicitly rooted. Recognising these deep roots are not new to the UCCan's current context; their planting and sowing can be traced to the last two preceding centuries (McAdams *Redemptive* 147).

This sense of restriction, of being barricaded, however, highlights the manner in which the UCCan has historically interrogated the traditions it has inherited. As it has shifted from a belief in the certainties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it now finds itself adrift. This uncertainty, in turn, can lead to a sense of insecurity.

Without attempting to find ways to navigate through this time of change, therefore, the UCCan stands in danger of entrenching in a narrative of fear (deficit). Relational construction as a reparative partner can assist in discerning new language that will be required as it moves forward in a missional manner. The old moorings upon which it has relied can no longer anchor *what was* in *what now is*.

Exploring these challenges should not, however, paralyse. If anything, it is possible that by recognising its role as an inheritor of Empire, the UCCan can find itself energised to creatively engage in new ways that involve and invite multiple perspectives in the midst of the plurality of different voices to generate previously unconsidered possibilities.

The role of story, whether as an individual or community, carries with it a great resource in times of change. Rather than seeing the story as flattened, it is in the process of sharing that possibility and new meaning arise. This sharing is not only relational; it is (as we shall next discuss) imaginative. It is imagination, as a correlative conversational partner, that reminds us of the role of creativity within the Creation story, we have discussed, and which becomes more central in the construction of a relational practical theology.

This intersection between the relational and story or narrative is significant. Practical theology parallels this, in both narrative and relationality. In "Narrative and Being Free," Nicola Hoggard Creegan connects practical theology and narrative in a Trinitarian framework:

The world is relational in trinitarian terms, and so it makes sense that community would be brought to bear on the problem of resisting evil. Together, moments of strength and resistance to the dominant, culturally determined narrative are highlighted and held strong. Only the community can lift these forgotten or passed over moments to a place of importance in the

counsellor's life. The thinking of this paper was that we should not be surprised if freedom comes through community— that is the image of God in us. (1380)

This idea of community, as experienced through the lens of the communal and relational, is further expanded when we consider relationality as being theologically understood as mutuality. A flattened story of the Self, if you will, is often covenantal in nature. Specifically, the individual is bound less to others than to partnerships that are unilateral in nature, i.e., shaped by patriarchy and hierarchy (Bidwell *Empowering* 37). The UCCan has, through its long critique involving suspicion, identified the challenges that this unilateral nature poses. In identifying its previous role in Empire, it has reminded the church that it has been and is connected to the mechanisms of power that endeavours to normalise.

Such power to normalise reinforces an individual's isolation from others and structures a person's relationship to knowing in hierarchical and patriarchal terms, which results in one's relating to conventional institutions, as opposed to other people or the environment. This structural relationship is connected, therefore, with the epistemological grounding that we have discussed in respect to relational construction.

Practical theology, as we have also examined within the context of the UCCan, has been concerned about the power of language in forming the self and, subsequently, shaping reality. The diction, the syntax, the grammar utilised are all connected with how we proceed into the dawning of each new day. Without intention, therefore, it is easy to find that we are defined in ways that feel, and therefore are, outside of our control.

The stories we choose to tell clearly have implications. From a pastoral perspective, therefore, practical theologians have seen in relational construction and liberationist developments ways in which to explore theologically the stories we tell ourselves and one another in ways that encourage mutuality.

How we theologically interpret the implications of our narratives can and does often lead to appropriate questions as to whether or not they cause harm or do good (Neuger 9). Though broad and ambiguous, terms such as *harm* and *good* can seem too vague, while it seems to me they connect with what we initially discussed about the flattening of stories.

This flattening, if you will, has a practical theological parallel: truth. Often and historically, Christian theology has endeavoured to establish *Truth* as an uppercase absolute, as differentiated by a lowercase *truth*, which coexists in a context of multiplicity. For space to be made to embrace multiple stories, or truths, practical theology has been influenced by the liberation critiques and, specifically, feminist and gender studies that have demonstrated that flattened stories cause harm (Neuger 9). As we have discussed, for the UCCan's journey, this suspicious deconstruction has allowed it to interrogate inherited imperial assumptions that has revealed the paradox (and choice) of being a part of Empire and nurturing a theology of diversity as reparative.



In turn, this movement toward accepting multiplicity, in respect to the stories we tell, has been generative in that “Feminist and profeminist approaches to theology, along with other liberationist and postmodern perspectives, have revolutionized the way we formulate the kinds of questions I just named and, thus, the way we understand the meanings of health and wholeness for the people who come for pastoral counseling” (Neuger 11-12). Practical theology and relational construction, therefore, create the opportunity to ask different questions, which do not reinforce the normative, but invite creativity in the context of change that operates within an aspiration of mutuality.

### Why is it Important?

The institutional church is the context from which I am inviting us into this conversation. This institutional context, however, is an example of a larger context of change. Though we are moving through these chapters with an intention to navigate from the academic to the practical within my vocational setting, my particularity speaks to a larger reality that is affecting those western institutions that have benefitted from the stability afforded since the mid-twentieth century.

One central anchor that moors this larger reality, whether that is organised religion, government, or the academy, as way of examples, is the orientation to Truth. This trajectory toward polarities has sometimes born inflexibility that has and does cause harm. Furthermore, this mooring has, in turn, established narratives that can reinforce the foundational Truths.

As we have discussed, the theological journey that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been engaged in has involved deconstructing the Truths it has inherited. In this orientation to suspicion, it has had to hold – in paradox – both its role as an agent of Empire and also as an agent of change that aspires to collective liberation. For the UCCan, this journey of deconstruction began in respect to interrogating gender role expectation it had inherited, and which came into conflict with the lived experience of women during and following the war years of the twentieth century.

### Imagination

As we shall see in the next chapter, *The Pragmatic Task and Appreciative Inquiry* (AI), one way that relational construction is operationalised is through such practices as AI. We have so far explored how relational construction and practical theology, as correlative conversation partners, are able to help us better appreciate the significance of the insights that arise from The United Church of Canada’s (UCCan) history of suspicion. Furthermore, this conversation offers ways to bridge the deconstructive to the reparative. Relational

construction, also, from the UCCan's current organisational change context adds to our ongoing project to construct a relational practical theology.

For organisational change, in particular from the vantage point of relational practices such as AI, imagination is an important resource that can harness the memory and experience of the community. It is important because it is able to translate what was previously useful in ways that are new and beneficial in the future. In my vocational context, imagination is also an act that is Holy in nature. The role of imagination is directly connected with an appreciation that we are blessed to be creative and generative as we are invited into a relationship with the Divine as co-Creators.

Creation, therefore, as an act of imagination is central to our own movement through this conversation. Gorsuch refers to this act of imagination as *anticipatory activity*: "human action in response to need that also moves toward a new future" (7). She further reflects that this does not mean we are responsible to bring about the "kingdom," but that the particular act of pastoral care reveals existing dilemmas and challenges that require us to address the needs of those with whom we are in relationship through the act of imagination (Gorsuch 8).

In this time of structural change for the UCCan, how might it navigate through it in a way that does not perpetuate a deficit orientation? For the UCCan, finding ways that are creative and generative to chart its way through is a significant task before it, and further engaging with relational construction is one way it can continue to make that change.

By recognising this time of change (and turmoil) before the UCCan, I am not suggesting that relational construction contains or is positioned as a "silver bullet." Rather, this constructionist orientation allows the UCCan to better appreciate its journey of (suspicious) deconstruction and how a complementary orientation might offer it language to better shift from deficit to mission. An exploration of imagination, from within my vocational context, is one way that the institutional church has confronted and responded to the implications of inherited theological traditions that isolate and oppress.

Borrowing further from Gorsuch, imagination as an anticipatory activity occurs as we listen to those with whom we are in pastoral relationships (Gorsuch 7-8). In these places of care, the practice of care reveals the limitations of theological preferences that have excluded. Identifying these limitations started to occur when the UCCan began to question normative heteronormative gender roles in the mid-twentieth century. What we observe in this practice, such as the reality of homophobia, racism, and misogyny, becomes a relational exercise called practical theology. As a theological endeavour, though it has its historic roots in the inheritance we have discussed that the UCCan has been questioning for nearly a century, practical theology has explored relational responses as it has recognised and addressed real lives that do not, cannot, and often will not fit into inherited and rigid traditions.

Exploring the manner in which practical theology can engage with relational construction helps us navigate the manner in which the UCCan might better think about and develop practices in response to the deficit orientation in which it has been moored, as well as celebrating and embedding relational practices in its pedagogy as it prepares leaders for a changing generational reality.

To be more pointed, as practical theology has developed a suspicion that has led to questioning and interrogating the implications of inherited theological traditions, it has explored imaginatively how the constructionist practice of generativity might lead to innovative practices that demonstrate both/and flexibility. This is important as it is one way that relational practical theology is lived out from a reparative orientation. Furthermore, this pastoral context then mirrors the generative possibilities in respect to organisational change. Recognising, whether in a pastoral relationship or in the process of congregational reorientation to mission, imagination allows for ways to shift and heal.

Underlying the Creation story is an act of Creator's imagination. Gorsuch offers that our actions, as co-creators with the Holy, anticipate or mirror what it is that we believe God will do in the future: which is ultimately grounded in liberation and reconciliation from oppression and suffering, which highlights our interdependence and relationality (Gorsuch 17). Gorsuch's observation allows us to recognise that the conversations we have, whether old or new, can nurture creativity through acts of both individual and collective imagination. It is helpful to remember that imagination is a holy gift as we continue to journey with one another.

What is the role of imagination in making space to make change and, at the same time, how does its absence lull curiosity and wonder? Asking such an important question can begin to reveal our assumptions and how they may or may not offer liberation from captivity for ourselves and others. Engaging in conversations about imagination helps us have larger conversation about not only the Self, but also the systems and structures that form us individually and collectively. It is helpful because it allows us to creatively question assumptions that sometimes limit our ability to respond relationally. As we have mentioned, this helpful response can be understood as the place in which a reparative lens complements a hermeneutic of suspicion as both share a family of resemblance (Wittgenstein 67).

As a species, when we are confronted with the need for change, whether corporately or personally, it is often by harnessing our imaginations that we are propelled. It can be a playful, even whimsical, exercise to visualise what might be or what might have been. Whether we are just beginning to prepare to fly upon dragons' shoulders and breach impenetrable mountains, which may hold treasures of yore, or find ourselves advanced in years bearing wisdom's gift, the endeavour to imagine prepares us to engage in new conversations and situations (McAdams & Bowman 525). In "Pastoral and Ecclesial

Imagination,” Robert Dykstra describes the meeting of imagination and practical theology in the following manner:

Imagination is what makes human life meaningful and engagement with the world possible. No human being can really thrive without it. Imagination is the foundation of human perception, of understanding and interpretation, and of whatever deep probings we may make into the significance, meaning, and mystery of human life and reality. It is not just a cognitive phenomenon, although it is the foundation of all cognition. (43)

One of the ways in which imagination can lead to learning is through the use of story. We have discussed story previously as a way to understand the ways in which practical theology and relational construction demonstrate how new meaning is made that offers healing. One of the central often unspoken and implicit foundational components of storytelling is imagination. Whether we are seeking to reinforce that which we feel is right or wrong, or whether we intend to begin to discuss something without assuming what the end result may or may not look like, it is the anticipatory nature of the imagination that allows us to move from the sterile to the generative, from the flat to the nuanced, from what is to the multiple opportunities for what might be.

This possibility for healing also translates to the context of change currently experienced by the UCCan. At a local level, harnessing imagination makes space for communities of faith to recognise possibility, though they have been in a context of structural change that has been deficit oriented. This orientation has, as we have discussed, sometimes led to a disconnect with the reviving nature of missional identity.

How we make such meaning ebbs and flows from how we engage in what we recall in order that we might dream of ways to make connexions that anticipate a new future. In such playful and intentional work, therefore, such conversations are intrinsically about playing with reality (De Brigard). Such work is both risk-taking and exciting. To endeavour to begin the conversation, to shift from a monologue to dialogue, together, we begin with our creative capacity.

One way that relational construction complements practices of practical theology is by engaging in such creative possibility as a mutual conversation (Cahalan & Mikoski 271). More specifically with an orientation towards the playful, conversation creates space and freedom to ask new questions. Michael Koppel, in his exploration of play in pastoral leadership, defines it this way: “Play as embodied theology is cooperative engagement within self and between self and others that heightens enjoyment of God and pulls more deeply into life experience; incorporates the new and innovative within already structured patterns of behavior; and, allows for making mistakes as we develop creative, and sometimes previously

unimagined, pastoral leadership practices” (*Open* 14). Play is important, therefore, in pastoral leadership because in places of grief, such an orientation is able to help foster conversations that lead to healing (Koppel *Open* 28 & Koppel “Playful” 64). From such new inquiries, new meaning might be discerned (Browning 229). Such conversations, once again, can be both in the intimacy of the pastoral or in faith communities endeavouring to engage in dreaming.

In this context, therefore, imagination, Dykstra observes, is both theologically practical and intentionally ecclesiastical as it creates a symbiotic relationship for all who are engaged (Dykstra 43). This symbiosis, as Dykstra describes it, reiterates the relational potential we have been discussing in how we might use this time with one another as conversational.

It is practical because it allows us not to take for granted that which we have inherited. In the context of our conversation, this would be illustrated by how the UCCan has interrogated gender roles it inherited, which has led to an evolving sense of a theology grounded in diversity. By not taking for granted this inheritance, the UCCan is better positioned to interrogate the implications that have literal consequences for individual lives that do not conform to inflexible poles: this then is one aspect of operationalising practical theology. In turn, the learnings that arise from these implications translate into questions as to how communities of faith are able to find practical ways to offer care. This orientation to care, therefore, becomes part of the conversations that are possible in regard to missional revitalisation.

The act of imagination is also ecclesial in that once we have identified how theological traditions have caused harm, the mechanisms that have perpetuated them become clearer. As the UCCan experience has illustrated, these mechanisms reveal the manner in which the church has been complicit in Empire by fostering and nurturing imperial theologies. Though difficult, confronting these implications allows the church, as an institution, to ask questions about structure and polity, process and leadership that might address its complicit role and how it might, in turn, seek and offer healing from a reparative orientation.

The UCCan’s history in respect to sexual orientation and its aspiration to be an ally to the LGBTTQ\* community demonstrates both theologically practical and ecclesiastical response to such acts of imagination. This ecclesiastical connexion then begins a missional conversation for the local congregations within their own communities to live into the need for reparation that is evident in the deconstruction of suspicion.

Relational dialogue, as conversation, also introduces a new way to explore the construction of a practical theology of relationality. Such theological discussion will create reverberations beyond just individual stories and will influence the structures (i.e. ecclesiastical) in which communities are formed relationally. Specifically, the institutions and processes that have traditionally formed us as isolated from one another will nonetheless be impacted by the conversational shift:

Ecclesial imagination is the way of seeing and being that emerges when a community of faith, together as a community, comes increasingly to share the knowledge of God and to live a way of abundant life - not only in church but also in the many contexts where they live their daily lives. Ecclesial imagination emerges among the people themselves, fostering a way of seeing and being that is in some ways different in content, quality, and character from that which prevails in the culture surrounding them. (Dykstra 57)

When one imagines, therefore, one creates the possibility of new realities. When we explore memory, the subjective and objective understanding of “T(t)ruth” comes into focus. In this clarity, the role of institutions in reinforcing what is normative is highlighted. Finally, it then becomes possible to choose to resist such formation. This imaginative act of memory recall, as we have discussed in respect to the UCCan’s deconstruction of inherited inflexible theological traditions, allows us to explore multiple ways that lead to truths that can coexist, as opposed to supplanting one with another. Furthermore, such imaginative endeavours help make explicit memories that may not only be forgotten, but be unacknowledged and even subconscious.

As we continue to explore truth, it becomes important to recognise that the words we use create reality. As Gergen challenges, “The meaning of a word is not contained within itself but derives from a process of coordinating words” (*Relational*, 32). In this coordination, the moment defines the meaning in which we find ourselves, whether as individuals or communities. Such coordination, therefore, creates the framework that we call reality.

The reality that arises from the traditional theological inheritances, which the UCCan journey has normalised is the manner in which people are individualised and isolated (Gergen, *Relational*, 176). Our conversations have been structured in a way that bounds us from one another. Shifting from bounded to the relational, however, is an act of mutual imagination. In this relational constructionist stance, therefore, imagination creates the potential to introduce a reparative preference that can inform the construction of a relational practical theology. This potential, therefore, is applicable both to the pastoral relationship in the act of witness and also within the congregational context as it engages in shifting from deficit to mission.

## “T”ruth

Central to engaging imagination is the role of truth. Whether that is in the lived experience of members of the LGBTTQ\* or faith communities longing to shift to the possible, the role that truth has is important. Understanding how we orient to truth, therefore, helps us further appreciate the role of imagination in respect to a reparative response to suspicious deconstruction and organisational longing to move from paralysis (deficit) to the possible (mission).

One of the orienting assumptions, or the way of seeing the world, which the UCCan has inherited is the relationship of reality to Truth. In particular, since the age of Enlightenment, in which the rational mind became preferenced as the way in which we create and acquire knowledge, to the entrenchment of the scientific method as the central *modus operandi* for western inquiry, there has been a trajectory to establish universal Truths. These Truths, in turn, have reinforced discussions and discourses that become dominant and ultimately establish meta-narratives: a story that explains all stories. The challenge in this movement, where rationality and the scientific method become entwined, therefore, is that when Truth becomes fixed, generalisations arise reinforcing such a reality (Anderson “Collaborative Dialogue” 1464).

Such generalisations become evident when we simply begin to consider stereotyping. Whether the examples are racial, linguistic, faith-based, gender, and/or sexuality constructs, this flattening serves to reinforce the fixed Truth. Furthermore, generalising also ensures that any critique or challenge to the normative can easily be dismissed by the certainty that is the Truth. In respect to normative sexual identity, therefore, the stereotype of an effeminate gay man or the strong lesbian woman allows for a flattening that bounds those considered outside of the agreed upon conventions that are culturally accepted.

It is important also to remember that in this construct of Truth, as defined and unassailable, language conforms to expectations of what reality looks like. The very words that are nurtured, developed, and ultimately preferenced create a sort of feedback loop (Gergen *Invitation* 9). Language creates the matrix in which we walk, talk, breathe, and love.

Language, as the way in which we engage relationally, articulates and propagates established Truth. This, in turn, reveals the intimate connexion between knowledge and learning (Gergen & Gergen 690). The questions we ask and the words we use become just as bounded and limited(ing), as the atomised individual. Whatever new learning may arise, however, is nonetheless bound to the essential Truth under consideration. And, as much as such an endeavour may or may not be conversational, there remains the underlying and implicit nature of the Truth-established reality. In this bounded orientation to Truth, there are two concerns that arise: 1) universalisation and 2) isolation (Gergen & Gergen 700).

There is in this Truth-is-Reality orientation the danger that any derived knowledge can be removed from its context and be universalised. This concern exists in a larger meta-narrative that encourages Truth to be structured acontextually, in one way, often described as a rational and scientific orientation. As a result, when removed from the context, truth is universalised (Gergen *Invitation* 11). An example of this, theologically, is the tendency to connect particular scriptural contexts (i.e. Genesis 19:1-11: The Fall of Sodom and the rape of the two angels that is contextually about hospitality) beyond the milieu in which they were created and understood. Removing the passage, however, from its scriptural context creates the possibility to connect it with discussions about same-sex relations, which have no ancient corollary. This example, therefore, also illustrates the effect of flattening.

The second concern or implication is the isolation of knowledge. In one sense, the universalising and isolating of Truth establishes binaries. If knowledge is dependent upon an established Truth, which can also be understood as a discourse or tradition (Hermans "Ultimate" 118), then the language that develops around it must serve two purposes: one, it must continually reinforce the context of its reality (i.e. a humanities discipline); and, two, in turn, it must become inaccessible or cumbersome to those from a competing Truth, for instance, sociology and psychology (Gergen & Gergen 700).

As we explore truth with a capital-T, it is also important to recall that to function successfully in that reality, adhering to Truth is essential (Gergen & Gergen 922). When functioning is dependent upon adhering to the story, tradition, or discourse, therefore, doubt and questioning become problematic (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1457). Should such challenge arise, debate and conflict result in order to establish a new Truth or to reinforce the old Truth.

The story, in context of Truth, becomes problematic because it must therefore compete with other Truths. This competition determines how we view the world. When Truths compete, the discourses in which we live create the parameters of reality. In *Social Constructionism*, Burr describes discourse and its relationship to Truth in the following manner:

Discourses make it possible for us to see the world in a certain way. They produce our knowledge of the world. If we think of knowledge as one possible account of events, one that has received the stamp of truth, then to the extent that this version brings with it particular possibilities for acting in the world then it has power implications. (79)

Furthermore, any discourse is connected to power. The institutions in which we live, that govern and educate, perpetuate and reinforce how we relate to another based on how power and control are distributed. These dominant discourses, therefore, are not only two



sides of the same coin, universal and isolating, but also they ultimately have a “profound effect on how we live our lives, on what we can do and what can be done to us” (Burr 75).

In the context of the UCCan, therefore, its deconstructive trajectory of its theological inheritance has described power through the language of Empire. This endeavour, informed by an orientation of suspicion, has led it to a place to both recognise its complicit role in perpetuating inflexible traditions as “Truth” that have caused harm, beginning with an analysis of gender roles, to broadening its theological understanding to include the diversity of stories from communities and individuals. In the case of our project, the stories upon which we have referenced are those that the UCCan witnesses (often) in the pastoral relationships at the local congregational level.

### “t”ruth

Within a worldview that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has inherited and interrogated over the course of its history, Truth and objectivity are intimately connected. In order to establish and maintain a particular tradition, the rational is preferenced, creating a hierarchy in which objectivity is favoured and subjectivity is not. This objectivity and subjectivity are shaped around a logic system particular to that discourse (Shotter “Psychology” 200; Wittgenstein 107 & 125). As a result, regardless of the Truth being discussed or examined, objectivity is considered or privileged as the default position.

Theorists of relational construction attempt to move beyond absolutes (Truth) to a discussion in which multiple truths might coexist. In some instances, such conversations might unfold between people who believe/endorse different Truths that seem initially to be or are, in fact, in tension and competition. The intention is to foster new conversations, even in the midst of discord, in order to test assumptions and, in turn, make space to create relationally new knowledge and language.

Practical theological practice, in turn, is able to engage in this relational construction about truth when it takes seriously the personal experiences and stories that arise as the lived reality within Christian theological inheritances. How practical theology preferences multiple truths (stories) that are lived within the confines of the theological inflexibility become central to the Christian practice of pastoral care.

In such conversations, the hope is that creative and generative insights occur. Though this is not the only criteria that we might foster from relational construction, the hoped-for outcomes might include practical and tentative possibilities that arise from such creativity. It is in such spaces and opportunities that participants are encouraged to realise that their own contexts and experience (the subjective) have value. Not only do relational constructionists not intend to substitute one Truth for another (McNamee “Relational” 1739), but also by

encouraging a conversation about plurality, the hope is to actually “increase admiration for existing knowledge-making endeavours” (Gergen *Invitation* 57).

These conversations, therefore, are relational in nature. This relationality, in turn, offers clarification in respect to an objective/subjective paradigm. Regardless of our tradition or orientation, objective fact is understood, in a relational constructionist perspective, to be dependent upon that which we preference (Burr 6). In essence, knowledge is connected to an agreed upon subjective alignment, which becomes the criteria for a particular tradition’s objectivity.

This nuanced approach to knowledge creation is important because it recognises any particular tradition’s inherent value as truth. This nuance also brings to the endeavour not only a reflective, but reflexive orientation. If a tradition’s concept of objectivity is founded upon agreed-upon collective subjective orientations, then curiosity offers a way in which there can be an interaction that is not competitive or binary in nature. As Anderson observes, therefore, language and knowledge become creative acts. They are not fixed: rather, meaning is continually and fluidly discerned in the context of how language and knowledge are utilised (Anderson “Collaborative Relationships” 10; Cahalan & Mikoski 99).

Reflection is certainly helpful in considering current context. Reflection, however, is not necessarily active in nature. In fact, reflection on its own can lead to reinforcing the very ideas under consideration. Reflexivity positions those involved to ask questions purposefully, as both informed by curiosity and an orientation toward action. When we ask questions from this viewpoint, there arises an expectation to act upon the resulting answers and insights. When one is oriented reflexively, one does not presume that what might be discerned will undermine existing assumptions; one simply engages intentionally in relation to creativity. In this orientation to creativity then, reflexivity can hold the aspiration of reparation as an actual practice and not just as a hermeneutic or interpretative lens.

## Knowledge, Meaning-Making, & Epistemology

Practical theology's engagement with relational construction provides insights into how knowledge is created, which enhances reflexivity. This knowledge creation can occur in both pastoral relationships and in practices when local congregations engage in missional imagination. More importantly, as we continue this exploration of how relational construction bridges both the pastoral practices and organisational change, the epistemology, theory of knowledge, that develops in mutuality is significant.

Knowledge is not only embedded in culture, history, and language by means of discourse, but also in the very practices in which we create meaning, which are contextually bound to the community from which any understanding is discovered (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1439). Knowledge and its creation, therefore, can be understood as neither static nor fixed; the relational positioning of participants means knowledge is in a constant state of "fluid" change (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1447). Harlene Anderson expands upon this fluid nature by sharing the following orienting assumption about knowledge, as understood from a social construction perspective: "Knowledge creation is a relational-dialogic social process that minimizes the dichotomy between 'knower' and 'not-knower'" (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1479).

The knower and not-knower, professional and amateur, minister and lay person become unmoored from the boundaries of the objective (expert) and subjective (non-expert). An "objective" preference binds knowledge and its creation to those who have demonstrated proficiency to replicate and perpetuate Truth, univocally. From a relational constructionist position, it is through dialogue that knowledge is created as people endeavour to discover meaning through an egalitarian orientation that exists in multiple perspectives: multivocality (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1517). The endeavour to make meaning is, ultimately, collaborative: "Collaborative-dialogue is a meaning-making process with language as its medium. Language refers to any means by which we express, articulate and communicate with others and ourselves" (Anderson "Collaborative Dialogue" 1493).

What is also useful to discuss is the implication of appreciating knowledge as formed in dialogue that is both collaborative and relational. From this vantage point, in *Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach*, Sheila McNamee helps reframe social construction as relational construction:

In the context of relational constructionism, all ways of relating can be thought of as part of the "knowledge/power nexus" (Foucault 1980). Transformative inquiries see knowledge and power (now relationally theorized) as dancing together, so to speak. Knowledge and power are both located in ongoing

relational processes, and much more emphasis is given to power than inquiries based in, for example, post-positivist science. (McNamee & Hosking 109)

This dialogue and knowledge formation, therefore, arises in the pastoral context of witnessing, which we will explore as our final correlative conversation. In particular, the act of witnessing recognises the lived experience of harm within inherited theological traditions in which the UCCan has been engaged in a history of deconstruction driven by suspicion. Dialogue and knowledge also arise whenever communities of faith, such as at the local level, come together to plan, dream, and imagine where it is that they might be called. This missional orientation, therefore, highlights the insights that occur when engaging with relational construction from an organisational change context, such as being experienced within the UCCan currently.

### Lament & Witness

Our final correlative conversation partners, prior to moving on to the Good Practice that Osmer describes as completing the normative task and which, for our purposes, is the construction of a relational practical theology, will be between Lament and Witness. Lament, as we shall continue to explore as a Christian practice, takes on further depth when we understand witness, from a relational orientation, as a practice that invites mutuality and creates new meaning.

This act of witnessing, though it certainly complements the operationalising of practical theology in such contexts as pastoral relationships, is important as a relational constructionist practice because it becomes a generative opportunity to shape meaning out of the trauma that we have discussed in regard to the lived experience of members of the LGBTTQ\*, who have been harmed by the imperial theological traditions that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has interrogated.

Lament brings to this act of witnessing a means by which those within the local context, whether within a pastoral caregiver relationship or a congregation, can wrestle with the complicity the UCCan has identified in its historic role as an agent of state. This historic contest, as we should recall, has been connected to Empire as framed through White Privilege. Furthermore, from a reparative orientation, lament allows those within the local context a way to navigate through the complicit reality to recognise ways in which it might continue the denominational deconstruction in a manner that is reparative. This opportunity to foster healing, as we shall see in the *Pragmatic Task*, allows those within the local context ways to shift from deficit and possibly paralysis to a missional and celebratory stance that can

serve to revive the larger denominational context, which remains focused on structural change.

As we have discussed in regard to trauma theory, our cultural deference to rational thought as *better* or *superior* does not allow us to fully embrace conversations about lived oppression. Preferencing the mind as the sole arbiter is inadequate when we confront the trauma experienced by those who have endured the inflexibility of theological traditions that have informed normative North American roles and expectations. The same, therefore, can be said in respect to conversation that we have previously explored in regard to White Privilege:

Moving from the heart to the head—balancing the need for the emotional intelligence required to think about guilt and compassion with the brainwork necessary to look at more subtle privileges—is the process of doing an inventory of our personal access to institutional power, resources, and influence based on race and socioeconomic class. (Kendall 122)

One of the significant resources that the Christian tradition brings to our conversation about reparation and constructing a relational practical theology is the ritual of lament, a practice that connects with matters of the heart (trauma). As well, as we shall explore in the final section *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*, lament can serve to complement a philosophical preference towards generativity and abundance. Lament makes space to hold the tension, even paradox, that arises when engaging in suspicion and reparation, which make irreconcilable paradoxes more apparent. Lament also allows ways for the inheritors of White Privilege, which is the local congregational context of the UCCan, to utilise an old Christian tradition to integrate the witnessing that it experiences in regard to lived experience that has been harm filled by inherited Christian traditions that have been deconstructed.

There are two steps that are helpful for this part of our conversation. The first is a general exploration of lament. The second relates to further discussion about the context of change in which UCCan finds itself. Furthermore, it is not only the structural change where lament can be useful for the UCCan, but also it can help with a deepening exploration of White Privilege. Though the context of change and White Privilege are not separate issues, lament makes space to bring them together in a way to help us when we consider the potential that arises when explored as interwoven realities.

Duncan & Rainey in their collaborative work on *Reclaiming Lament* describe lament in the following manner:

We understand lament to be a public acknowledgement, protest, complaint, crying out against the pain of grief, loss, misery and/or injustice. It is an active, ongoing process for overcoming denial, one which requires a sharing and naming of being in the depths. It can be an expression of anger, a release of energy, which involves the identification, naming and blaming of the enemy. It accepts the intricacies and identifies the complexity and interconnexion of many different forms of pain and injustice. (2)

Lament is a Judeo-Christian ritual, a relational and public practice that named inequality and injustice through an ancient form of literature. Foundationally, lament allows for grief to be named, which can range from despair to protest. What is particularly distinctive is that lament is grounded in a direct dialogue with the Holy (Park-Hearn 162-163).

This mutual and intimate (Park-Hearn 184) framework is lived out in the process of lament in which such public discourse engages the Divine in a manner that is dialogic and relational. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the psalms and prayers of lament illustrate this call-and-response format in which oppression is held up to the Creator (Duncan & Rainey 1). This call-and-response, we should note, serves as a reminder of the mutuality that we have discussed that is preferenced by relational construction and which is evidenced in the manner in which witnessing is an invitation to locally co-create new meaning.

It is also important to realise that in a secular country, such as Canada, such practices are mostly unknown. When, in fact, there is an appreciation of their import, it is often framed through a narrative that sees organised religion, and Christianity specifically, in a hostile light. As such, it might be easy to dismiss the following psalms, as way of example, as representing a form of religious thought that is superstitious, inward focused, judgemental, and even violent. Each of these secular charges are not uncommon, perhaps not even unwarranted when we consider the nature of our own exploration in respect to the implications of the binaries that have been inherited, and often serve to limit generative conversations.

### ***Psalm 23***

*1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
3 he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name's  
sake.  
4 Even though I walk through the darkest  
valley,  
I fear no evil;*

### ***Psalm 58***

*1 Do you indeed decree what is right, you  
gods?  
Do you judge people fairly?  
2 No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;  
your hands deal out violence on earth.  
3 The wicked go astray from the womb;  
they err from their birth, speaking lies.  
4 They have venom like the venom of a  
serpent,*

*for you are with me;  
 your rod and your staff—  
 they comfort me.*  
*5 You prepare a table before me  
 in the presence of my enemies;  
 you anoint my head with oil;  
 my cup overflows.*  
*6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow  
 me  
 all the days of my life,  
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
 my whole life long.*

*like the deaf adder that stops its ear,  
 5 so that it does not hear the voice of  
 charmers  
 or of the cunning enchanter.*  
*6 O God, break the teeth in their mouths;  
 tear out the fangs of the young lions, O  
 Lord!*  
*7 Let them vanish like water that runs  
 away;  
 like grass let them be trodden down and  
 wither.*  
*8 Let them be like the snail that dissolves  
 into slime;  
 like the untimely birth that never sees the  
 sun.*  
*9 Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of  
 thorns,  
 whether green or ablaze, may he sweep  
 them away!*  
*10 The righteous will rejoice when they see  
 vengeance done;  
 they will bathe their feet in the blood of the  
 wicked.*  
*11 People will say, "Surely there is a reward  
 for the righteous;  
 surely there is a God who judges on earth."  
 (New Revised Standard Version)*

There are several items in respect to the historic context of the psalms above, as lament, that are often forgotten or unknown, even to those for whom Christianity is their tradition of faith:

- Lament was expressed from a context of oppression. Lament, relationally, is often voiced from a lived ancient Hebrew experience of powerlessness, oppression, and suffering. Lament, therefore, served as a way in which to relationally, between the people themselves and the Holy, find ways to wrestle with the paradox of powerlessness, while embracing a sense of purpose.

This historic reality is further elucidated when Park-Hearn connects lament among those experiencing disenfranchisement to their ability to grieve: “By living into lament, individuals and communities whose grief is disenfranchised connect with pain and loss from which they have been disconnected and detached” (Abstract);

- Most of the psalms, though often addressing hurt and harm, suffering and oppression, are bookended by gratitude and even abundance (Branson 43ff). This facet will become more significant in the forthcoming discussion about Appreciative Inquiry (See *The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry*).

In this framework, lament becomes not just a communal way to name vulnerabilities, but also to enact 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). The act, itself, becomes an opportunity to reinterpret the stories that have been imposed (Park-Hearn 84 & 98); and,

- The historic context speaks to the prophetic tradition upon which we have already touched. The prophetic Christian tradition allows the UCCan to reconnect with its shift away from the centre of power, understood as Empire. The tension in this awakening, however, highlights the paradox of White Privilege.

It is easy to imagine that reconnecting with a very old ritual, such as lament that speaks to oppression, would allow those of us who are beneficiaries of White Privilege to project ourselves onto the past. In doing so, we stand in danger of entrenching ourselves in an ideological orientation that disavows and dismisses our role in perpetuating forms of oppression, which are echoed in the ancient tradition.

One of the realities that becomes clear, when viewing lament from the historic perspective of oppression and disenfranchisement, is that the Christianity of Empire has embraced a theology that is often triumphal. As such, this clarity reminds us that, as with trauma theory, it is in the place of suffering that the church witnesses (Park-Hearn 27) and consequently, the possibility for change begins.

To emphasise, the Psalms are most often spoken from an experience of suffering and hurt not dissimilar to that which the church has caused in respect to its role in Empire and entrenched in the conceptual framework of White Privilege. The laments of those having benefitted from White



Privilege and those of the oppressed may be different, but the ritual allows all to seek healing (reparatively) in a relational orientation.

Lament, as both a process and a ritual, resonates with an appreciation that in paradox, disarray, and chaos, there can be transformation. Traditionally, the practice is future forming. By expressing feelings that arise from oppression and disenfranchisement, such as anger, grief, and protest, those who lament make space for restoration and transformation (Park-Hearn 4). Though counterintuitive, if you will, to that which we consider normative, lament makes space for competing emotions and thoughts to coexist and be expressed. In fact, Duncan and Rainey found further in *Reclaiming Lament* that there were no less than seventeen different factors that seemed to be involved in the transformative process of lament:

- |                                       |                            |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Acceptance;                        | 10. Lament;                |
| 2. Anger;                             | 11. Power and authority;   |
| 3. Being heard;                       | 12. Powerlessness;         |
| 4. Companions;                        | 13. Rejection/abandonment; |
| 5. Analysis and critique of ideology; | 14. Reflection;            |
| 6. Depression;                        | 15. Risking action;        |
| 7. Fear;                              | 16. Self-worth; and        |
| 8. Hope;                              | 17. Trust. (23)            |
| 9. Isolation;                         |                            |

Depending on the context of the catalyst for the use of lament, each of these factors represents different levels of importance (Duncan & Rainey 23). Duncan and Rainey in *Reclaiming Lament* identified four consistent factors of the ritual, which they described in the following way:

- Acceptance of one's self and the reality of one's pain and suffering by self and others;
- Analysis and critique of the dominant social and cultural ideology that defines contemporary reality and value systems;
- Embracing of a power and authority that affirms change in the direction of justice and healing; and
- Actions that can be risked and engaged in, that contribute to movement in a new direction. (23-24)

These observations about lamenting highlight another paradox that arises from the transformation that becomes apparent in the construction of a relational practical theology. Park-Hearn in her work *Will No One Shed a Tear* describes this potentiality, both in respect to the individual and community:

As such, lamenting slowly engenders a sense of power that can weaken the stronghold of vulnerability that is overwhelming. Expressions of lament reconnect people's lives to community thereby wresting them from feelings of isolation. Lamentation, as religious articulation, enlivens connexion with the divine, as it avails a context in which to present the harrowing losses and to give voice to the agonizing doubts about God's power, goodness, and the nature of creation thereby sustaining the life of faith. To lament makes possible comfort, be it in the form of a caregiver or public sites where lives are memorialized. All these establish lament as lens through which to view life, especially during tragic times. (45)

Shifting our focus from the exploration of what lament constitutes, the reality is that The United Church of Canada (UCCan), as a denomination, has since its outset utilised lament (Duncan & Rainey 52). In the UCCan's history, it has examined the results of the church's involvement in power and the resulting harm that has been experienced by those for whom normative stereotypes were destructive and even soul-devouring (Duncan & Rainey 52; UCCan *Together* 22-23).

I suspect that the same potential development of normative stereotypes can be anticipated as the UCCan wrestles with the structural change it confronts now and takes steps to explore the centrality of making visible White Privilege. Duncan and Rainey's concluding observation in *Reclaiming Lament* rings just as true today for the UCCan as it did when they wrote the following fifteen years ago:

We believe our model makes transparent a way to enable communication within the church as it embraces the call to transformation and healing. It is not a way which is easy, or comfortable. It means living in the chaos of pain and suffering. It means supporting and encouraging people to lament their own experiences of pain and suffering such as: the pain of grief and death, the isolation and hopelessness of addictive behaviour, the trauma resulting from sexual abuse, the demonizing of their sexual orientation, the demoralizing experiences of racism, the fear of illness, feelings of being punished and/or abandoned by God, of isolation and rejection, vilification and abuse by family members, partners, and the church. It means facing the risk of touching,

discovering and exploring our own pain. It means encountering the courage and strength of human resilience. It means witnessing and sharing the holy ground of healing and hope. (53)

### Constructing a Relational Practical Theology

If we read this sacred story [the Resurrection arc] as a story of survival, we are pressed to think about what it means to remain in the aftermath of a death that escapes our comprehension. To witness this sacred story is also to receive it for the truth that it tells: love remains, and we are love's witnesses .

..

Perhaps the divine story is neither a tragic one nor a triumphant one but, in fact, a story of divine remaining, the story of love that survives. It is a cry arising from the abyss. The question is: can we witness it?

(Rambo 171)

The United Church of Canada's almost century long deconstruction of inherited imperial theological traditions has allowed the denomination opportunities to broaden its theological orientation to preference diversity. It has nurtured an expansivity in faith that challenges traditions that bound and limit. The implications of this naming and deconstruction, at the local level such as in congregations and pastoral relationships become evident when those who have been harmed by these traditions approach the UCCan seeking healing. Yet the orientation to suspicion is inadequate to explore this opportunity for mutuality.

In the context of this tension between deconstruction and witnessing is the reality that the denomination has also been engaged in over a decade long structural change process that has been fiscally and deficit driven. Though the milestones of theological learning have been explored in our ongoing conversation, they have been overshadowed at the local level by change that is not consistent even with the psalms we have discussed, which are shaped in gratitude and abundance, even in the midst of lament.

We have, therefore, explored correlative conversation partners with the hope of introducing a reparative preference to balance the impact of suspicion operating within the UCCan. Whether that is in the witnessing of harm, such as within the LGBTTTQ\* context, or in congregational contexts that are ill-equipped to find missional revitalisation in fear driven change, reorienting to reparation has offered a promising generative way to navigate such opportunities.

The conversation between practical theology and relational construction revealed that it is in the locality of relationships, whether pastoral or congregational, that meaning

making is particular to its own context. This mutuality invited an epistemological opportunity to make sense, relationally, of harm witnessed and change experienced. The complementary nature of practical theology to relational construction's preference to co-create knowledge has served as a way to better appreciate the Creation tradition that the UCCan has shaped in its expanding understanding of theological preference for diversity.

The introduction of reparation, therefore, has allowed us to journey to this point of establishing a relational practical theology that does not intend to universalise a doctrinal orientation. Rather this theological suggestion becomes nimble in recognising that in the local context, meaning will be established that is particular to that community. In turn, the particularity can serve as a model to assist the larger denominational context to shift from deficit to possibility. We have named this as missional identify and renewal.

In regard to the missional, therefore, we explored how relational construction is able to introduce into the structural context of change of the UCCan a way to shift from organisational fear to shared generativity. In particular, relational construction's preference for the local context as a meaning-making community invites the UCCan to look not to the national body to embrace change, but to the particularity of congregations. In these places, change becomes specific to the context, but reflective of the manner in which diverse responses from a missional orientation may serve to revitalise the national discourse in an orientation toward the future that is grounded in possibility, not survival.

Finally, we discussed how witnessing can be integrated through the Christian tradition of lament. This is important because the witnessing from a relational orientation that the UCCan experiences within the local context can feel overwhelming without a practice that offers integration. This challenge regarding integration is owing to the fact that within the local community, congregations continue to benefit from the role they have had as an agent of state and had not (generally) had opportunities to engage in this work.

Though the denomination has been able to articulate this through such understandings as White Privilege, there has been little opportunity to explore this locally. As such, though witnessing occurs, understanding and dealing with the trauma and harm that is present can be numbing at the local level because there is inadequate or no language to make sense of such experiences. Lament, therefore, serves as a practice that integrates a reparative intention for all involved.

Lament without engagement offers a helpful challenge. I believe the task before the UCCan is how it creatively transforms and repairs the trauma and violence experienced by those impacted by the historical theological inheritances, which its own history of suspicion reveals. Structural change simply to keep the doors open is not only bad management; it is poor stewardship. As the Creation story invites us to consider, when read reparatively between the tradition of Sin and Blessing, healing and newness are the trust afforded to us by a relational Creator. At the very beginning of the Creation story, and which extends to the

formation of the Trinity, is a Holy One who is not abstract or distant, but present in the intimate moments, mistakes, and possibilities of our “complex, ambiguous and diverse” lives (Brock & Parker 512-13). As the pastoral relationship reveals, from the generative insight of relational construction, the lived experiences of hurt and harm can be reknit; they can be reconstructed with an appreciation that there is life after death.

Central to this possibility of a life altered after Holy Saturday is the meaning that is constructed that holds the paradox together. Whether in the pastoral relationship or missional exploration, meaning is found in the way our stories reveal joys and pains, celebrations and loss. Finding a manner in which to understand that theologically is helpful, therefore, to inform the operational aspect of practical theology. Practical theology, in its lived practices whether counselling, confessional, restorative justice, or organisational change practices such as Appreciative Inquiry, experiences the blessings that doctrine can bring and is able to identify the harm caused.

In this conversational orientation, from the individual to the institutional, a relational practical theology has in it the explicit recognition that change is constant, just as our lives demonstrate. In this preference for abundance, in the richness of the meaning that is made, people and congregations are able to shift from deficit to resilience that is creative, playful, and certainly joyful. This resilience, this vibrant recognition that in our relationships meaning is made is intrinsically missional.

The following, therefore, is the construction upon which we have been engaged. We will first name the relational practical theological values that arise from our exploration thus far. We will then present the construction in both a traditional format and, as we explored in respect to The United Church of Canada’s own most recent doctrinal statement the *Song of Faith*, through the creative medium of the poetic. The final part of this normative task will be another *Summary*.

### Relational Practical Theological Values

1. Acknowledge that we are relationally connected and construct meaning with one another and our environment;
2. Recognise that words have the literal ability to create life and take life;
3. Take seriously that all that we construct together will lead to processes and doctrine, practices and rituals that will define what is normative;
4. Accept that consensus, ongoing reflection, and witness must occur, in order to be open and present to the needs of those who are marginalised by our constructions; and,

5. A relational practical theology is contextual, pragmatic, provisional, and generative so as to be flexible enough to witness individual experiences of trauma.

#### A Constructed Practical Relational Theology

1. Central to the Christian tradition is the Trinitarian formula that is foundationally relational. This relationality is both internal to the Unity of One and also reflective of humanity's role as co-Creators with one another;
2. Sin and Blessing are complementary components of a larger theological tradition of the Creation story that arises out of the Christian Genesis text;
3. Blessing, both historically and chronologically within the Creation stories, occurs first: "We are first and foremost the beneficiaries of an original blessing and not the victims of an original sin" (Henry 18);
4. Genesis from the Jewish tradition does not articulate a "permanent rupture of the divine-human relationship" (Lieber 18);
5. The Tree of Knowledge as midrash was a reflection of the complexity and ambiguity that arises with knowledge. The event, therefore, is not prohibitive but serves as a warning or challenge;
6. Original Blessing in the context of awakening at the Tree of Knowledge is a call to bring about the healing & transformation of the world;
7. Original Blessing takes seriously the role of humanity as relationally connected to Creator as co-creators;
8. Original Sin is a warning and challenge that arise out of the act of disobedience. In the moment of awakening, therefore, in our creativity and potential, we can turn away from our divine call as co-creators. Such awakening means humanity must recognise and harness the power of choice. Recognising the potential of choice highlights the tension between our animal and human nature in exile from the Garden;
9. In humanity's ability to turn away from our relationship with Creator, we are able to appreciate that Original Sin represents "the deepest of all demonic activity [which] is the use of our divine imaginations to invent destruction" (Fox *Primer* 232). This recognizes that "[sin] consist[s of] injuring creation and doing harm to its balance and harmoniousness, turning what is beautiful into what is ugly" (Fox *Primer* 119). In our ability to commit sinful acts, we possess the power to deny love and thus break the covenant we have with Creation;
10. Baptism, when not framed through Christian supersessionism, is the ritual through which the community recognises and acknowledges membership.

This sacred ritual does not presume or position itself as Truth. In the context of a pluralistic society, the ritual of baptism allows the community to claim its “truth” with confidence and humility in recognising that no one preference can contain the Divine. In the Christian tradition, therefore, this ritual recognises that all peoples are composed of the sacred element we call water;

11. As partners in creation, we possess the potential to create, but we also require Grace to live into that potential. In this paradox, we are continually striving to be reconciled to ourselves and one another:

“So Fall-Redemption and true Creation Spirituality can be integrated. Indeed, I believe they cannot really be separated because we cannot have Hope without Redemption, nor can we have Original Blessing without the idea of Original Sin” (Basden 4).

I will end our conversation, at this point, with the following endeavour to translate the eleven theological propositions into a more poetic form. This poetic exploration hopefully allows us to appreciate further that a reparative orientation remains suspicious of traditions that cause harm and trauma, both individually and collectively. The UCCan, in its own theological journey toward the expansive nature of a theology of diversity, will need to continue to find ways to adequately respond to the witnessing that occurs when we look at lived experience through a practical theological engagement that is relational. Perhaps in holding both the language of the academic and poetic relationally, in the space from this page to the next, there may be further opportunity to reflect on the conversation we have had thus far:

### 1

In the unfolding that is One  
 harmony danced amidst  
 that which was, is and will be  
 and for those who might  
 have heard Her song  
 three notes chorus formed

### 2

In this unfolding song  
 balance aspired to inspire  
 those who would be  
 Creation’s companions

to embrace choice  
possessing potential & temptation

**3**

As Unity sang into being  
feather & hair  
carapace & tentacle  
arm & wing  
all blessed be

**4**

In this thriving place  
garden planted  
soil nurtured  
water sacred  
all diversely bound  
One in Many

**5**

From Three cascading notes  
that which was green bloomed  
petals fine  
fruit sweet  
trees tall  
in life abundant  
all blessed be

**6**

At tree's branch  
Knowledge awakened  
life & death  
dignity & infamy  
inclusion & exclusion  
Transformation's healing beckons

**7**

As companions along the way  
two stirred to accompany  
nurture  
Unity's song  
that which was, is & will be

**8**

As companions along the way  
creativity & potential possessed  
discord or accord  
life-giving or soul-devouring



choice's power

**9**

As companions along the way  
choice  
hubris tempts  
to forget  
fall asleep  
that creativity's gift  
binds music to instrument  
note to string

**10**

As companions along the way  
Remembering water dances  
As droplets cleanse  
The song returns and in many notes  
Unforgotten Unity  
Reveals diversity  
All blessed be

**11**

Born anew  
water sacred  
Grace accompanies  
companions reconcile seek  
transform  
heal that which we share  
inherit  
Love as life  
All blessed be

## Summary

Practical theology as it engages with relational construction is able to help articulate the journey upon which The United of Canada (UCCan) has undertaken. It is able to do this with an orientation that is both reflexive and relational, as it takes seriously the truths that people live in the context of the inherited traditions that the UCCan has questioned. In the meaning-making pastoral relationship, practical theology is able to help explore traditions that have flattened and caused harm. From this vantage point, practical theology is able to operationalise relational construction both on an individual basis and as a resource to the UCCan on a structural level.

Practical theology recognises the limiting inherited traditions and is able to explore whether they are able to nurture well-being based on lived experience. When it becomes clear they do not, then the possibility for creative and generative ways to address that presents the possibility for pastoral conversations that are reparative in the sense that as new meaning is found, narratives that were once monotone can be broadened to invite healing and change. Without such an orientation, these traditional inheritances will continue to tend toward creating polarities that limit both the organisation and the people for whom it aspires to care.

In the Christian tradition, the role of lament is an important way to reflect on the role an individual or institution has had in creating harm. This first step is reflective, while the following is reflexive. What is named hopefully allows for ways to imagine alternative ways to address such harm. The UCCan has invested much since the late 1980s in the confession of its role as an agent of Empire. This work must and should continue. It can also, however, lift up the work that has led to this recognition and has nurtured a broadening theological orientation preferencing diversity. What I believe can assist the UCCan fully remember and embrace a missional identity, as opposed to the current weight of a deficit driven orientation, is the work upon which we are set: the construction of a relational practical theology.

This goal is not to impose a narrative on the UCCan's journey that is artificial. Rather relational construction as it engages with practical theology is able to knit together a narrative that holds up the work of almost a century. It honours the lived experiences of women from the mid-twentieth century who modelled the need to challenge the inherited theological traditions that were clearly incompatible with their lived lives. Since that time, the UCCan has deconstructed its connexion to Empire and gone well beyond just one Truth challenged. If the church is to continue in that important justice-driven trajectory, a theology of relationality offers a way that is generative and invigorating in a time in which change can either burden the institution or embolden it.

## 5. The Pragmatic Task: Lament & Appreciative Inquiry

[T]he pragmatic task of practical theological interpretation: the task of forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable. Practical theology often provides help by offering models of practice and rules of art. Models of practice offer leaders a general picture of the field in which they are acting and ways they might shape this field toward desired goals.

(Osmer 175-176)

At the beginning of our conversation, we situated it in the vocational context in which I work: The United Church of Canada. In my role with the UCCan, in which I currently serve as Principal of one of the theological seminaries for the denomination, there is a paradox. On the one hand, over the course of almost a hundred years, it has deconstructed its theological inheritances when it has recognised, they have been limiting or oppressive based on the lived experience of its membership. Though this originally began with the gendered expectations of women during the war years in the twentieth century, this interrogation has expanded into a theological orientation that has preferenced diversity in Creation. In the course of our discussion, the touchstone in this theological journey has been the LGBTTQ\* community.

While the denomination has continued to nurture an expansivity in regard to its theological orientation, it has also been mired in structural change that has been driven by deficit and fear. This change process initiated at the national level has been, in some ways, deployed in a manner contrary to the UCCan's aspirations to be a conciliar church. This change orientation, has, therefore, created a certain paralysis at the local level.

It is at the local level where both the UCCan's theology of diversity and deficit driven change comes into tension. While the UCCan's nurture of a theology of diversity is commendable and consistent with its engagement with a hermeneutic of suspicion, it has not (necessarily) been able to offer practices at the local level that integrate this shifting theological orientation. Without such practices, it becomes difficult for the local congregation context to engage in relationships with those who may see in the denomination a place in which their spiritual journey might find a home.

Furthermore, in the context of deficit driven change, the impact has not led to a collective sense of missional identity. As a Christian community, not unlike other not-for-profits, without a sense of purpose driven by vision, such organisations can be negatively impacted. Local congregational contexts are no different.

We introduced into our conversation a reparative orientation as a way to balance the UCCan's tradition of hermeneutic suspicion. We explored this reparative concept first through

the UCCan's own work in regard to Creation and the theological idea of humanity as being co-Creators with the Holy. In this exploration, we recognised the manner in which generativity is fostered from a creative stance.

From Creation, we then engaged various correlative conversation partners, with one consistently being relational construction. The manner in which this constructionist orientation has been explored has ranged from practical theology to organisational change and the act of witnessing. In each of these conversations, the meaning-making preference of relational construction has brought us back to the way in which local congregations are able to shape understanding that is particular to their context. This epistemological preference to the local has also been complemented by our various discussions about lament.

Lament, as an ancient Christian tradition, has been one of the central ways in which we have explored how the local UCCan congregations within their own contexts might address both the witnessing it experiences and the structural change before it. In each of these realities, the UCCan's own role as an agent of state, who once supported and fostered the theological traditions it has since interrogated, has been explored through the lens of Empire and White Privilege. Lament, therefore, is a powerful conversation partner for the UCCan in respect to relational construction.

At the end of the normative task, therefore, we completed what Richard Osmer calls the Good Practice: the construction of a relational practical theology. This construction informed by relational construction and practical theology has been fashioned around the epistemological understanding that people within local contextual realities possess the wisdom to make new meaning that is specific to their own context. In this meaning-making preference, we have suggested that such a construction might assist the local congregations to address missional identity and thus serve as varied examples to revitalise the denomination's deficit orientation toward possibility and abundance, which we identified as central to the Creation story that the UCCan developed in regard to a theology of diversity.

If the Good Practice is the construction of a relational practical theology, then the pragmatic task is to offer a strategy to implement the reparative intention embedded in this construction. There are many strategies that we might explore, and as this project proceeds, we will suggest some of those other possibilities. The one strategy that we will explore in our final chapter, however, is Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

AI, as one operationalised practice of relational construction, presents an opportunity to offer a tangible way to live into the contextual realities in which a relational practical theology can be applied. The final part of this pragmatic task, therefore, will present the outline of a curriculum that encapsulates the work in which we have been endeavouring. In order to arrive at that strategic response, therefore, we will first revisit lament in the context of this task and how it might serve the UCCan in the possibility for missional revival.

## Returning to Lament

As we continue to explore lament further, this observation from Brock and Parker is a helpful touchstone to ground and remind us of the relational nature of ritual as a communal practice:

Rituals are the core of every strong community's life. They are like the bones of a body's skeleton, the framework that holds things into a shape, giving form to a community's values and relationships. Humans ritualize everything that matters: eating, sex, death, meeting strangers, resolving conflict; they are our most significant forms of communication, more powerful than words. To live in paradise requires us to create the kinds of rituals that teach us to love the world and each other. (Brock & Parker 516-17)

There are several items in respect to our previous conversation about lament that are important to recall:

- Lament was expressed from a context of oppression. Lament, relationally, is often voiced from a lived ancient Hebrew experience of powerlessness, oppression, and suffering. Lament, therefore, served as a way in which to relationally, between the people themselves and the Holy, find ways to wrestle with the paradox of powerlessness, while embracing a sense of purpose.

This historic reality is further elucidated when Park-Hearn connects lament among those experiencing disenfranchisement to their ability to grieve: "By living into lament, individuals and communities whose grief is disenfranchised connect with pain and loss from which they have been disconnected and detached" (Abstract 2);

- Most of the psalms, though often addressing hurt and harm, suffering and oppression, are bookended by gratitude and even abundance (Branson 43ff). This facet will become more significant in the forthcoming discussion about Appreciative Inquiry.

In this framework, lament becomes not just a communal way to name vulnerabilities, but also to enact 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). The act, itself, becomes an opportunity to reinterpret the stories that have been imposed (Park-Hearn 84 & 98); and,

- The historic context speaks to the prophetic tradition upon which we have already touched. The previously mentioned amnesia becomes apparent in this time of change in which the Christian tradition begins to reconnect with its shift away from the centre of power, understood as Empire. The tension in this awakening, however, highlights the paradox of White Privilege.

It is easy to imagine that reconnecting with a very old ritual, such as lament that speaks to oppression, would allow those of us who are beneficiaries of White Privilege to project ourselves onto the past. In doing so, we stand in danger of entrenching ourselves in an ideological orientation that disavows and dismisses our role in perpetuating forms of oppression, which are echoed in the ancient tradition.

One of the realities that become clear when viewing lament from the historic vantage of oppression and disenfranchisement is that the Christianity of Empire has embraced a theology that is often triumphal. As such, this clarity reminds us that, as with trauma theory, it is in the place of suffering that the church witnesses (Park-Hearn 27) and consequently, the possibility for change begins.

To emphasise, the Psalms are most often spoken from an experience of suffering and hurt not dissimilar to that which the church has caused in respect to its role in Empire and entrenched in the conceptual framework of White Privilege. The laments of those having benefitted from White Privilege and those of the oppressed may be different, but the ritual allows all to seek healing relationally.

## The United Church of Canada

As I consider this next section and pivot from an overview of lament to look specifically at how the ancient ritual might be of use in this time of change that The United Church of Canada (UCCan) is experiencing, I am aware of the potential that the ritual holds. As Park-Hearn reminds us, the possibility of lament helps us not be stuck in what might be experienced (Park-Hearn 84). In giving voice to that which might be silenced, lament is not an act of the melancholy; it is a conversation in the midst of the Holy – a communal reflexive act that recognises hurt and harm as confession and yet is reparative by its very nature of looking forward to a world in which healing is possible.

It is easy to dismiss the potent resource that is the ritual of lament. It is easy to reject it in a manner that highlights how lament challenges the central plumb line, male gender, of White Privilege. As a man who is awash in paradox, I appreciate the difficulty of making space to hear the experiences of others' hurt. The difficulty lies in the reality that, in the ensuing turmoil, control may be lost and the certainty that privilege affords as a flat story may awaken the need to hear that which I would rather not. This challenge that I/we must confront, however, wrestles with the Christian practice of lament, which is relational and messy in nature (Park-Hearn 59).

Though the UCCan has done important work in respect to lament and challenging its inherited theological assumptions that it has been affected by and complicit in nurturing, there remains a corporate challenge that lies before it. In utilising the lens of Empire to affect change, our examination of the very structures and processes of the UCCan remain grounded in the invisibility of White Privilege. As such, though parts of the UCCan have made space to witness trauma, a significant part of the body, local congregations, remain grounded in a historic relationship with Empire.

In order to address the explicit challenge that Park-Hearn levels below (177) and which seems to speak to this congregational tension, lament invites the UCCan into the uncomfortable beginning that promises collective transformation:

A church that is uncomfortable with lament and/or believes that its place in the life of the church is unwarranted, is detached from the suffering around the world, is immune to the plight of creation at the mercy of exploitive human hands. Further, I argue that the church that does not lament renders its congregants disconnected to loss and to the healing made possible when people grieve together. By this I mean that an inability to lament keeps individuals and communities disconnected, unaware, and removed from pain and without the knowledge and comfort that God is in the midst of our loss.  
(177)

As a community, the UCCan is formed by individuals who occupy different social locations. Its members' experiences span the spectrum of oppressor->oppressed, and many of them live in the paradox of both power and powerlessness, as framed through White Privilege. Furthermore, each individual carries hurts and joys, trauma and celebration, that mark life's journey. Pastorally speaking, this is an important reality to note. This is significant because when discussing structures and processes, it is easy to fall into the trap of making people invisible. Any conversation about organisational development and change, therefore, must be sensitive to the reality that the structure, itself, is a living being that carries individual experiences and possesses its own lived hurts and joys, traumas and celebrations.

We can explore an organisation's development and capacity for change by looking to past milestones. Choosing dates can be arbitrary to a certain extent. Just one point of time often silences the journey to that point. This is no less true when we focus on a historic person. Whether a person or a date, it is important to recognise that there is a depth of meaning and circumstance, choice and events that foster forgetting. That having been said, it seems to me as someone who has journeyed into this institution that there are important moments that lend themselves well to imagining how lament might be useful.

Two important dates that highlight the fruition of the UCCan's deconstruction of Empire are 1986 (First Apology to Canadian First Nations) and 1988 (Leadership in the church is opened to all people, regardless of sexual orientation) (Kim-Cragg & Schweitzer 21-22). Attending to these two dates, however, does not imply that no work has been done since then. That would be inaccurate as the denomination has continued to engage in the process of reconciliation that is certainly informed by a hermeneutic of reparation. It has also moved from the boundaries of sexual orientation, as limited by hetero or homosexuality (UCCan *Together* 25), to a current appreciation that both gender and sexual identity are fluid and better understood as existing upon a continuum (UCCan *Moving* 20).

These dates allow us to explore some of the ways in which lament is present in the UCCan. Though 1986 and 1988 can be celebrated as milestones in the denomination's journey towards what we have been calling a theology of diversity, they also reflect a general malaise that is present in most mainstream protestant North American experiences: declining numbers of adherents. Don Schweitzer has referred to this as "disestablishment" (Schweitzer 285 & 289).

Though disestablishment has been accelerating in the last few decades and, in some instances, can be framed as crisis in some congregational contexts, the reality is that the decreasing number of congregants can be traced back to the 1960s. In the story that congregations tell themselves, there are memories of churches overflowing with multiple generations, expansion, and growth that overlaps with the reality that the 1960s signalled the beginning of decline.



Both these competing narratives exist simultaneously. In respect to the story of decline/deficit, therefore, there is nostalgia that, in some instances, frames the UCCan's broadening theological position as the cause for the decrease in church attendance. There can be no denying that the expanding theological position of the UCCan coincides with the declining numbers, but the correlation is much more complex than simple cause and effect. Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer offer the following synopsis:

The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925. From then until 1966, its membership grew. Since 1966, its membership has been declining. From roughly 1970 to 1990, the United Church was occupied internally with re-thinking its understanding of gender roles, sexual orientation and its relations to First Nations peoples. Externally it was occupied with social justice struggles against apartheid in South Africa, the nuclear arms race and ecological issues. By the 1990s, its loss of membership was affecting all aspects of the United Church's life and could no longer be ignored. (11)

Underlying this sense of decline, I would suggest is a loss of control that is occurring for the denomination as it comes to confront its shift away from the centre of Canadian identity (UCCan *Authority* 5; Schweitzer 164). In this shift, the early church models a sense of identity that is historically congruent with a position that is not tied to the mechanism of state. This potential, however, highlights the need to recognise this historical context and thus reveals the role that lament can play as congregations explore the context of White Privilege from which they continue to benefit. Awakening to this reality, however, is clearly not easy for the denomination, let alone congregations. If the UCCan endeavours to do so, however, the possibilities for the future are well articulated by Lois Wilson, the former Moderator of the UCCan, when she observes:

The strength and gift of the United Church is the pioneering role we played in social ethics in this country, and the ways in which we have been able to hold together profound Christian faith and action in society and among persons. The United Church is about the link between spirituality and the concerns for the world in a lively and profound way. But is there sufficient historical memory of this to propel us into the future? I think the church needs to focus more intentionally on helping people to become functionally literate as far as the Bible goes . . . the United Church has gifted us with a non-literalist understanding of the Bible—celebrate this! (Meighan 268)

Another challenge for the denomination in respect to lament is the broadening awareness of the UCCan's involvement in such corporate policies as the Canadian residential school system, the 60s scoop (which was a programme that separated Indigenous children from their families and placed them in adoptive non-Indigenous families), and other governmental initiatives that some have framed as cultural genocide. Though at a denominational and national level, there has been significant intention to seek healing and reconciliation, it falls to individual congregations to choose to engage in this reparative work. The path to reconciliation is not easy, and the place for lament to navigate that journey is important.

What we have framed as an expansive theology of diversity can be seen to be competing with a form of evangelism that might be framed as conservative. From the *Song of Faith*, the UCCan, itself, has expressed this tension in the following way:

- Diversity and Unity;
- Progressiveness and Tradition;
- Global Perspective and Eurocentric World View; and
- Individual Freedom and Institutional Authority. (UCCan *Song* 17-18)

This traditional debate creates a lived opportunity to recognise that lament, as one resource, might help the UCCan engage in a conversation that moves into reparation for a theology of diversity. Lament makes space to begin to ask questions that are generative. This orientation makes space to generate new responses and meaning that might avoid the implications that we have explored from a practical theological viewpoint by focusing on sexual orientation. The UCCan, in its journey to articulate this theology of diversity poetically, in the *Song of Faith* has described this tension and the way to engage it in an innovative manner that might avoid once again fostering theological traditions that oppress. This begins from a place of humility that is different than the certainty of previous credos (Kim-Cragg & Schweitzer 78):

Diversity and Unity—The United Church's affirmation of inclusiveness creates certain problems in establishing a sense of unified identity for the church. The church is increasingly skilled at accommodating a wide spectrum of theological perspectives, liturgical practices, political opinions, cultural values, and social practices, as well as a variety of ethnic backgrounds, regional associations, sexual orientations, and so on. However, there remains a longing for unity, for that which binds the disparate together. But to name what that "common thread" might be always runs the risk of excluding, of creating division, of establishing boundaries. The church's aversion to "us" and "them" distinctions

for fear of excluding anyone makes attempts to establish who exactly “we” are difficult, so the church’s dream of being a “united and uniting” church remains in tension. The statement of faith will likely not resolve this tension, but it does seek to engage it. (UCCan *Song* 17)

In this posture, which the *Song of Faith* models, the UCCan, even in its current context of structural change, has moved to a reparative orientation. In this place in which difference and even paradox are held without trying to establish right and wrong, it is well situated to harness organisational change philosophies that embrace the memory/experience of a corporate body as its greatest asset. Specifically, as we shall see, Appreciative Inquiry complements a preference for embracing the abundance that is the lived wisdom of an organisation. This shift from deficit to generativity/potential complements the theological trajectory upon which the UCCan has been through its almost hundred years of existence.

### Appreciative Inquiry

#### A Relational Change Philosophy

Change is inevitable. Perhaps that goes without saying, but change as constant reality often confronts human systems and structures that rely upon stability and predictability to function well. Whether we are talking at a macro-level about how power is transmitted through such structures in order to continually shape that which is normative or the practical day-to-day pragmatic reality, change happens.

One’s response to change’s constant presence is a function of one’s orientation, and in the case of The United Church of Canada (UCCan), we have named this as either towards deficit or mission. The former, deficit, can lead to a sense of unmoored resistance. Such resistance can be found can lead to attempts to entrench in the status quo, even in the recognition of change. Thus, change can feel threatening and destabilising. From a missional orientation, though, change may elicit similar responses; at the very least, it is embraced as inevitable and, at the most, as generative and energising.

By way of an image, consider coastal wetlands: tidal waters rise and flow, ebb and stream. It has not been uncommon to drain or divert this natural cycle. Nature’s rhythm has and does constantly reshape this geography, so that the lay of the land might look completely different from one year to the next.

Such terraforming, however, occurs for various natural reasons and human rationales. There is often a myriad of motivations that range from economic necessity, to perceived health concerns, to perhaps land reclamation for housing or agriculture. The reshaping, once

done, becomes an infrastructure investment that requires constant and diligent maintenance.

In some instances, the requirement to maintain such infrastructure is minimal. As a global species, we now confront climate change as these cycles now threaten coastal areas in ways that are forcing us to reconsider the strategy of static walls, dykes, and diversions. If such cyclical rhythms can bring change rapidly, how, then, we might ask ourselves, can we respond with similar nimbleness?

The rising of waters, as metaphor, speaks to this cresting reality of change that the UCCan now confronts. From the impact of climate change to the implications of social media as a global relational platform, whether paradigm shifts that undermine the stability sought following World War II to generational tensions between Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen Xers as they confront Baby Boomers and Builders, change is happening. This new, albeit old, reality is apparent throughout the UCCan and its particularity no doubt speaks to a generality that is occurring in mainstream North American Protestantism. There can be no doubt that for some for whom the UCCan is their faith home, it can feel like the firmament is shaking and loosening.

Just as change is inevitable, so, too, is conflict. In this rising wave of transformation, the nature of conflict and its resolution becomes noteworthy. Not only are we living in the most economically privileged context, in which health and longevity have far exceeded those upon whose shoulders we stand, we are also experiencing unprecedented and sophisticated technological upheaval.

Our default adjudicative and combative nature of conflict invites us to pause and reflect upon whether that which we have always done will, in fact, serve us well during this time of change. As the old teaching adage goes, when considering change, if you always do what you've always done, you're always going to get what you always got (Magruder 10). And, in this moment of systemic cultural change, I suspect the UCCan may not actually want what it has always got . . . especially when we consider that for much of its recent telling it has been grounded in deficit.

The UCCan has adopted a hermeneutic of suspicion that has led it to reject and reconstruct imperial theological preferences that broaden who is in, as it has recognised its role of once excluding based on its own historic inheritance. Yet this important work can seem distant or obscured by the local congregational reality that has not heard a generative narrative, but one of loss. The possibility presented by the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to inspire provocative dreaming is just one operationalised relational construction practice that reflects our exploration of practical theology's conversation with relational construction (Manley-Tannis "Appreciative" 31).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), in its fermenting years, began as a research methodology to navigate the management of change. As it endeavoured to articulate and explain change

through processes and techniques, its research orientation was as innovative in the 1980s as it was generative (Bushe “Foundations” 10).

At this time, organisational development was and, to a certain extent, is currently driven by the process or tools that help systems navigate change. From these early years, however, AI has shifted to embrace change in a more philosophical orientation. Regardless of the techniques or procedures utilised, AI has endeavoured to develop a change philosophy that is congruent with its relational construction orientation (Bushe “Foundations,” 10). In particular, AI models the manner in which the local, based on the sharing of story, can affect change much more effectively and rapidly owing to the creativity that arises when a system is given agency.

AI endeavours to approach change from a vantage point about what can be done within a context of change that is generative. From this perspective, it does not avoid challenges (Bushe “Foundations” 16), but it looks to what has worked well in the past to harness that to move forward (Magruder 16). One of the central components of this practical philosophical orientation is the intention of building resilience in the people that becomes a cultural value with a system (“Appreciate Yourself”) as opposed to addressing issues as they arise. Branson refers to this culture of resilience as creating an “interpretive community” (Branson 23). Resilience, when nurtured from a strength-based perspective, is intentionally collaborative and relational in order to be generative and creative (Barret & Fry 25-26). Barret & Fry offer this description from their joint work *Appreciative Inquiry*:

At its core, AI is an invitation for members of a system to enhance the generative capacity of dialogue and to attend to the ways that our conversations, particularly our stories and metaphors, facilitate action that supports members’ highest values and potential. An AI effort seeks to create metaphors, stories, and generative conversations that break the hammerlock of the status quo and open up new vistas that further activities in support of the highest human values and aspirations. (25)

AI offers a way to help the UCCan reframe its current context of change, which is informed by the relational practical theology that we have constructed. The current tension in which the UCCan finds itself is illustrated well in a recent study entitled “Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy” (Haskell). In this exploration, mainstream Protestant denominations were compared to more literal and conservative evangelical Christian faith communities. The intention was to examine success, by way of numerical numbers and engagement, and, in turn, draw conclusions from the identified differences.

What was telling in this study, though not surprising for those who have been looking at organisational development within the Christian faith-based context, was that evangelical Christians seem to be more successful on account of their adherence to scripture in a way that established clear expectations (Haskel 9). As such, those who were considered “left-leaning” or “progressive” were seen to be in decline, as evidenced by the numeric reality we discussed previously.

There are many ways to explore this study and its conclusions. What strikes me, in respect to our current conversation, is the connexion between clarity of Christian identity and the ability to transmit that with confidence. To borrow from the language of marketing and social media, evangelical Christians have a clear sense of identity and purpose, which allows them to implement strategic plans that encapsulate well their sense of vision (Blakely 19). In this regard, Haskel observes the following: “The clergy and congregants of growing churches are more theologically conservative and exhibit higher rates of Bible reading and prayer. Growing church congregants are more likely to agree that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose, and to identify evangelism as that purpose” (21).

That clarity is packaged and branded in a way that is accessible in a manner that the UCCan and other mainstream Protestant denominations are currently struggling to express. This inability, I would suggest, is not owing to a theological deficit. Rather, the challenge that the UCCan, institutionally, continues to wrestle with is finding ways to embrace corporately a narrative that invites the entire system to embrace and celebrate an evolving theology of diversity. To further clarify, the confidence that conservative Christians possess allows them to evangelise their familial and social networks in a way that is not paralleled in the mission and teachings of mainline Protestant denominations such as the UCCan (Haskel 23).

This theological orientation towards diversity is consistent with the UCCan’s previous work of recognising its values align with a secular culture. The irony is that the UCCan and its secular counterparts share significant values. The challenge is that the church has not found a way to explore this as an opportunity to express an identity. Specifically, how the UCCan attempts to convey that theological orientation to diversity is limited by its inability to translate it from its context to the secular environment. More pointedly, diversity’s value and White Privilege have not been explored universally at the congregational level. AI, therefore, affords a potential bridge. Finally, as the UCCan has been grounded in a deficit orientation, it has been unable to embrace the alignment with secular Canada as a missional orientation.

This bridge, if you will, is both relational in nature and harnesses the lived experience of the congregation. This bridge is further expanded when we begin to consider the manner in which a relational practical theology informs an understanding of the Christian community through the Trinitarian symbol and the story of Creation related to co-Creators.

Specifically, AI allows congregations to honour their past as they look for the very best practices and experiences that have been rewarding/successful. In sharing stories of these

experiences, congregations then stand better prepared, as their own agents/experts, to explore how to do what was great in the past in new ways that are relevant to those with whom they share values, but with whom they are not yet in relationship.

Part of what this bridge offers is a way to begin to help those in congregational leadership, whether Ordered (which in the UCCan includes both Ordained and Diaconal Ministers) or Lay, to translate denominational theological work that has often occurred at an academic and/or institutional/national level to the congregational context. At this grass root level, the UCCan is often beholden to just one narrative: deficit. By engaging AI from its philosophical orientation, a practical curriculum makes space to translate this theological work in a way that becomes accessible systemically throughout the denomination as it undergoes significant structural change. Intrinsic to this curriculum is a relational practical theology.

AI does not explore systems through a lens of deficit; AI does not focus on what is wrong or broken. Rather, practitioners of AI identify places of strength and relationship. This orientation, as we have mentioned, does not deny that there are challenges within a system, but seeks to identify the innovative as generative, as opposed to issues to be problem-solved (Bushe “Generativity” 6). Philosophically, and borrowing from relational construction (Bushe “Foundations” 10; Magruder 4-5), AI contends that the words we use begin to form the future. And if those words and images, stories and narratives, are grounded in a place of “can’t,” then the result will consistently be “won’t.”

Whatever success might look like, it begins with the words and stories people tell themselves as co-creators (Thatchenkery & Metzker 88). AI helps people recognise what is organisationally/personally best, as a step to shape what will thrive in the future (Mohr & Watkins 2). By orienting us to be very intentional about the words we use, we (individually and collectively) are encouraged to begin to ask questions that are generative and future oriented, as though it were happening now. This appreciation of the importance of diction informs AI’s posture that questions are never neutral (Barret 39). They serve to focus our attention, and where we are focused leads to what we will see (Magruder 16): deficit or potential, brokenness or possibility. In this focus, the possibility for innovative and new ideas is nurtured. Bushe describes generativity in this way:

AI can be generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren’t available or didn’t occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future. When AI is transformational it has both these

qualities: it leads to new ideas, and it leads people to take new actions. It is the generativity of the inquiry that makes that happen. (“Generativity” 2)

At the moment when new and generative questions are asked, a system begins to change (Magruder 41-42). If the questions determine the path of an organisation into the future, the UCCan might begin to ask itself questions that are grounded in a theology of diversity as celebratory, as opposed to those shaped in deficit. In such celebration of that which is best, these acts of remembering, maybe even reawakening, are identity forming. Clarity of identity, as we have referenced in respect to the “Theology Matters” article, is central to being able to confidently speak with authenticity that engages those with whom the UCCan hopes to share its passion.

AI, philosophically, provides an opportunity for a system as a living and relational organism (Gergen *Relational* xv) to transform its culture, embrace identity, and ultimately pose questions that are reality forming (Bushe “Generativity” 7; Kelm 57). It is not whether the right question is asked as much as whether the place to which such a question leads is generative, creative, and sustaining of new possibilities (Kelm 58). From a postmodern position, AI makes space to recognise that individually, any process must be flexible enough to accommodate the context in which it is used, yet robust enough that it recognises the collective formation that begins in embracing the particularity of the parts: namely, congregations of the UCCan. Utilising a theology of diversity as the thread that binds, the UCCan has already, at a national level, begun to weave such a tapestry. The work upon which it has set has offered a relational practical theology that can imbue AI in a manner that makes that preference for diversity clear.

#### [Appreciative Inquiry: One Final Correlative Conversation](#)

One final step that I think would be helpful for us to take, prior to shifting to outlining the pragmatic task before us that incorporates Appreciative Inquiry’s (AI) philosophical orientation into a curriculum that can be used by The United Church of Canada (UCCan) during its time of structural change, is to explore one final conversation in what we have called mutual “critical correlation” (Tracy 45). This correlation or dialogue between human experience and Christian text/theology helps further appreciate the way that AI creates capacity for the UCCan in the context of its structural change. The participants in this correlative dialogue, therefore, are Appreciative Inquiry and practical theology.

As with all that we have done, thus far, this excursion is meant to be provocative. One of the challenges that the UCCan has confronted is its inheritance to establish Truth. Revisiting this is important, as way of reminder, in that it is nonetheless easy for us to slip into that practice or performance. This ease finds a response when Gergen deconstructs the



preference of mechanistic discourse to flatten or reduce people to an essential form and/or resource (Gergen "Correspondence" 145). This challenge is helpful, as we have been endeavouring to explore this conversation relationally:

However, from the present perspective, we see that once a theorist is committed to the metaphor of the human as machine, the particular activities of the person cease to play a central role in the process of theoretical description and explanation. Regardless of the character of the person's behavior, the mechanist theorist is virtually obliged to segment him from the environment, to view the environment in terms of stimulus or input elements, to view the person as reactive to and dependent on these input elements, to view the domain of the mental as structured (constituted of interacting elements), to segment behavior into units that can be coordinated to the stimulus inputs, and so on. (Gergen "Correspondence" 145)

We have not only been theologising or discussing the theoretical. Since the outset, we have been moving toward a practical way in which to construct a relational practical theology that keeps the UCCan oriented to a reparative intention. The practical application, therefore, is intended to be both relational and reflexive. It serves to continue to hold the institutional church to account in respect to any possibility to regress, becoming once again complicit in imperial theological traditions that oppress. A relational practical theology shares with all practical theological orientations a preference for lived experience. As such, this must be central to all endeavours, in order to avoid the flattening of people and creating and/or perpetuating harm.

Mary Gergen goes on to describe such intention as a theoretical orientation (Gergen "Personal" 239 & Yang 128). I believe that what she means by this, as she discusses the work of Ken Gergen, is that any and all relational endeavours remain theoretical acts that exist in a (constant) state of interaction. They constantly invite stories that change and transform processes when people engage with one another. Not only do people change in this orientation, but so do organisations. If an organisation is ultimately relational, social construction allows us to better appreciate that meaning is made in the intimacy of being present to one another:

As he [Ken] began to reason, if all realities emerge from relationships, this includes the reality of individual minds. Thus, one could see relationships, as opposed to separate inter-acting individuals, as the originating point for all meaning. Here was an exciting new vista for theoretical innovation, and it meant for Ken a full reconstructing of all those psychological processes

traditionally viewed as “inside the head” as taking place within relationships. Ultimately the individual could be viewed as a matrix of multiple relational processes. (Gergen “Personal” 239)

This is important in this brief exploration about how AI and practical theology are in conversation because it addresses the danger of drifting from truth back to Truth formation. Furthermore, with such intention appreciated, it allows those who are engaged in the theoretical or the theological to take seriously that we must find ways to constantly operationalise learning in a way that is collectively relational, so that the community, itself, can play, challenge, test, and change. Practical theology allows this to happen through the practice of engaged witnessing, and Appreciative Inquiry does this by inviting people to explore their shared stories in a way that celebrates individual meaning, in order to shape corporate decisions and understandings: “With the development of new theoretical languages, research practices, forms of expression, and practices of intervention, so does the field invite cultural transformation” (Gergen “Vision” 9).

Just as we are exploring how AI and practical theology might be in conversation, so, too, are the theoretical and theological discourses in which we have been engaged. These two orientations to collaborative and relational endeavours are complementary and make space for mutual critique, or perhaps mutual dialogue. Again, such critique does not require one to be right and wrong. If done relationally, each orientation promises something new when open to cultural transformation.

From *Blessed Rage for Order*, David Tracy’s work in this regard, especially about critical correlation between lived experience and Christian text/tradition, promises to engage in what he calls “revisionist theology:”

A practical theology in interdisciplinary conversation with empirical sociologists and economists and informed by critical social theory would find its *praxis* grounded in, yet authentically be a major and new stage of development upon, the *theoria* of a newly constructed revisionist fundamental and systematic theology and an ever-freshly retrieved historical theology. (248)

In many ways, what we have done throughout our journey has been to highlight and explore how practical theology, when engaged with relational construction, helps reveal new ways to explore the implication in which the UCCan has recognised its complicity. In this recognition, the UCCan is also able to live into sharing a theology of diversity that has expanded to be expansive and not oppressive. In this sharing, therefore, we are discussing evangelising from a theological preference of practical relationality.

Just as importantly, we have done more than highlight and explore these implications. We have discussed how practical theology might offer healing when those implications are examined from a place of reparation. We have come to understand these implications in relation to a ubiquitous use of violence that fosters collective trauma. In this mutuality between practical theology and relational construction, we have dared to name this trauma as, itself, sinful. We have explored how the UCCan's tradition of interrogating its inheritance has revealed harm in some situations such as gender roles, homophobia, and racism as a colonial settler.

With this recap in mind, it feels important to explore how mutual critical correlation might further deepen and even offer transformation for both AI and the praxis of practical theology. Some of the ways in which this mutuality might be described and explored, therefore, are:

- At a theoretical level, as highlighted between “theoretical orientation” (relational construction orientation) and “mutual critical correlation” (theological method), how our relational practical theology might be further enriched when explored as mutual dialogue. If taken seriously, the possibility for mutual transformation suggests that such “discursive resources” stand to enrich us all, social and culturally, through creative and mutual practices (Gergen “Psychological” 809-810);
- The manner in which AI challenges the current UCCan orientation to dominant discourses about deficit. In this critique, AI offers the church an opportunity to reflect and (re)orient itself toward a theology of abundance and gratitude;
- The Christian tradition of ritual and lament, as but one example, suggests to AI that the act of coming together collectively and using repeated patterns (processes) that lead to deepening awareness is more than just process. The language of ritual connects individuals in a manner that further highlights AI's awareness that the shared and historical wisdom that an organisation possesses is its greatest asset. The word ritual, as denoting a sacred act, may initially be resisted from AI's secular context. More specifically, the word ritual, when used in a contemporary secular context, may not be accessible to participants of AI owing to the reality that experience of organised religion is waning in western contexts. That having been said, the vocabulary of spirituality, when understood as transformative, allows the tradition of ritual to further enliven and deepen AI philosophy;
- AI's orientation to recognising an organisation's wisdom as its greatest asset stands as a critique to the institutional church's tendency to embrace the dominant consumer and cultural celebration of the cult of youth. This youthful

idolatry has and does serve to reinforce deficit thinking. AI's focus on corporate wisdom also allows the church to (re)orient itself to the Christian tradition that makes explicit that it is at its best when all of the generations work and interact with one another (1 Chronicles 16.15. Deuteronomy 4.9-10, 6.5-9, 11.19 Matthew 19.13-15, and, Psalm. 78.4);

- Practical theology when engaged with relational construction brings to the practice of AI a deeper awareness of the dis-ease that (some) participants bring into a process. This sensitivity, when incorporated into ritual, invites AI to consider utilising transformative processes that further its orientation to seeking the shared lived wisdom within an organisation;
- Practical theology, through the practice of witnessing, brings to the implementation of the AI philosophy an ability to explicitly engage in the reality of conflict with a reparative intention. Often AI confronts the challenge of being "Pollyanna."
- This term is used to flatten AI processes to simply looking for the good, which is trivialised as saccharine and/or simple. Practical theology, therefore, and the manner in which we have explored witnessing violence, as a symptom of collective trauma, models a possible way to augment processes with an intention that addresses the "Pollyanna critique";
- AI asks practical theology, when it uses lament, to what extent focusing on harm is not simply complaint. As such, AI further highlights that the practice of lament is a way to shift from what is not possible to what is possible. In this shift to possibility, AI once again asks practical theology to take seriously whether its practices lead to deficit – complaint – or reprimand. AI allows practitioners of practical theology to be reflective, in order to recognise a re-orientation to a preference regarding Original Sin. In other words, AI's philosophical adoption, when it is incorporated into practices, serves as a metric or gauge for our constructed practical relation theology.

These examples of mutual critical correlation do not necessarily need to be resolved, especially if we, ourselves, in our own conversation, recall that it is in the dialogue that meaning is made. In the generative nature of such critical correlation, any processes, practices, or rituals that arise out of practical theology's engagement of social construction must remain reflexive in that we must be aware we can once more nurture a culture of trauma. This awareness then allows practitioners, whether Lay or Ordered, to ask questions that are expansive when intending to utilise Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

In turn, practical theology invites AI practices to take seriously the transformative effect when it is used. In so doing, new practices that are more than process might be

imagined. Or, more clearly, practical theology makes space to recognise that the processes used by AI practitioners are in and of themselves transformative for individuals and communities. In this recognition, the import of the task takes on both a richness and a responsibility that further the relational connexions that social construction recognises bind us.

### The United Church of Canada

Though mapping a complete curriculum that synthesises what we have explored in respect to The United Church of Canada (UCCan) is outside of the scope of this work, I suggest the following framework for a curriculum that encapsulates what we have explored in this journey. Furthermore, as can be found in *Appendix (Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the Provocative)*, I have already deployed a “sampler” that is intended to assist faith communities’ experience of the process of developing a “provocative proposal.”

It has been my experience that this learning is often generative when faith communities shift from “being processed” to recognising the agency that Appreciative Inquiry affords them by tapping into their shared stories as the resource to imagine missional responses in their local context.

Furthermore, such a curriculum hopefully offers ways for us to imagine the practical applications that embed our constructed relational practical theology. Such a suggestion, I hope, reminds us that such endeavours are never complete, that conversations and meaning-making evolve as we constantly engage in future-forming mutual opportunities.

Our conversation has explored the theological journey of the UCCan in respect to the learnings that arise as practical theology and relational construction engage in conversation. The central theological touchstone to which we have returned is the UCCan’s evolving theology of diversity, as illustrated by its experience with the LGBTTQ\* community. Finally, we explored the pastoral relationship as the place in which practical theology witnesses harm. In this orientation, we set to construct a theology of practical relationality in order to make specific the liberative reality of an epistemology that is particular to the local and intentionally reparative.

I believe that the future-forming opportunities that relational construction nurtures allow us to now present a curriculum framework, which embeds this construction. Though this is specific to my Christian faith-based context, I believe it offers a general framework that can be transferable to other North American mainstream protestant contexts and perhaps even further afield.

The first overarching reality is that the entire framework of this potential curriculum is grounded in Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The UCCan is a complex organisation with various

levels of accountability and identity. In her book, *Appreciative Inquiry*, McGruder summarises why AI complements this current context in which the denomination finds itself:

[T]he real power and impact of AI is seen when it is used as a comprehensive orientation to change in complex systems. By comprehensive change we mean change in an orientation to discerning strategic shifts in the relationship of the enterprise with its environment, changes in the way the work of the organization is done, and/or changes in how the organization approaches problems of leadership, performance, conflict, power, and equity. (32)

If the philosophical underpinning of this programme is AI, the next reality that must be understood is that deployment will most often occur within a congregational context. Though there are certainly examples where faith communities are thriving in the UCCan, many are striving during a time of cynicism and fear. Often, as is the case of the UCCan, when systems have been continually confronted with organisational change and renewal, particularly motivated by a deficit orientation, eventually fatigue and apathy arise (Magruder 35). To nurture the potential for transformation, therefore, any curriculum will require trust throughout the system, whether that is between leadership and participants or within interpersonal relationships between those who occupy roles within the various denominational structures to further share such a programme. Embedding a practical relational theological orientation, therefore, is key. Furthermore, there must also be a willingness to find ways to introduce this opportunity in a way that models generativity (such as the curriculum already mentioned in *Appendix (Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the Provocative)*). Another study programme, for the sake of another programme, will not be well received within the UCCan ecosystem.

As with all systems, the gatekeepers can be allies or resisters in traditional organisational paradigms. The challenge and opportunity are to model for gatekeepers (often ministry personnel) the potential such a curriculum offers. Structurally speaking, the UCCan is grounded traditionally in a non-hierarchical conciliar governance model. As such, when it works well, there is a sense of developing ideas with consensus. When dysfunctional, however, there is a tendency to default to isolation and distrust. The pitch, if you will, will require multiple strategies to share this resource invitationally.

Some preliminary strategic considerations with tentative timeframes are the following:

- Discern denominational willingness, at a national and regional level, for implementing a programme throughout the system (4Q 2019 – 1Q 2020);

- If willingness is apparent, offer “teach pieces” that are experiential to leadership within denominational courts who would be willing to support a commitment to development of curriculum (1Q 2020);
- With commitment to proceed, begin curriculum design (see below for rough outline: 1Q-2Q 2020);
- Denominational survey and invitation to those who have worked with AI and/or complementary postmodern philosophical and change management techniques to review and beta test final curriculum (2Q-3Q 2020);
- After completion of a beta cohort, which will hopefully be representative of the geographic breadth of the UCCan, further adjustments and improvement of curriculum (4Q 2020); and
- Coinciding with the current structural change process in which the UCCan finds itself, deployment of the curriculum nationally (1Q-2Q 2021).

Questions that remain, in respect to a 4Q 2020 deployment, are the following:

- Staffing commitment to deploy nationally post 4Q 2020. The AI philosophy highlights capacity and resilience making at a foundational level. In order to help congregations live into this will require a commitment to a “train-the-trainer” model moving forward into 2020+. Where that commitment arises, however, will need to be determined;
- To what extent can this potential resource be incorporated now, in respect to the evolving structural change, in a manner that is owned denominationally? Though there is currently a commitment to a social entrepreneur model denominationally, EDGE: A Network for Ministry Development, it operates on a pay-for-fee model. How then might this suggested internal process complement that work?

### Curriculum Framework

The content of the suggested curriculum that follows models the overall structure of our conversation in this final chapter. As such, much of the material herein indicates the content that will be expanded upon within an actual curriculum. Though establishing a timeframe for the entire programme, at this point, is premature, I believe it is safe to assume it will require a certain degree of commitment that will have to address concerns/resistance about time and energy, which are initially outlined in the questions we just named.

- Historical overview of a UCCan theology of diversity;
- Proposed three sessions that cover the following timeframes:
  - Early UCCan exploration of gender and divorce;

- UCCan exploration of sexuality and apologies to Canadian First Nations; and
- Intercultural Church in a pluralistic and secular society;
- Modernity and postmodernity would be a central thread explored for theological reflection; and
- Experience would be relational and experiential with a commitment to preparing for each session based on readings between each gathering.

a) Lament's first step: a ritual of exploring loss in this time of institutional change;

- If the first component of the curriculum is head spaced/academic work, this next step would take us to the place we discussed about trauma: listening, storytelling, and healing;
- Proposed two sessions;
- Each session would utilise storytelling interviews that explored what has been lost/mourned/lamented;
- Session 1: Self;
- Session 2: Corporate; and
- As themes emerge, AI philosophical orientation will help reframe themes as "gifts" that were named/identified in the shared lament ritual.

b) Educational process in respect to White Privilege;

- Proposed three sessions that intend to engage both head and heart work. The model offered by the United Church of Christ's (UCC) White Privilege curriculum would help inform this component of the process;
- Session 1: Self;
- Session 2: Corporate; and
- Session 3: The financial implications of White Privilege. Again, using the model offered by the UCC, the financial realities of racism would be highlighted. Since the UCC has already done much work in respect to the Canadian context of right relations with Indigenous friends, Brothers and Sisters, that would be one area in which the UCC's curriculum would need to be modified.

c) Lament's second step; recognising the trauma that is collectively present, though individually experienced, in respect to White Privilege; and



- This would follow the first lament section, but thread the work thus far, including White Privilege, into two sessions: Self; and Corporate.
  - d) An Appreciative Inquiry process that can recognise the places in which the UCCan has historically done faithful work, as framed within the tentative proposal of a theology of diversity and White Privilege, in order to imagine innovative ways to navigate toward a future in which potential is embraced.
- There are two considerations in this regard, which remain to be explored more explicitly during design phase: Process and Training. Since AI is both experiential and invites those within systems to take ownership of the ways in which the philosophy is introduced, some considerations are the following:
  - ❖ Assumption: Curriculum will be implemented locally by members of each congregation/local region;
  - ❖ Assumption: Those providing leadership will have had to have experienced both training in the foundational aspect of AI and have engaged with contextualising the curriculum itself;
  - ❖ Assumption: A train-the-trainer curriculum must be designed;
  - ❖ To Be Determined: How will local leadership be discerned?
  - ❖ To Be Determined: What are the resources that will be available to help with costs of training/implementation? From where will resources be provided? And
  - ❖ To Be Determined: What a mentoring denominational model of support will look like for local leadership.
- After the first four movements of the curriculum, those who have been providing local leadership will, with the assistance of a Mentor, begin to implement the AI philosophy in ways that speak to the direct needs/context of the congregation/local region. As such, there are not particular details that can be provided, other than to reinforce the nimbleness, which AI affords those embracing change. The wisdom in the local system, when recognised and embraced, allows us to recognise what the next steps are that need to be taken. This responsive nature, therefore, reinforces the postmodern orientation's comfort with ambiguity, as opposed to certainty often expressed in modernist organisational processes of change.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this text, I have been addressing you, the reader. I wonder about you frequently. I wonder what you have heard and experienced during this journey together. I wonder whether you identify as a person of faith. I wonder, perhaps with some anxiety, what it may be like to meet you away from this endeavour in which we have engaged. I wonder about the extent to which this journey has been accessible and whether the sharing of personal stories has made space, in the vulnerability that comes with storytelling, to nurture a shared sense of connexion and meaning, even when we have not yet met.

I wonder all of this because the world outside of this writing experience, performance, sharing, and relational endeavour is currently loud with a narrative of fear and catastrophe. It is an unfolding tale where swords are being rattled disrupting the semblance of stability, which has existed since the end of WWII. Some of this instability is filled with potential and some is not. The choices before us, collectively, clearly require us to find space to listen and learn, reflect and act. They require of us to take seriously the need not only for new conversations, per se, but also to have them in different ways.

There is some irony in this state of affairs geopolitically. Millennia ago, Augustine imagined a church that was universal, in which all of us were welcome, and that was the arbiter of Grace. The church recognised our connectivity in our shared brokenness. Since then, the institutional church, as we have explored through the journey of The United Church of Canada (UCCan), has been a central agent in shaping what western culture has come to deem acceptable and normal. In this role, as that history has become forgotten, the layers of normalcy have become entrenched.

Though we may imagine that the liberal west has opened itself to diversity, one need but listen to the media, whether social, traditional, or digital, and the inherited traditions that the UCCan has interrogated are there in weaponised form. People and places are so quickly flattened and dehumanised. Violence, implicit and explicit, abounds, and too quickly there is a collective dulled passivity that comes with paralysis, with shared trauma that is inarticulable.

Yet in this tumult, in which much seems untethered, there is a potential, an optimism that beckons. Whether that is faith or confidence in our collective ability to meet in changing times with civility, I am not sure determining which matters. What does, I suspect, is an openness to find new meaning, to find new words, explore new language that helps make sense of what has, is, and may occur. This is not simply an intellectual musing or an exercise in abstraction. It is a recognition that is lived out as the UCCan invites people to come to share and have witnessed these inheritances that continue to cause harm.

This remembering is not easy. In the act of witnessing history, such reflection invites listening, not pontificating or politicising. In places of listening as witness, the UCCan finds

itself with an opportunity to recognise the harm that has occurred through an orientation of relational practical theology. This praxis, reflection and action orientation, allows the UCCan to continue to test inherited and newly constructed theologies in regard to the extent to which they liberate or oppress.

When theological orientations rely upon violence, then the UCCan must continue to ask foundational questions, if it intends to explore ways to corporately offer healing that is reparative and mutual. Humility, rather than ego, becomes a gauge of a community that recognises the harm it has caused, sometimes mistakenly and other times with intention, and encourages action from the learning that arises, not defensiveness, dismissiveness, or paralysis.

This journey of ours, through an exploration of the UCCan's expansive nurture of a theology of diversity, has not been an act of the theoretical or theological. It has included theologising and theorising as an act of relationality intended to spark new conversations. In this theoretical orientation, I have explored my vocational context as an example of how the UCCan might shift from an orientation of deficit to one that embraces its theological journey missionally. The UCCan offers a model, not a solution, to explore a relational practical theology that is an act of theorising. In this model, as pastoral relationships are sown and congregational change is explored relationally, if nurtured well, we can find ways to respond with resilience in this time of change.

What a conversation between practical theology and relational construction brings to the UCCan is pragmatic reflection that arises from what sometimes can feel abstract and distant. Christian doctrine and theological discourse are indeed valuable ways to contribute to an evolving human endeavour to more fully understand our relationship with the Holy. Though valuable, such practices must always be held to account and a commitment to a relational practical theology offers the UCCan a way to be both reflective and reflexive.

To arrive at this point in our conversation, we began with the descriptive task in regard to the current context of the UCCan. In its current change context, it has (at present) been orientated or focused on deficit/loss. It also has a long history of nurturing an expansive theological orientation that endeavours to embrace diversity. This theological journey was born in the experience of women whose gendered roles did not match their lived (liberative) experience in the war years during the twentieth century. How the individual life is affected by inherited imperial traditions became a very important and suspicious orientation of suspicion that continues to inform the UCCan's theological journey. Those experiences, when understood as stories, as narratives, become important mirrors as to the implications of theological preferences that oppress or liberate.

From the descriptive task we then shifted to the interpretive. In this part of our examination, we continued to explore story and narrative through the lived experience of violence. This violence, when recognised as affecting both the person who has lived within

inflexible theological traditions and those who witness and may be complicit in perpetuating them, we named as collective trauma. In both the descriptive and interpretative tasks, we threaded this reality of violence with a reparative practice from the Christian tradition: Lament.

From the interpretive task, we then shift to the normative. In this part of our conversation, we then began to explore what a conversation between practical theology and relational construction might afford the UCCan as a resource to shift from deficit to mission. In this endeavour, we have particularly focused on the epistemological grounding of relational construction. This understanding that meaning is made locally and is practically experienced in such setting as pastoral relationships and practical change process like Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has allowed us to offer a way for the UCCan to understand its evolving story. This evolution, when informed by relational construction, has allowed us to better appreciate how a relational practical theology can be a significant resource as the denomination strives to shift to a missional identity in the midst of structural deficit driven change.

We completed the normative task by completing the Good Practice that Richard Osmer suggests at this stage. In the context of this project that left us with the construction of a relational practical theology. Relational practical theology is an important construction as it embraces the role of witnessing. The act of witnessing the harm that has and does arise from theological inflexibility invites the UCCan to have conversations in different ways, in order to create the possibility for newness in the midst of harm and trauma. Newness, what Christians might frame as resurrection, is not an individual exercise. It depends upon the degree to which we commit to relational dialogue that does not avoid the hurt, but takes seriously our interconnectedness. It is explicitly connected to an orientation of seeking reparation in all relations.

In the final task, the pragmatic, we connected lament and witnessing as a generative application to inform one practice that can be explored as a praxis extension of a relational practical theology. Though we focused on AI specifically, there are indeed other practices that might be explored following the completion of this project. Whether that is embedding AI's philosophy into other processes, such as can be found in *Appendix (Social Media & Evangelism)*, exploring the manner in which the epistemological creation can be introduced into the pastoral educational setting for Ordered and Lay caregivers or beginning conversation with Indigenous communities to co-create reparative responses to the harm of imperial – colonial – Christianity, the only limitation to possibilities, I suggest, are time and imagination.

In the relational orientation to witnessing, the UCCan, after taking this seriously as a shared endeavour, trust and humility must be central to an aspiration that imagines new meaning that arises from generative and creative possibilities. In order to avoid perpetuating previous Christian inherited tradition that cause harm and, perhaps more importantly,

replacing one inflexible doctrine with another, the UCCan must continue to reflect and learn from its previous complicit role as a state agent of Empire in nurturing practices that were oppressive.

David Tracy continued our correlative conversations in the pragmatic task. Such correlation, when approached relationally, becomes a formative opportunity to answer the question that has propelled our conversation. In particular, Tracy allows us to understand this correlation between two partners: Christian tradition and lived experience. We have done this in two ways.

In the first, as we have already reviewed, we have engaged such partners as practical theology and relational construction to better understand the lived experience within limiting traditions (such as those that have fostered racism, homophobia, and misogyny) that have caused harm. In this mutual space, in which listening and humility recognise trauma and hurt, we have arrived at what feels like a practical application of a reparative intention. These responses offer ways to imagine that witnessing offers not solutions, but collective healing.

The second manner in which we have explored critical correlation is the Christian tradition, as evidenced in the denominational context of the UCCan, and the lived experience that is brought to the fore through the use of the philosophical change orientation of AI. AI allows for practical ways to explore the tradition's vestiges that can be discerned in the lives of UCCan members based within the various congregational communities. Though this correlational may also translate into a larger denominational conversation, the practical application invites critical correlation between communities of faith and AI.

Regardless of different UCCan communities of faith or the larger denominational body, such conversations occur in the context of those who have benefitted. Whether as inheritors of colonialism and White Privilege, or those who have been oppressed and harmed, AI complements practically the implications observed by practical theology and invites lived experience to offer wisdom about how to thrive, even in the context of harm and/or deficit.

Finally, after exploring the UCCan's long history of endeavouring to acknowledge a past that has caused harm and constructing a relational practical theology, we returned to the ritual of lament. The UCCan, by engaging in that history with such ancient practices as lament and deep witnessing, is able, if with difficulty, to find language to explore the trauma in which it has been complicit in creating. This position of brokenness, however, is supplemented with the critique that arises from practical applications of relational construction such as AI. This correlation enables the church to begin to (re)orientate itself to engage in missional conversations, and subsequent new meaning and insights, that are nurtured by the communities of faith themselves.

This critical correlation between AI and the UCCan possesses potential when explored relationally. The co-creating that arises helps, ultimately, in the transfer of the theoretical into actual practices that allow communities of faith, congregations, to acknowledge a history of

trauma, but not to be paralysed by it. In this place, the local community stands better prepared to dream dreams, rather than resist what occurs when people remember from an orientation of loss and deficit. The local community stands better prepared to embrace its collective agency, which has often been limited or discouraged by a culture of expertise. In this relational critical correlation, therefore, the community, itself, is able to creatively and generatively respond to the change in which they contextually find themselves.

Power: as long as our species gathers in community, power will always exist. What we have explored and constructed together does not deny this. Furthermore, just as much as we cannot divorce ourselves from our history/context, we cannot deny that any practical applications we may create will and are shaped by and will shape power.

This is but one more example of the tensions that the UCCan must recognise and which a relational practical theology is particularly equipped to address from a constant awareness of witnessing and a commitment to reparation. If the UCCan can live into this, whether as individuals, in pastoral relationship and/or institutional bodies such as the church or governing political communities, it can intentionally utilise this new language to remain reflexive about the choices it makes, rather than allow the choices it makes to shape systems and structures that slowly lead to acquiesce agency and once again nurture traditions that oppress.

In this changing cultural climate, whether as an individual or as a church, more than ever, we must be awake to one another and our relationality. In such an awareness, ultimately, we are better prepared to ask questions that place our collectivity as the central guiding locus. From here, we may hear something new every time we begin to listen ....

## 7. Appendix (Logs & Vignettes)

### Log #01

This Log involves the death of a person who was wrestling with bullying and homophobia. The person was being bullied both at school and online. The person was wrestling with sexual identity and also had a history of self-harm, primarily by cutting and burning. The family context is Christian informed by a literal theological orientation. One way to understand this literal preference is in regard to the idea of Christian salvation occurring literally after death. Though the metaphor may be extended and explored from this perspective, the literal reading can limit the ability to address the reality of trauma and loss that defy literal readings (Rambo 168). In the case of the young person, they died by suicide.

This event involves an Outreach Minister from a The United Church of Canada (UCCan) Affirming Ministry, which is a ministry that has done intentional work and completed the requirements to be officially recognised by Affirm Canada as a place that is welcoming to the LGBTTQ\* community. The Minister has been contacted by the parent of the dead young person who is experiencing many presenting concerns:

- Crisis of faith;
- Questioning relationship with family faith tradition;
- Shock and trauma from being the person who discovered their dead child who had used a firearm to die by suicide; and
- Anger at God and is trying to explore if the UCCan Minister can help the family navigate through this loss.

Items to consider:

- What does an orientation to generativity mean in this case for the Outreach Minister?
- How does the UCCan's history and its expansive theology of diversity help in this difficult conversation?
- What is the role of lament and confession for the conversation?
- What does self-care mean for both the parent and Minister during and after meeting?

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (*New Revised Standard Version Lev. 20:13*)





### Vignette: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin . . .

*The finality of it sits there. As with its kin, whether long barrelled or short, it is dressed in impassive, cold hard lines. On the nightstand, amidst journals filled with lament, doubt, questions and anger, it simply is. As thoughts of self-harm, soul-drenched fatigue and suicide set the stage, the gun's weighted presence acts as a silent witness to a choice that dances upon a precipice from which there is no return.*

*As an observer with only one possible voice, it finds itself in a non-descript room, in a bland suburb, somewhere in a place where the Bible defines sin and sinner. A Holy Book used to create the boundaries and binaries of what it means to be gendered (male and female), what it means to love (heterosexual), and who is in (the pure) and who is out (the unclean). An interpretation of Sacred Scripture that offers an illusion of stability in a world gone mad.*

*In this place that could be in any house (mine or yours) in a city or town, village or suburb, the story is the same in generality, even though its particularity will never exist anywhere, any-when, ever again. In this place in which the imagination adorns walls with posters depicting bands, movies, or even heroines or heroes, all is dressed in monotone grey. This drab shadowed cacophony speaks to a deep, unspoken current of human struggle and tears that never fall, yet long to be shed.*

*In this moment, removed from its assumed-to-be-secret place in the parent's closet, so none may be harmed, it watches and waits . . .*

*It is within this Vignette, this captured moment of balance, that it has been tenderly, even reverently, removed from the keyed box that holds it . . .*

*Dressed in a deadened grey that speaks to the resilience of nylon polymer, it simply waits to be held, to be used in the utility for which it had been designed. From its handle grip, shaped to caress and hold fingers that perspire fear to the magazine that firmly and protectively houses shells intended to sever the dance of life's sanctity, its form moves from hammer to muzzle. From the confidence of its two-trigger system, it seizes and prepares to discharge an intimately impersonal projectile in whatever direction its handler intends. As with all tools, it reflects the designer's choice. As with all tools, it is, in and of itself, simply an inanimate object that possesses neither ill nor favour, intention or attention. To paraphrase just one obscure pop-culture prophet:*

*"Does the thing have a purpose if it is not used?"*

*"If it simply sits there, unused, is it actually imbued with any meaning?"*

*("Objects")*

*These impersonal, even metaphysical, questions and queries, however, have no place in this story. This is not an abstract moment, intended for poets or artists, painters or storytellers. This is the culminating moment in a lifetime, albeit composed of just sixteen solar revolutions, in which that which defines the person feels “wrong.” All the while, a silent witness observes this moment.*

*In particular, the human actor, whom we might call Alex in this moment, has never been drawn to, attracted to, or even loved whom one is supposed to. Instead, its heart has always been open and bloomed when near those who are like it, not opposite. And in this lifetime, in this generically unusual, specifically unrepeatable journey, a heart that opens in that context is defined not only as bad, but sinful, broken, even damned by evil’s taint.*

*No amount of remediation, retraining, inoculation, camp, or therapy reversed, healed or cured, can, would, or will help Alex. Each attempt Alex whole-heartedly embraced, trying to reverse what felt right, yet was clearly defined as wrong. With each remission, reversal and failure, this actor’s despondency, depression, and darkness simply widened, grew and rooted.*

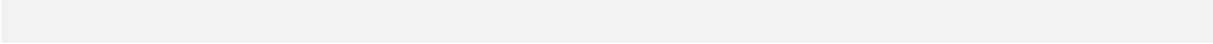
*How could what felt so normal, be so wrong?  
How could such love, actually be sinful temptation?*

*Such was, is, but may not be, the lament that filled Alex’s journals already mentioned. Such was, is, but may not be, the recriminations that barraged parents and teachers, pastors and therapists, during endeavours to purge sin. Yet always and inevitably, no answers arose in a field planted with only right and wrong. As wrong simply kept taking over the garden, like a weed strangling that which was right, choices became fewer. And now the actor and the object, the person and the thing, are familiarly held as time stops, as the tick pauses between what is and what might be, between now and then: life and death . . .*

*How does one resolve these tensions when all appears either/or? How does one realise, awaken, or embrace a different choice, when none seems possible? What does one do when this and that cannot be reconciled because they cannot coexist? What do we do, when that which we teach, value, and preference leads to one inevitable conclusion for some and simply does not compute for others?*

*Some moments and stories resolve themselves. In some tales and narratives, conflict and tension lead to insight and newness. Sometimes, creativity is born out of paradox. Sometimes . . . In this grey ambiguity held like a vice in binaries, however, that may not be possible. In this nondescript context, in which breath is paused, resolution may only be found in a handgrip held in a manner not intended by its designer. In this imagined bedroom, the silent witness may find itself pressed intimately against the soft underside of a jawline that traces a fearful swallow of a person possibly named Alex. In this moment, in which the clock does not tick, in which the breath is not exhaled, in which the trigger has not been pressed, that*

*which follows may find our witness finally speaking with its only voice exclaimed with a retort . .*



## Log #02

This Log involves a pastoral relationship that has been nurtured in the judicial system. It involves a pastoral caregiver in the role as a chaplain in a youth detention facility. The chaplain is also a practitioner of restorative justice and is meeting with a young Indigenous person charged with a non-violent criminal offence that includes theft and property damage. The particular nature of the crime allows for the possibility of a diversion into an alternative to the adjudicative process that would likely lead the youth to face incarceration and a criminal record. To be diverted, however, requires the young person to agree to the diversion and, in turn, admit culpability.

The restorative justice process involves the following people:

- The victim;
- The offender;
- A community member who is involved in the local restorative justice committee; and
- A mediator.

The mediated process involves storytelling for both victim and offender. The intention is to navigate (best word?) the crime and explore ways that resolution can be arrived at and mutually agreed upon from the perspectives of both the victim and offender. The decision is binding in the judicial system. The community member acts as witness to the process and also names challenges and concerns both in respect to the crime itself and also is a 'reality challenger,' in respect to resolution options.

The young person is very angry and is unconvinced that the diversion matters. His anger is both externalised at the systems he identifies as oppressive and 'bent to crush his people' and also internalised. The anger initially is directed at the chaplain as a person from the church, which is a trigger for the young person. The racial stereotypes are explicitly present in the unfolding relationship.

Things to consider:

- What are those stereotypes?
- Consider the paradoxical role of the chaplain: perceived agent of the state and yet offering a possible judicial avenue that would lead to no criminal record of imprisonment.
- What are other tensions for the chaplain?
- What are the tensions for the young person?
- How might you navigate the conversation without anticipating an outcome?

### Vignette: A Statistic Waiting to Happen

*The boxes sat on his desk and office chair. Most were already taped shut and all he had to do was take them to the trunk of his car after the party. He put down the tape and began to put the last few things into the remaining open box.*

*He looked at the closed boxes and the one that remained open with a certain sense of finality, perhaps even fragility. In each were the memories of a career that had seen many changes and shifts. There were relationships captured by each picture, stories of transformation implicit in each file. In each memento, tears and laughter, joy and loss danced. There weren't a lot of things that he needed or even wanted to keep, but these few tokens felt like enough. He could hear them down the hall; the traditional "send-off" was underway. Between the sounds of laughter, he could hear his name being called. He would miss this place, but his doctor had said that it was time that he considered a different pace. He wasn't sure what the diagnosis might mean as he entered retirement, but Melanie had told him they would figure it out. There had been tears, but finally he had heard her. Perhaps he was simply trying to convince himself that she and the doctor were right . . . regardless, it was time.*

*As he stared at the last picture to be packed, he realised in that one image his entire career, he liked the word vocation, in the justice field was encapsulated. A journey from enforcement and laws to one in which there was more grey and ambiguity. When he first took his oath to protect and serve, it was pretty clear what that meant: bad guys got what they deserved and law-abiding citizens had to be protected from dark streets and cagey people.*

*It had been an era, those first few years, in which a little force could loosen tongues and get results. Of course, he remembered that even with tongues loosened, he kept seeing the same faces in the rear-view mirror of his squad car. Seeing those faces, perhaps they had a new tattoo or scar, always seemed . . . to be despairing? Even lost, he would wonder? He never could describe what it was, but whatever the word, it was what finally brought him to the Restorative Justice Branch.*

*He was sceptical, but it was part of the role, he would later reflect. The training he had to work the street was not originally concerned with talking things out. When he was dispatched, the lights flashed, and his job was to stop the crime in progress. It wasn't even a consideration to address the underlying causes, which he would never have thought about anyways. That changed over the years in this office, he noted.*

*Kim (the director at the time) listened to him, his frustration and his lament that no matter how many hours he tried to put in, he wasn't making a difference. She patiently let him reflect and wrestle with how force didn't seem to change anyone, and all that he could figure out was that he was simply getting angrier and more prone to violence.*

*He even, reluctantly, admitted that sometimes he worried he was becoming the very thing that he had hoped to stop. He hated admitting that to her, but it was like he was infected by*

*the job. He offered this confession hoping she might understand. Gratefully, holding that picture, he remembered that she did.*

*Looking at the picture of a bright sun-shine-filled beach at the edge of an ocean, he stood with his arm around a boy: no, man, he corrected himself. That man, Charles, stood tall above him and his long, braided hair spoke of a deep pride for his First Nation: Nehiyaw—Cree tradition and culture. Remembering that day, embraced by the warm sun, he knew that when they first met, pride and confidence were the last things Charles possessed. In fact, the first time they met, Charles was simply another statistic waiting to happen.*

*Charles was just another young Aboriginal boy, arrested for a “break & enter.” The victim was an elderly woman by the name of Mrs. Clementia. Charles’ crime would lead to his graduation into the penal system, a system that Larry’s career had taught him meant if Charles ever got out, he would be in his forties with no prospects. Larry knew the colonial history, and what that meant, but understanding it didn’t change the fact that Charles and his people were always playing a game in which the rules had been stacked against them. At one time, when he was on the streets working the beat, he knew he was one of the reasons Charles was meant to lose.*

*Though he was a statistic waiting to happen, Charles was Larry’s first assigned mediation after he transferred to Branch. He went through the training, working with Elders and non-Aboriginal practitioners; he learned more about the social causes and problems affecting people who often had their cases redirected to the Branch. He even had to accept that too often what he did when he was on the street was social work, not law enforcement. That realisation, however, only reminded him how ill equipped most of his peers actually were after leaving the Academy.*

*He knew he was initially resistant to the idea that he had anything to do with the poverty and challenges that came with a lack of education or job options. He hated that he had to look into the mirror of his own privilege.*

*There was a point when he was about to quit when Kim reminded him what had brought him to the Branch: if he really wanted to make a difference, it would mean he would probably have to wrestle with the fact that the blacks and whites of a constable’s work would have to give way to the vagaries and ambiguity of the grey areas of people’s lives. It was something he would have to accept if he was to actually become a victim-offender mediator. And, she suggested, that began with him knowing his own privilege and realising how he, like all Settlers, benefitted from the system. It was hard to hear, but it finally sunk in.*

*Even with all of the training, he walked in with assumptions at his first meeting with Charles. The underlying causes and knowledge of the history of being on Treaty lands went straight out the window. The cop Larry had once been rudely trumped all the work he had done with Kim, the Elders, and other mediators.*

*Larry laughed now, picture in hand, recollecting that it was Charles' own anger and frustration with being in that holding cell that allowed him to let go of those assumptions. It was easy to do, he thought to himself. When a yelling and crying young sixteen-year-old Cree boy sits sullenly, silently, and then, as a dam bursting, points at you with recrimination that this "mediation thing better fucking work, or else," you sort of realise that not only are you part of the solution, but also that any solution can't happen without trust. That trust took work, of that there was no denying. It began with Charles' clear commitment to knowing that this was a sort of "last chance," but it also took Larry to realise that Charles could not do it alone. The path to any resolution would require Larry to find ways to help Charles connect with a mentor if this were to work.*

*From that moment, he wasn't sure whether it was him or Charles and Mrs. Clementia who actually helped that mediation unfold so well. There were utter failures, of course, as he often had to remind himself. No matter how many doors you open, an Elder once told him, you never help anyone by pushing them through.*

*But it was their willingness to actually listen to one another as they shared how their lives led them to the incident that brought them together: the B&E. Usually a B&E would result in the Crown Attorneys cutting a deal to expedite the process, which sometimes even resulted in shortened jail-time, if for no other reason than to alleviate the backlog. In this case, Charles and Mrs. Clementia did not meet in the courtroom divided by space, law and ritual.*

*During the mediation sessions, Charles and Mrs. Clementia were honest to the point of discomfort, at times, with one another, and some of those there to witness on behalf of the community. In their divulging, an amazing thing happened. In the mind of Mrs. C. as she became known to us, Charles shifted from a criminal to a young boy, on the verge of manhood, who made a set of bad mistakes, mistakes that now placed him at a crossroads.*

*Mrs. C. realised she was more than the "victim," a sense that too often never leaves those who have been violated and experienced harm. And in the process, they walked toward their own resolution, something intrinsic to the victim-offender mediation journey. A resolution in which those involved decide what good looks like. Usually such reconciliation demonstrated that though something might begin in the irritation of conflict, there is the potential for a pearl!*

*He laughed, remembering the face of the RCMP constable and Crown Attorney as Mrs. C. suggested a resolution that not only had no real "precedent," even in the mediation process, but that had no footing, per se, in the criminal justice realm! Though there could have been a challenge to this, Mrs. C. pointed out that even though the B&E had happened, there had been no damage and the items that Charles had stolen had been promptly returned unscathed. All she wanted were two things: a hug and an opportunity to pay for Charles' art lessons! Everyone in that room, as Charles wept and his mother numbed by what seemed (initially) incomprehensible, were trying to process what had just occurred in that little office.*

*Larry always wondered what led Mrs. C. to that place of grace, where she shifted from retribution and restitution to something less tangible, maybe, but certainly more restorative. It was not that he did not accept or appreciate the shift, but at the time there seemed to be no logic to it. Over the years, as he reflected on this initial “success,” Larry came to realise that it was Charles’ reference to art in answering some of her questions that helped facilitate the outcome. When words failed him owing to the context of a troubled family with few economic options and where substance abuse was a constant temptation, Charles had learned to speak through his art. Charles’ art, Larry realised, was likely the catalyst.*

*A hug and paying for art classes for the boy who had violated her home was . . . humbling, he admitted. Later, removed from the emotion of the moment, the lawyers and RCMP would share their “displeasure” with him and the Branch. But then it felt like a thin moment, one in which something very special had transcended, even transformed, all of them.*

*He didn’t often get into that aspect of the work. It made him squirm a bit. Yet, in those quiet and honest moments, it’s why he remained so passionate about the work after that first experience. It’s when he realised that he could hold on to his ideals and make a difference, something he knew he would not be able to do had he stayed on the Force.*

*After that, Charles drifted out of his life. The Branch took on more and more work and continued to have to rationalise itself to a judicial system that too often wanted metrics of success that were simply not quantifiable with hugs, and he saw lives transformed when people chose to go through the doors. But the seeds in which he had a part planting did not become apparent as new growth. The potential of this work did not come into full view for him until that picture was taken two springs ago. It was when he and Melanie were trying to figure out what retirement would look like: hard to believe that was even before the recent results came back from the blood work, he realised.*

*He was standing there on the beach. Melanie had gone to check on their reservations, and he heard his name called in a deep voice of inquiry, “Larry?”*

*As he turned, in front of him was a tall man, well-toned and clearly confident. Even though it had been years, he still assessed danger in unexpected meetings and this was no different. As he noted the braid and evident health of this man, he was aware he was trying to figure out if this unknown man was a threat. As he processed the encounter, the man spoke once again: “Larry? Mr. Porter? It’s me, Charles.”*

*In that moment, in the power of a name to transport time, his face softened, eyes opened, and there, on a beach that could be anywhere, they embraced. An echo of the same hug that had once been shared between Mrs. C. and Charles decades previously.*

*After they had caught up, and Larry learned that Charles was there hosting an international indigenous art gathering, Melanie changed their reservation to include Charles and his spouse, Pat, and their two children, and Charles took him aside once more as they were leaving. What*



*Charles said was the door for which Larry had been waiting as he wrestled with when might be the “right” time to leave the Branch:*

*Mr. Porter, you probably don’t remember this, but that day, after we first met in the cell, you told me that my art was a gift: one that was not mine alone, but one that had to be shared. You didn’t use the word Creator, but I do now.*

*You told me, however, that the path I had set upon with that B&E would mean my options would be limited in the future, in ways I could not appreciate then. You told me that responsibility could never happen because if I didn’t go through the mediation and wasn’t successful there would be doors closed. If I hadn’t heard you, this door would never have been opened . . . so thanks ...*

## Log #03

This Log involves a person coming to a congregation of The United Church of Canada (UCCan) seeking pastoral assistance. The catalyst is the experience of discovering a violent incident. This person is military personnel and came upon the result of a homophobic attack against a fellow soldier. The person is not practicing in a particular faith community but identifies as a cultural Christian. The person has nominal lived experience of a church community.

In the course of the pastoral relationship it becomes clear that:

- The person has questions of faith, which include anger at the Divine and the institutional church;
- The person articulates their understanding of the culpability of organised religion in perpetuating violence against the marginalised, in this case a “gay” fellow soldier;
- The person is drawn to the UCCan owing to their awareness of the denomination’s openness and support of the LGBTTQ\* community; and,
- The person is trying to reconcile their experience with the UCCan’s paradoxical position in respect to diversity.

## Vignette: 1988

## Scene 1: The Hall

*I wanted to change the world: who at 17 doesn't? I had seen them, the Blue Berets, as they endeavoured to be a thin line between people who wanted to hurt, maim, and kill each other. In places like Cyprus and Beirut, Canadians asked their military to be peacekeepers. We seemed to be choosing, as a nation, not to make war, but to nurture and encourage civil discourse in the midst of conflict.*

*I admit I may have romanticised the national narrative of being a peacekeeping nation, which had been nurtured since the tenure of Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who advocated that "[t]he best defence of peace is not power, but the removal of the causes of war, and international agreements which will put peace on a stronger foundation, than the terror of destruction" (Pearson).*

*Pearson's clarity of thought only emboldened my idealism that set me longing for truth-seeking and story-telling. At that point on life's journey, I imagined being a truth-bearer, a person who reported on the realities of war and highlighted and celebrated the choices of peacekeeping, as opposed to war-making.*

*I also realised that to do that both effectively and practically would require me to understand and appreciate the realities of a military life. To be a good reporter, I imagined, I had to be able to understand subject and context. Since I wanted to share the story of these peacekeepers, it seemed to follow, logically at the time, that I should enlist. So, at the age of 17, I joined the Canadian Armed Reserves, to take my first step towards my imagined career as a war correspondent.*

**A drill hall is a funny place:** *Even in those silent moments, which are not many, you can hear the persistent echoes of those whom you have followed. The cadence of feet falling in unison, of a regimental sergeant major calling the platoon to halt, and then that sliding foot, one step, then a resounding stomp! In the finality of that unity, the lingering sound of the bagpipes keeps the silence at bay.*

**A drill hall is a funny place:** *You can smell history blending with perspiration, jubilation, and fear. In this place, pride born in nationalism can be sensed. An idea that for Queen and country something noble persists within the walls, keeping at bay the horrors that have followed as feet have marched to war.*

**A drill hall is a funny place:** *You can imagine echoes of marching, right-wheel turning men and women as they attempt to find their rhythm as a unit. In these*

*moments, when the veil between now and then is briefly lifted, the ideal of a shared identity in arms is seductively invitational.*

*As one body, whether platoon or an entire regiment, arms and legs move in unison as every head turns on synchronised cue followed by a sharp salute to dignitaries and officers. In the Presentation of Colours, men and women, dressed in spat and tartan, bearing St. Andrew's emblems, reflect well-earned pride.*

***A drill hall is a funny place:*** *During the beginning of a Flag Raising, as the thirty-eight Battalion Colours unfurl, one is touched by a connexion to a history marching back in time, a time before even the idea that would be the Canadian confederation was imagined and then formalized. In that marching formation, dressed in the green, blue, and black tartan accompanied by lighter lines of red and yellow, trepidation and pride parade every July 1<sup>st</sup> to Ottawa's Confederation Square.*

***A drill hall is a funny place:*** *Tasting a wee dram, before the haggis is served, is an initiation and a milestone. It marks, in the cold January evening, a journey from child to adult, boy to man, girl to woman. As the haggis is piped, the address follows. On this night, which honours and celebrates the Bard of Ayrshire, flavours blend. Tastes and textures, which the uninitiated might never imagine should be paired, open a door to camaraderie well-earned and now festively embraced.*

## *Scene 2: The Other Hall*

*A drill hall is like the display windows of the stores that lined Rideau Street in the nation's capital of Ottawa. Windows are dressed up in a way to grab your attention, to entice you to walk in. All the baubles and "pretties," latest fashions and coolest gadgets, are presented in a way that intends to enamour. Whether the practiced march, attention to physical competition and training, or the art of arms, a drill hall puts on display the external, even romanticised, realities of a martial life.*

*Yet the drill hall never reflects that which lies just beneath: the assumptions and stereotypes that mould young men and women. Such moulding reinforces a shared purpose and identity. This moulding, some might call deconstruction and then reconstruction of self, is intended to prepare you for that future battlefield where your life will depend on those with whom you have practiced and trained. Assumptions form the binaries of what a good soldier looks like, and when you do not fit, the corrective is stark and eerily efficient.*

*I have never liked locker rooms. Whether in high schools or public gyms, they have always seemed to be the places where secrets thrive and where the reality of paternalism and*

*patriarchy is evident. On a base, in a nondescript Canadian town, one hallway leads into such a place. Cold concrete walls exude chlorine cleansings that do little to detract from the musk of the untold men who have entered the rooms where lockers, showers, and washroom stalls silently watch the mundane events and horrific acts, which often never get told, though some are never forgotten.*

*I remember, in my imagining recollection, turning the corner to that artery that ends at double doors. Portals swing outward to reveal the places in which rest and respite ordinarily abide. Yet these gateways also lead into moments and times when violence – implicit or explicit – stalks.*

*I heard their harsh, even excited, whispered voices, before I saw them. For some of them, their voices still broke as a reminder that not long ago some of those whispers might have been soprano and not yet tenor or bass.*

- *Before they saw me, I saw them as the outward turning doors closed behind them as they entered the hallway.*
- *Before they saw me, I noted their towels hanging like cudgels.*
- *Before they saw me, I knew that these weaponised linens, hastily rinsed and still blood tainted, spoke not to the ordinary on the other side of those doors.*
- *Before they saw me, before they hurriedly tried to shove their improvised weapons into just opened bags, which awaited their towelled cargo, I knew the idealism that had brought me to this place was about to be shattered.*

*There's a moment in the Canadian psyche of storied tales on long, winding trails, in which the hiker turns the corner only to be confronted by a bear. An animal, regardless whether black or brown, that hears you, smells you, knows you. In this collective tale, you hope it is not a mama bear with cubs too cute in pictures and significantly less so up close and personal, as the maternal instinct often makes this story even more frightening.*

*In the nature encounter, reconnects with a primordial self, long buried beneath consumerism and mechanisation, and the sacred act of prayer is invoked soundlessly.*

*Sometimes, the bear turns and walks away. Sometimes, you turn and run. Other times, you drop, play dead as you may or may not become a playmate or snack. Occasionally, pepper spray and an air horn prove to be wisely counselled companions. And, in other stories, it charges me with an intent to silence with violence implied . . .*

- *After they saw me, I found myself pinned to the wall as one cudgel soap-bearing towel became a teaching moment.*
- *After they saw me, as prey stank and predator perspired, forgetting was encouraged . . . demanded.*

- *After they saw me, the warning was issued. In its pronouncement, it is acknowledged in hallways that are never empty except in stories mythologised, I find myself alone. The bear had gone, my breathing was heavy, and I paused considering whether or not to go through doors, which beckoned like a loose tooth.*

### *Scene 3: The Soap Party's Finale*

*Let's imagine, for a moment, regardless of the degree to which truth is important when we share our own ongoing, mythologised stories, we are always the central protagonists and heroes. Let's imagine, in this unfolding mythology that I walk through those double doors, and as they swing shut, it seems like they slam resolutely as I stand in that locker room.*

*It's evening, yet without natural light, the fluorescent lighting flickers just enough to heighten the scene towards which I am walking. In the lit room, usually filled with jest and jeering, posturing and play, there is a stillness that reminds me of the ghosts we become. In that silence, there is no solace, only the inevitability of a story that will remain a constant teacher. Lockers stand towering in multiple rows, and behind them, the restrooms and rise. I am willing myself not to hear that low, whimpering cry. I am hoping beyond hope that the adrenaline that is coursing through me, making everything sharper and causing the moment to slow, would hinder my desire to smell bloodied iron as it mingles with bleach and soap. I do not want to hear a shower running in the distance, knowing that the water is likely mixing with ochre flowing toward a drain that will never reveal what it devours.*

*The silent locker sentinels do not seem supportive or protective as I proceed upon this quest, imagined or not. Like the drain, they are mute about what they witness, what stories they see. While their slamming doors shout above the din when this room is occupied, now they are silent, even stoic, in their impassive grey mantle. Their mouths locked closed and yet you know that their interiors tell a different story. Pictures of loved ones, of families, friends, and lovers, their content tells the tale the current resident wants to see each time the mouth opens with a creaking metal greeting.*

*Standing on the threshold that changes from the forest of lockers to the stables of washrooms and further afield, the pasture of showers, I now hear that low, whimpering cry accompanied by moaning. The sound of running water continues unabated. I look back through the canopied path from which I have come. I expect to see the doors flung wide and open. In that expectation, I would not be surprised to see the bear return . . . intent to deny any discovery of any fell deed perpetrated in the pasture beyond.*

*But nothing happens . . . time passes slowly, set aside for revelation . . . for witnessing. It's a moment of paradox, in which one is not wanting and wanting to dance, when fear and fortitude sway with one another, moving toward inevitability, when time returns in a sudden and dramatic moment that will never be remembered.*

*I walk through the stables, remembering the realities of embodied beings relieving themselves. The hard, cold floor is now perspiring. Though this vast and varied terrain of forest, stable, and pasture lies empty, it is clear that showers have long been running, and their humid presence is evident on walls and floors.*

*I finally leave the stables and now before me lies an open plain of showers, in which multiple heads are spewing a deluge of hot water. As the fluorescent lights previously flickered and augmented the atmosphere with clarity, in this space, the light seems focused; like a spotlight, it leads my eye to the centre of the plain, toward the drain. There I see a person, fetally bound, with knees tightly hugged, bare as a wee babe, and weakly whimpering as a result of the outcome of the soap party.*

*I fumble to offer some aid, a towel grabbed is presented: a kind of cowl to hide the rising welts though the broken teeth and battered nose will require much more care than I am able to offer. Touch is all I have. I have no words, no solutions, not even an understanding as to why this violent violation occurred. So, rocking this man is all I can do.*

*Eventually we stand, towel wrapped, preparing to return to barracks. No one, not the drain, gushing showers, stalwart lockers, or haunted stalls will tell this tale. In fact, we will never discuss this, after our procession out.*

*Secrets that normalise keep us bound to the stories we are told and the ones that have formed and fastened us. My companion will not remain for the rest of the training, and by the next season, we will both have left that Scottish military fraternity. Our paths would never again cross, except in my own evolving story, in which names are forgotten, details rewoven, and secrets named.*

*But before that moment faded, when the doors to the ordinary opened outward, leading us away from the trees, stable houses, and open plain, we exchanged what words defy. Regardless of truth, the soap party was held because someone, somewhere, some when had named him as gay. In that naming, labelling, the inevitable stereotypes limited, defined, and set in motion the body's response to that which is deemed aberrant and dangerous, infectious and alien.*

*I wish there was a resolution or epiphany, other than realising that idealism suffers greatly in the reality of violence that is symptomatic, regardless of the individual actors. I wish there was some sort of awakening that happened, that maybe we hugged, maybe a long-term friendship was established, and something good came from that moment. Alas, we left that finale, as double doors definitively declared closure, broken . . .*

*Scene 4: Awakening*

*When our dreams are tarnished, harmed, or irreconcilably damaged, there is a sense of loss, of unmooring. That which was once familiar becomes distant, foreign, and alien. Where once certainty and confidence were touchstones, distrust and cynicism become new companions. I still remember the powerful sense of longing for direction and clarity I felt after leaving the Armed Reserves. I am not sure I would have articulated it in this manner at that time, but I physically remember that nauseous sense of emptiness as each day unfolded. I was not yet at the point of pursuing my academic studies, and I began to seek solace in various expressions of faith.*

*I experimented and explored. From the intimacy of the Wiccan coven, to the Buddhist temple, synagogue, and mosque, I attempted to answer questions, which I had not yet asked. In each of these sacred places, there were inklings of home, of arrival, yet they did not feel right. A word I might use now to express then what was simply a feeling might be appropriation: a sense of taking something that wasn't mine, but claiming it nonetheless.*

*I longed for something, yet I knew/know that to embrace any of these valuable expressions of Mystery was simply to perpetuate a cannibalising consumerism. It is easy to put something on that feeds and meets a certain hunger, if but momentarily, and to discard it when it no longer fits or perpetuates that which we want, as opposed to need.*

*In this time of wandering, though perhaps a better metaphor would be slumbering, I avoided the Christian tradition. I was, perhaps still am, reflective of a generation that perceives the Christian journey as firmly entrenched in institutional judgement and hypocrisy. A human institution that doesn't walk its talk. A collection of denominations and ecclesiastical organisations that perpetuate a form of oppression that does not liberate or bid people shine. And, perhaps obviously, as this imagined story spans a circle of seventeen years, my personal experience as a young boy only reinforced this sense of dis-ease.*

*As I have come to recognise, it seems to be the wont of the Universe that often that which we avoid with intention is the place to which we are ultimately called, where we end up finding that for which we have been seeking. This paradox, if you will, began to unfold in the summer of 1988. During my slumbering wandering, the headlines in Canada began to look a little something like this:*

*"United Church allows Gay Ministers"*

*"Canadians barely united on homosexual issue"*

*"Report Opens Doors to Gays"*

*"Homosexuals Could Win but Church Could Lose"*

*"Stand on Gays Will Destroy Church"*

*"United Church Showdown Looms"*



*This was unexpectedly jarring for two reasons. First, and perhaps obviously, since my experience of the soap party and my wrestling as to whether the military was a place where my dreams could find nurture, I was only partially aware of the reality of homophobia. Though I admit I could not intellectually understand such discrimination, nor the subsequent violence that accompanies it, I remained aware that it was somehow wrong and connected to deeper eddies of injustice, which I suspected, but could not yet articulate.*

*The second is that I recall a sense of awakening. Perhaps, even more succinctly, a knitting together of parts of me that felt unbound, which had been previously torn asunder. A wrenching that I can now trace back to that day in which I stood before two Emissaries of the Christian tradition who passed judgement upon me as a young boy: "The bastard." A mending that began to answer the quintessential question that animated me for decades and which now finds itself central to this undertaking about which I have been endeavouring:*

*Is love enough?*

## Log #04

This Log begins online. A congregation has transitioned its “brick and mortar” pastoral care ministry into the relational medium of social media. Over the course of several years, the Care Team for this The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has been able to not only engage with people in respect to conversations about culture, politics, and faith, but also has been able to build enough trust across a multi-generational spectrum that matters of care, whether clinical or pastoral, are often initially broached via private messaging on various social media platforms.

In this Log, a person who has been engaged with a member of the Care Team begins to share their story. Over the course of several months, the care-giver has learned:

- The person’s background is Syrian and French Canadian;
- The person was raised solely by their mother and grandmother;
- The father was never part of their upbringing;
- The person has no church experience other than the cultural distrust that arises from being raised in a patriarchal context of orthodoxy. In this milieu, the person experienced an inflexibility in respect to their birth (unmarried) and racial (father was not Syrian) context; and,
- The person’s story is further complicated as their birth order would have resulted in a higher status in the patriarchal structure had their parents been married when this person was born, and both had been Syrian. This person has been haunted by being “a bastard child” and has asked to meet the caregiver.

After learning this, the caregiver and person finally agree to meet in person. The person is interested in possibly becoming a member of the UCCan because of its orientation toward diversity, but continues to have misgivings about the institutional church owing to the cultural experience in which Christian traditions excluded and ostracised their upbringing.

### Vignette: Is Love Enough?

As with all stories,  
this may not have actually happened,  
but all stories are true.  
And as story-tellers know,  
once you hear them,  
they are happening to you. . .

Meanwhile, sometime in 1970s Canada:

*We had gathered. Food was the unspoken reason, so as to nurture existing and seed new relationships, as with all communities of faith.*

*Faith, of course, is a funny word in this day and age. It invites, conjures, and weaves emotive responses that underlie significant cultural and demographic tensions, especially in Western democracies. Those tensions encompass concepts that range from judgment to terrorism, and talking about faith has become taboo at the least and, at the worst, conversation ending.*

*For the sake of this story, let's imagine a time when structures and institutions such as government and church, though perhaps tentatively, commanded respect, when such bodies were still able to mould and define what was normal and acceptable. When difference was apparent, implicitly or explicitly, they possessed effective ways to discipline and correct. When ideas such as sin and brokenness opened or closed doors. Barred opportunities or revealed possibilities depending the nature of one's birth ...*

*I was born into a Syrian Orthodox family in which I existed between two worlds: insider and outsider. I had the lottery of birth to be born the eldest grandchild of an Economos Priest, a man for whom the Orthodox communities from Montreal to Ottawa and all along the eastern US seaboard, held revered esteem. I had the gift to carry his name, Michael, as my middle name. And, in a culture richly influenced and informed by patriarchy, one's birth location carried with it privileged potential. This social location could have allowed me to enter places of privilege and opportunities only afforded to men in this family of origin. Could have ...*

*In my remembering, I walked into this communal meal feeling at home, loved, and safe. We were in a hall, maybe a basement or ground floor, in which tables were set as the community prepared to celebrate. I do not recall the occasion, but there was the usual networking that carried a distinct scent of the political. As always, we gathered with an intention, yet the reason was not clear to me, initially. In all of my remembering, I was and am still a five-year-old boy ill prepared for that which will come . . . an event that continues to reverberate in a way that begs the question whether faith communities that claim to be love, are in fact living in opposition to that central tenet that Jesus' ministry models.*

*In this 1970s tale, a time some have called the “Me” decade, Syrian Christians had long ago completed an exodus from a land that no longer existed, even then. During the mid-nineteenth century, privileged and educated Christians who lived in the Ottoman Empire in the province of Syria had begun a diaspora.*

*Entrepreneurs—male mostly, if not exclusively—began to depart to ports far and between. From Pier 21 in Halifax and the port of Montreal, to the eastern US seaboard and as far afield as Argentina and Australia, the wandering unfolded. Whether as peddlers reaching into central US or Canada, as bearers of a Christianity ancient to their new Protestant neighbours, or finding commonality with Catholic cousins, change was not new. As the tempo for war increased between Europe and the Caliphate, they seeded far and wide.*

*In my remembering, I walked into that communal meal knowing that there was something wrong with me, about me, in me. In my remembering, the scent of all that was savoury, mingling allspice with cinnamon, rose water and flat bread, invited identity. Even then I was afraid that such an identity was an unattainable illusion. Whatever that day’s occasion, whether an occasion of joy or grief, the community followed the ritual of greeting the Other. And, for this particular meal, our Orthodox Priest was offering hospitality to his Roman Catholic counterpart. In all of this remembering, I was and am still a five-year-old boy ill prepared for that which will come. . . a moment in which love and belonging, and, ostracising and sin continue to face one another ...*

*Though my gender and birth location foretold the opening of doors in life’s journey, my paternal parentage precluded such possible ascension. Through my mother, I connect with a pedigree that traces its past to at least fourth-century Syria, which also only exists as a land now lost to time. In respect to my father, however, there was no such celebration by those who shared my maternal lineage. Through my father, I was labelled in unspoken whisper and furtive gaze: outsider. A birth context in which sin negated any privilege that might have been born by the name “Michael,” which I carried.*

*Often when food is shared, faith communities receive and welcome. The tradition, in this telling, was that we were to be greeted and welcomed by our priest before food could be shared and tales told that weave tightly a diaspora personality. It was a cultural gauntlet that established the order of things. Like a doctor taking a pulse, in each hand gripped, in each introduction our priest made to his Roman Catholic companion, one’s health in the body was diagnosed. Through Him, food was purified and with His nod or smile, in voice or silence, status was established.*

- *As my mother and I arrived in the receiving line, does the forty-four-year-old adult wish for a different outcome?*
- *Do I hope that the telling of this once more might lead to a new narrative?*
- *Do I long for something other than paradox?*
- *Does the allure for certainty still beckon?*

*As my hand was taken, I looked up at our priest. I could smell that scent particular to the men of my mother's kin. A scent of belonging, of masculinity dressed in tones of olive and bearded shadows that appear as quickly as blade scrapes yesterday's whiskered growth. This scent I know continues to invite intimacy that stretches back to the symposia of Sokrates and the perambulating philosophers of the Mediterranean, where once gender and intimacy blurred what it meant to be male. Where philia, brotherly love, embraced intimate relations and where concepts of homosexuality would not limit them as sinful until millennia later. It is an aroma in which philia continues to be sought, yet is often obscured by our contemporary messages of hypersexualised divisions between men and women.*

*As I let go that romanticised breath, exhaling to hear the manner in which I would be introduced, in my remembering there was a hush, a lull, in which only ringing silence waited. In the ethereal eternity of a second, paradox was born. A central tenet, a quintessential question was born that would drive me to this moment and this endeavour . . .*

*As one Emissary of the Holy introduced me to another, a journey of doubt and faith was born. In the lilting musical English cadence, which is particular to one for whom Arabic is his language of origin, my priest declared:*

*"And this is the bastard child . . ."*

## 8. Appendix (Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the Provocative)

This workshop was first published in the Fall 2018 in The United Church of Canada's denominational magazine, *Mandate*, which "provides tools for use in all areas of congregational life, including spiritual growth and discipleship formation, justice and advocacy, worship, stewardship, outreach, and Mission and Service Fund awareness."

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy and worldview that guides people through an intentional process of generating more of what is good in their lives and communities. In this introductory workshop, participants are introduced to developing a proposal as part of this affirming and life-giving approach that has helped hundreds of congregations and communities of faith.

### Introduction

This workshop is intended to introduce participants to AI as a practical philosophy. Unlike some workshops that focus on training the trainer, this one endeavours to allow participants to experience one central part of the practice: developing a provocative proposal. The intention is to allow participants an opportunity to experience what is life giving about the philosophy and to acquire, refine, or refresh skills that can immediately translate into use, not only in their ministry context, but also in their own faith journey.

This workshop outline is not prescriptive, but rather suggestive. One of the tenets of AI is that the community has its own wisdom about how to harness what is best and creatively bring it forward. From this generative position, AI recognises that part of that wisdom is grounded in lived experience. It invites designers and participants to claim their own capacity as change agents in their faith community's culture.

Two helpful metaphors that facilitators are invited to use are the dance floor and the balcony. From the dance floor, participants play and do; from the balcony, they reflect and integrate the theoretical aspects found in the primary and secondary texts suggested for preparation prior to participation.

There is no limit to how large this workshop can be; in fact, the larger the better. One of the philosophical underpinnings of AI is called the "heliotropic effect." Basically, this means that where there is energy people are drawn. Where there is energy—passion—there is Spirit. Where Spirit is found, imaginations are unleashed, propelled by creativity.

Though the workshop can accommodate any number of people, it is important to have enough facilitators to help throughout. By way of structure, therefore, the following is suggested:

- Invitation to attend: individuals (who will self-select grouping during the process) and teams of four (quartets) from ministry sites that come with a shared passion, question, or governance role (i.e. Stewardship, Christian Education, Outreach).
- A core facilitative team of two people.
- For every 10–12 participants, another facilitator should be considered.
- In general, the workshop is broken into three groupings: pairs (or dyads), two dyads forming a quartet, and a plenary.

Please note that the quartets will work together throughout the process, especially during the provocative proposal exercise. That said, the wisdom and experience of the context should adjust based on the culture of the community.

The recommended time for this workshop is four to six hours. The shorter option would reflect an event that would not have a time of fellowship, whereas the longer would have a meal that would be used both for community building and integration of the material. The underlying assumptions for this workshop are: 1) facilitators will be well acquainted with the primary text and familiar with the provided secondary texts; and 2) participants will be familiar with the primary text.

Finally, though this workshop is considered a “taster” or “flight sampler” of AI, it is nonetheless paced quickly in order to be engaging. As such, it is important to encourage participants to be familiar with at least the primary text.

#### Materials

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| • Flip chart paper and markers.   | • Large stickies (4x6).  |
| • Brochure.   | • Tickle trunk (costumes and props for skits).                     |
| • Drawing/art paper.  | • Computer, computer speakers, meditative music, and a projector.  |
| • Drawing supplies (felt pens, crayons, oil and chalk pastels, pencil crayons). | • Candle and chimes (in order to call back from small group work). |
| • Magazines (for art creation).   | • Tables (for small group work).                                   |
| • Stickers (each participant will be given three stickers and a brochure).      | • Flat (wall) space to post on.                                    |
|   | • Chairs set in a circle (for plenary).                            |

#### Resources

##### Primary Text

Branson, Mark Lau. *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004. Print.

#### Videos

Denzel Washington, "Fall Forward" (search YouTube)

Jon Townsin, "Appreciative Inquiry" (search YouTube)

#### Link

Contains handouts and videos: <https://1drv.ms/f/s!AkWjOtI2VLE0ip4yJAgpxlCy-8gxZw>

#### Workshop Agenda and Details

##### Plenary: Intro (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** introduce gratitude/abundance, borrowing from Branson (Chapter 3: Biblical Reflections: Memory and Thanksgiving).
- **Video:** Denzel Washington (note: full commencement speech and text are available in online folder).
- **Facilitator:** personalise experience for participants by sharing something that occurred during preparation which models appreciation.
- **Facilitator:** introduce the team.

##### Centring (15 mins)

**Participants:** name self and context into the circle.

- **Facilitator:** play meditative music.
- **Participants:** journal. What is the participant's intention for attending? What does a good day look like at the end? What is the outcome hoped for from today?

##### Plenary: Questions (20 mins)

- **Facilitator:** play Townsin video.
- **Facilitator:** ask what question the individual and/or team brings to this event.
- **Facilitator:** help participants reframe each question with appreciative language (if required). Reference Chapter 4: Shaping a People through Question.
- **Facilitator:** depending on context, teams will stay together moving forward (e.g. Stewardship, Christian Education, Outreach). If individuals, invite them to self-organise around a question that resonates for them. If both, ensure that groups of four are formed.

##### Plenary: Overview and Instructions (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** offer overview of the process.
- **Facilitator:** share metaphor for practical (dance floor) and theoretical (balcony).
- **Facilitator:** highlight the power of the question. Reference Chapter 4: Shaping a People through Question.



Small Group: Paired Interview (25 mins)

- **Participants:** what's one example of a great experience connected with the question named earlier in the workshop?
- **Facilitator:** reference Chapter 4: Shaping a People through Question.

Plenary: Debrief and Instructions (5-10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** ask participants about how the experience felt. What was surprising? Exciting? (*Note:* This is a very important pause as it allows participants space to reflect and integrate. Facilitators pay attention to when dance floor experience might benefit from a balcony observation.)
- **Facilitators:** consider flip charting and making connexions for participants.

Small Group: Meaning Making (25 mins)

- **Participants:** choose a recorder. In pairs of four and/or in teams, each partner from a dyad shares a story told by their partner.
- **Participants:** as a group, note touchstones, themes, and threads. Facilitators reference Chapter 5: Provoking Imaginative Change.
- **Participants:** record touchstones, themes, and threads on large stickies. (*Note:* one theme per sticky note and encourage playful creativity in making and recognizing connexions). Choose one story to share in the plenary.

Plenary: Debrief and Instructions (5-10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** ask participants how the experience felt. What was surprising? Exciting?
- **Facilitator:** consider flip charting and making connexions for participants.

Plenary: Post Stories (15 mins)

- **Participants:** each group shares one story from the meaning-making process. In succession, each group presents touchstones, themes, and threads. Stickies are placed on a large surface (i.e. wall).
- **Facilitator:** as each group presents, encourage members to group/cluster themes that are shared from each quartet. After all are posted, ask the group if they now think of something else. If so, make new sticky per idea and (re)cluster.

Plenary: Review (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** make connexions between posted themes, touchstones, and threads. Consider the weaving metaphor in respect to balcony and dance floor. What are the balcony insights that would be helpful?
- **Facilitator:** ask people to consider these questions: What stands out? What do participants have energy for? Are there insights or “aha” moments? If time permits, make it a circle conversation.

Plenary: Cluster (5 mins)

- **Facilitator:** invite participants to place stickers (in any combination from single to multiple themes) on created theme clusters. The intention is to gauge where the

current interest is. (*Note: if the group is dealing with one question, all clusters are available. If facilitating with different teams with different questions, then cluster stickers only in the shared community.*)

Individual: Journal (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** play meditative music.
- **Journal:** what blessing or abundance do the participants bring to their team or individual context? As a child of God? As a disciple?

Fellowship Break (30+ mins)

Plenary: Overview and Instructions (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** Provide an overview of process. Review the metaphor for practical (dance floor) and theoretical (balcony). Stress that the goal for the second half is creating a provocative proposal. Reference Chapter 5: Provoking Imaginative Change: Provocative Proposals.

Small Groups: Creative Play (25 mins)

- **Facilitator:** The energy often increases and is a helpful way to transition after fellowship, especially if food was shared. Engage participants based on the theme, touchstone, or thread that the team chose based on the sticker cluster exercise. Ask participants to create a drama, song, montage, or poster to encapsulate their theme.
- **Facilitator:** invite participants to make use of craft supplies and a tickle trunk (*Note: make sure in your preparation that you put together a playful collection of clothing and such. The more eclectic, the more fun. Provide a brief explanation about play theory (see secondary texts). If there are teachers on the team ask for personal stories to share.*)
- **Facilitator:** Invite participants to imagine their theme and explore what it might look like if it were happening today. Invite them to create their piece a year from now as if it were happening exceptionally (e.g. Sunday School in the park, music for the dying, stewardship campaign as action in justice).

Plenary: Share Presentations (10–15 mins)

- **Participants:** share presentations;
- **Facilitator:** endeavour to make connexions and highlight balcony-learning moments.

Plenary: Debrief (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** ask participants how the experience felt. What was surprising? Exciting?
- **Facilitator:** consider flip charting and making connexions for participants.

Plenary: Provocative Proposal (5 mins)

- **Facilitator:** teach piece and review Chapter 5: Provoking Imaginative Change: Provocative Proposals. All of the Branson handouts are available in the online folder, including those specific to the provocative proposals.

Plenary: Overview and Instructions (5 mins)

- **Facilitator:** provide an overview of the process; solicit dance floor/balcony observations;  
reference Chapter 5: Provoking Imaginative Change: Provocative Proposals.

Small Groups: Creating a Provocative Proposal (30 mins)

- **Participants:** in teams/quartets review the resources in the brochure for the provocative proposal. Integrate the chosen touchstone and skit, and write a provocative proposal of one or two paragraphs. In teams or groups, record your proposal on flipchart paper.
- **Facilitator:** circulate handouts (sample provocative proposals and Branson); do a check-in.

Plenary: Sharing Provocative Proposals (10 mins)

- **Participants:** in succession, each team or group presents its proposal.
- **Facilitator:** pay attention to balcony moments and affirm insights and growth.

Plenary: Debrief

- **Facilitator:** ask participants how this experience felt. What was surprising? Exciting? Note if the language was written in the present. The exercise asks participants to imagine something that is excellent in the future and write it as though it is occurring now. If not, explore as a balcony moment, as AI philosophy is grounded in the view that our imaginations of the future embolden us to be change now if the imagined future is experienced as possible.
- **Facilitator:** consider flip charting and making connexions for participants.

Plenary: Discernment and Next Steps (15 mins)

- **Facilitator:** begin a circle conversation that explores the following for people as teams and as individuals. Will the provocative proposals be useful as participants move forward? Have they created a lens for those in attendance to engage in their ministry in new (life-giving) ways?

Closing (5–10 mins)

- **Facilitator:** in the circle, allow each person to say their name; pause, and then as a community say, “As a child of Creator, a blessing you are.”
- **All:** at the end of the ritual, sing “God of the Sparrow,” *Voices United* #229

*This curriculum is based on a workshop developed for Winnipeg Presbytery and co-created with Stacey Milne-Cieko and Erica Young. This curriculum has been used with 30+ ministries and over 1200 participants in the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario from 2013 to 2017. Without their commitment and wisdom to the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy, this material would not have been created.*

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## 9. Appendix (Social Media & Evangelism)

This workshop was first published in the Fall 2018 in The United Church of Canada's denominational magazine, *Mandate*, which "provides tools for use in all areas of congregational life, including spiritual growth and discipleship formation, justice and advocacy, worship, stewardship, outreach, and Mission and Service Fund awareness."

### Introduction

Through social media people share ideas, content, and relationships online. It is different from mainstream media in that anyone can create, comment on, and add to the content. Social media can be text, audio, video, images, and communities.

This workshop will use story throughout. Stories connect us with the best of what was and help us imagine carrying this forward in new ways. Stories foster community, trust, and relationality. The aim is for participants to recognise social media as a catalyst to (re)explore mission. Often participants come expecting to acquire skills and quickly learn that social media reveals ways to be the church that are both old and often new.

This workshop is for participants who are excited about imagining ways to harness social media as one component in visioning and revitalizing mission in communities of faith. As well, it can (re)connect missional activities such as social justice, pastoral care, and life-long learning. For those who imagine discipleship as an ongoing exploration in which change is a constant, this workshop will challenge, excite, and energise.

By nurturing the trust that comes with storytelling, this workshop will allow participants to recognise that as a people of faith, we have always responded with creativity. This technology affords us a new medium through which to share the good news. As an Easter people, we must consider such an opportunity to bring hope to our longing world.

The workshop is intended for teams of four to six. The reason for teams, not individuals, is that the implications of social media require more human resources than are traditionally allocated financially in most United Church of Canada contexts. Creating a group with a shared identity and passion serves to create a cohesive team.

The workshop can be scaled up, as long as it is noted that each additional team must be four to six people. For every group, consider adding an additional facilitator. This workshop takes approximately three and a half hours. Participants can bring the content back into their own context in order to build further capacity. The reality is that social media is not one role or position, but invites an entire cultural shift to engage in an online relational space.

There are two central items that facilitators should watch for throughout: clarifying the intention for engaging in social media and the pastoral care responsibility of incorporating ministry into a digital environment. Exploring the intention is important because it opens

space to explore theological understandings such as hospitality and greeting “the other.” In these conversations, the tension of wanting to “fill the pews” can be explored and challenged when it is recognised that the digital environment is not a static bulletin board, but a relational space in which the church is not often engaged. As this becomes clear, the pastoral implications become apparent: if you are offering care (initially) online, then questions of brick and mortar spaces come to the fore. Be prepared for this workshop to stimulate missional thinking that participants had not anticipated.

Below are some of the benefits and challenges that are present within social media.

#### Benefits

1. tolerance
2. friendship
3. change
4. communal
5. equal; small versus big
6. fair
7. open
8. authentic
9. global
10. participatory

#### Challenges

1. Internet addiction
2. less contact with family
3. loneliness and depression
4. less active social life
5. exposure to sexually explicit material
6. victimization and piracy
7. fluidity of virtual identity

Adapted from “Social Media and Evangelism” by Miroslav Pujic in *Ministry*, January 2014

#### Materials

- flip chart paper and markers
- sharpies and pens
- large stickies (4x6)
- computer, speakers, and projector; Internet connection
- candle and chimes (to call back from small group work)
- tables/breakout space

#### Link

The videos can be found here: <https://1drv.ms/f/s!AkWjOtI2VLE0ip4nNu6Jen1BNZbJWQ>.

#### Workshop agenda

Opening (5-10 mins)

Begin seated in a circle, with a candle in the centre. Each person introduces themselves and shares one hope they bring to the workshop. This is followed by a brief prayer and a time of silent centring.

Experience: An Exploration (10 mins)

Ask participants to name what is currently happening in respect to social media. What platforms are their faith communities using? Do they have a website? Who is responsible for creating content?

Move to an area for viewing, if different than opening. Have a flip chart to record threads/connections.

## Stories

### Small Group (20 mins)

In pairs, participants explore “What’s your best experience of storytelling?” The listener considers the following: What’s happening in the story? What’s the context? Who is involved? What are key words? Central feelings? The listener and storyteller switch roles. Then they discuss what themes/threads/ideas/questions are connected in the stories. Record on a large sticky.

### Large group (10 mins)

Participants share their partner’s story. What was that like? Have people name and post themes on flip chart paper. The facilitator helps identify common threads. Ask: What was the experience like?

### Video (5 mins)

Show the video *Dreams* by Prince Ea. There are several reasons to show this video:

- It demonstrates the power of online content and the manner in which secular culture can offer hope. Prince Ea has 10 million Facebook followers.
- It demonstrates that faith communities can harness already-created content to share their sense of mission.
- It demonstrates the vacuum created when faith communities are not online. Though this video aligns with United Church values generally, remind participants that there are also nefarious creations. If the church is not online, who is filling the moral void?
- It highlights, in this moral void, who is offering care to those who are hurting. If faith communities get involved in the medium, are they prepared to offer appropriate pastoral care?

### Small group (20 mins)

Divide into pairs, with one storyteller and one listener. The listener considers the following: What’s happening in the story? What’s the context? Who is involved? What are key words? Central feelings? The listener and storyteller switch roles. Then they discuss what themes/threads/ideas/questions are connected in the stories. Record on a large sticky.

### Large group (10 mins)

Participants share their partner’s story. What was that like? Have people name and post themes on flip chart paper. The facilitator helps identify common threads. Ask: What was the experience like?

## Video (5 mins)

Show the video *Socialnomics 2018* from DeOnlineStrateeg.nl. It will allow participants to appreciate the reality that social media is much more than a skill you acquire. This video can be overwhelming, so be prepared to listen deeply and make space for concern, even lament. As you move through this process, be intentional to make connections with the ideas of mission and pastoral care.

## Small Group (20 mins)

Divide into pairs, with one storyteller and one listener. Consider: What was surprising? What was new? Exciting? What's a growing edge? Switch roles, then discuss common threads. Record on a large sticky.

## Large Group (10 mins)

Participants present common threads. The facilitator adds anything they think is missing and notes threads that have possible actions/skill learning attached. These will be used in "What's next."

## Video (5 mins)

With this final video, *Social Media Evangelism* the hope is to offer participants some sense of where to go next. It is also intended to be a bridge from the possible anxiety that is present to places of imaginative creativity. Facilitators should note body language and be prepared to draw connections from participants' work (in particular, insights made during the video *Socialnomics 2018* that will help with "What's next").

## Small group (20 mins)

Ask participants to consider the following: Thinking of this workshop, where do you imagine it might take you? What evangelism is occurring, and what areas would you like to focus on next? What common themes or ideas do you see with work already done? Record on a large sticky.

## Large Group (10 mins)

Ask participants: What was that like? What connections did you see? Is there anything missing? The facilitator notes threads that have possible actions/skill learning attached. These will be used in "What's next."

## What's next? (30+ mins)

This final section will vary in time and complexity. Depending on the work done, the facilitator may have to help the participants shift to identifying actual ways to engage in social media. In many ways this is a dreaming section, but one that requires the facilitator to help participants name real possibilities and attach a metric to gauge completion.

Share the information in the sidebar "Ideas for harnessing social media" and use the following list of possible responses/questions/guides, which are suggestive and not prescriptive.

- Start with one platform and do it well.



- Remember that this is a relational medium.
- This is not a pulpit—it is a medium that is often informal.
- Do not do this alone; consider this workshop as a model to further engage your local faith community.
- Ask: Who is already online? Who is already creating content? This could be artists, musicians, poets who might be active in analogue, but whose work could be shared digitally, especially as a way to share your local faith community.
- Facilitators: Help make connections with those who are creating analogue content as a way to invite them to share as part of a local faith community's digital presence.
- Facilitator: Encourage participants to find people with already-created content (e.g., Prince Ea) and adapt it to their context.
- Facilitator: Help participants identify partners who are already online, and harness their presence to bolster their mission (e.g., a local Brownie group that uses the facility and is actively online or social justice partners with whom they work).

Closing (5-10 mins)

In the circle, allow each person to say their name, pause, and then name a key learning.

### Prayer

Holy Mystery,

We give thanks for this gathering of kin, sisters and brothers.

Be with them as they prepare to leave this space.

Be with them as they begin to imagine ways to bear Light into digital places.

Be with them as they journey into new areas of learning and wonder.

Be with them as they listen to the other.

Be with them in the midst of change that begins the moment new relationships are made.

In the name of our elder brother Jesus

We say,

Amen.

Sing "God of the Sparrow," *Voices United* #229

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