



REIMAGINING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION ACROSS THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA CONFRONTING THE NARRATIVE OF DECLINE



EMMANUEL COLLEGE
OF VICTORIA UNIVERSITY IN
THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



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The United Church
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Reimagining Theological Education: An Introduction

PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

The eight theological schools affiliated with The United Church of Canada, in partnership with the denomination and its more than 2,000 congregations, are undertaking a significant initiative to strengthen leadership formation and support the future vitality of the church. The project builds on an unprecedented period of collaboration among the schools and denominational leaders and responds to a shared commitment to leadership development, growth, and the renewal of theological education.

As The United Church of Canada enters its second century, this work is shaped by a sense of gospel urgency. While the church celebrates its centennial, it also faces the challenges of decades-long declines in membership and participation. Too often, these realities have fostered a narrative of inevitable decline. Through this initiative, the theological schools and church partners seek to challenge that narrative by investing in the identification, formation, and support of leaders who can help congregations thrive in a changing context.

Grounded in hope and possibility, the initiative is inspired by our faith in a God who is able to give life to the dead and to bring to existence that which does not exist (Romans 4: 17). The work calls for creativity, courage, and a willingness to move beyond business as usual as schools, congregations, and denominational partners work together to nurture leadership for the future.

Through this grant-supported initiative, the schools and the United Church are creating new pathways to foster discernment and calling, strengthen the preparation of pastoral leaders, and provide robust lifelong learning and support throughout ministry, with particular attention to those in their first years of service.

The impact of this work extends well beyond the theological schools themselves. More than 2,000 congregations across Canada will play an essential role in cultivating and sustaining leadership. Ministry is not the work of individuals alone, but of communities of faith that share responsibility for nurturing, supporting, and stewarding both lay and ordained leadership. By strengthening connections among congregations, theological schools, and denominational partners, this initiative seeks to equip current and future leaders to serve faithfully and effectively in a rapidly changing ministry landscape.

Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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The Atlantic School of Theology (AST) is well positioned to contribute significantly to renewing church leadership in Canada. With charisms in community-based formation, contextual theological education, and ecumenical collaboration, AST offers a proven and scalable model for leadership development. AST's cohort-based, praxis-integrated approach has demonstrated strong engagement and growing recognition. The proposed expansion will increase recruitment capacity, extend learning into local communities, strengthen field-based formation, and support leaders through their early years of ministry. AST also brings particular strengths in field-integrated learning.

1. Discernment and Congregational Engagement: Strengthening pathways into ministry

- Learning events in congregations and regional councils in Atlantic Canada
- Discernment events for all life stages in partnership with Regional Council
- Strengthen congregational role in identifying leaders

2. Faculty and Field-Based Formation: Practice-integrated leadership formation

- Strengthened contextual education
- Faculty grounded in congregational life

3. Curriculum Development: Responsive, future-facing theological education

- New courses in cooperative ministry, anti-racism, and leadership
- Expanded flexible learning formats
- Increased collaboration across schools

4. Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning: Accessible, community-based learning

- Expanded micro-credentials, with a focus on the effective practice of ministry
- Increased participation
- Working towards stackable credentials

5. First Five Years of Ministry: Early-career support and retention

- Cohort-based learning with mentorship and peer support
- Stronger leadership resilience

Centre for Christian Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba

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The Centre for Christian Studies (CCS) proposes a **three-stream strategy** to strengthen theological education, expand access, and address leadership shortages in the United Church of Canada.

1. Expand & Credential Existing Programs

- Scale CCS's learning circle model—community-based, experiential, and collaborative.
- Position current courses as meeting denominational priorities (leadership, justice, spirituality, ministry practice).
- Establish cross-institutional recognition, enabling CCS courses to count for credit at other theological schools.

Outcome: Wider access, stronger inter-school collaboration, and increased program reach.

2. Launch Collaborative Ministry Learning Circle

- New offering for early-career ministers, experienced leaders, and candidates trained elsewhere.
- Focus on core ministry competencies, including: experiential and peer learning; reflection-based practice; feedback and relational skills; and contextual analysis

Outcome: Practical, transferable skills that support lifelong, collaborative ministry leadership.

3. Strengthen Congregational Engagement in, and with Discernment

- Train diaconal leaders to guide congregations in identifying and nurturing ministry callings.
- Implement a four-stage model: development, training, community implementation, and ongoing support.

Outcome: Rebuild grassroots pathways into ministry and increase leadership capacity.

Conclusion

CCS is proposing a scalable, collaborative model that:

- Expands proven programs rather than reinventing them
- Builds essential ministry skills across career stages
- Establishes a national infrastructure for discernment and dynamic, robust congregational engagement.

Emmanuel College, Toronto, Ontario

ENHANCEMENT OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION THROUGH CONNECTION, CREATION (LAND BASED) AND CREATIVITY

1. Reimagine SME Learning Circles through On-line and In-Person Gatherings

We propose the development of SME online learning circles over a 9-month period program starting winter 2027. This gathering will be offered with staggered cohorts over 4.5 years as a pilot program to assess the needs and sustainability of the program in perpetuity, ideally administrated by the Office of Vocation. Over the duration of the SME Learning Circles, participants will gather in person twice in June of their first and the second years.

2. Curriculum and Capacity: Centering Indigenous Wisdom, Ecological Sustainability, Land Based Experiential Learning and Spiritual Practice

During their MDiv studies, students in UCC candidacy pathway will be eligible to attend a gathering hosted by the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre (SSSC) or Five Oaks or places where appropriate. Proposed Programs may include but not be limited to the following: Land-based Indigenous Wisdom learning (with elders, Indigenous scholars, leaders, students, Indigenous worldview, epistemology, and practices, learning from lived experiences); Climate Crisis and its social, economic, political, and mental impact, engaging concrete actions and strategies.

3. Congregational Engagement

3.1. National Youth Gathering Support: Tending the soil for Future Students

Andrew Aitchison, Emmanuel College Admission Advisor and Strategic Recruiter will expand his ongoing engagement with youth beyond point-of-contact interactions, by developing youth-focused takeaway resources that function as ongoing touchpoints for vocational reflection. These materials will be designed to reinforce initial engagement, sustain connection over time, and support early-stage discernment pathways.

3.2. Deepening Connections with the Regional Councils and “Calling Congregations”

Andrew Aitchison and EC faculty, Prof. Carmen Lansdowne will engage a few regional council AGM meetings and develop structured discernment resources that can be used across regional councils and congregational contexts out of this engagement.

4. Strengthening Digital and Public Presence through the Website/ Technology Upgrades

Develop impactful digital materials for storytelling, videos (testimonials), written profiles for MDiv students and faculty, as a way of strengthening public presence that is well aligned and connected with UCC’s core pillars (deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice) and UCC Lilly website.

Montreal Dio, Montreal, Quebec

COMMUNITY-BASED FORMATION FOR A CHANGING CHURCH

Montreal Diocesan Theological College (Montreal Dio) submits this proposal in response to a pivotal moment in the life of the church in Canada. Over a period of intentional discernment and consultation between January and April 2026, the College has developed a three-pillar response to the Reimagining Theological Education grant—one grounded in a reckoning with our regional context and animated by confidence that this moment of challenge is also a moment of opportunity.

The context is sobering. In the Nakonha:ka Regional Council, approximately 30% of pastoral charges have no full-time ministry personnel and likely never will again. The figure is just over 20% in the Eastern Ontario and Outaouais Regional Council. The congregational model with clergy trained separately is, in the words of one consultation participant, in "rapid freefall" in Quebec. Fewer candidates are entering the candidacy pathway; lay people are often reluctant to pursue formal education in distant institutions; and ministry personnel feel increasingly isolated from one another and from broader church structures.

Montreal Dio brings real strengths to this moment: small size with the capacity to adapt; proven hybrid and online learning models; close connections to many congregations; bilingual and increasingly multilingual programming; and a faculty deeply committed to the church's flourishing. These charisms shape everything we propose here.

Our proposal is organized around three pillars:

- **Continued curricular changes at the college** — adjustments to MDiv and other testamur programs to ensure students are equipped to lead imaginative change and support congregations in collaborative ministry.
- **Continuing education offerings for the whole church** — building on the success of Shared Way, Shared Witness, and deepening partnerships with regional councils to offer clergy study days, lay leader gatherings, and an annual conference on new visions of ministry.
- **A new program to support community-based lay formation** — a full-time Director of Community-Based Formation who will design programming that forms communities of faith as communities and in community, rather than training individuals in isolation.

The third pillar represents a reimagining of what theological education can be. Rather than raising up individual leaders who are sent elsewhere for training, the College wants to work alongside communities of faith as communities—in ways that are accessible to people of all educational levels, responsive to actual congregational needs, and grounded in the fullness of the Christian tradition.

St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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This work emerges from St. Andrew's distinctive charism as a prairie-based theological college committed to accessible, relational, and contextually grounded leadership formation within the United Church.

1. **Grow Academic & Lifelong Learning Pathways**

This activity will deepen our curricular redesign through partnerships like the Saskatoon Theological Union and the Eden Network, while offering flexible and relevant learning opportunities for traditional and non-traditional students. The certificate programmes of the Lifelong Learning Pathway (housed in the Oliver & Gruchy Learning Centre) will nurture Lay leaders and other ministry professionals seeking to support congregations in varying capacities, as well as providing opportunities for continuing education.

2. **Maintain a Media Hub** for digital production

This activity will include podcasts, webinars, and multimedia learning content, with facilities for cultivating 21st-century communication and digital literacy skills. Beyond the provision of the tools for digital ministry and content creation, the Media Hub shall feature content for supporting prospective students seeking pathways to a variety of ministry through the UCC.

3. **Establish a Theological Circle of Elders' Wisdom**

The Theological Circle will host both visiting scholars and scholars-in-residence who will share the fruits of their research on public theology and theological education via seminars, panel discussions, or public lectures. Indigenous community connections and scholarly work relating to the work of the various ministerial streams of the UCC will be prioritised. Additionally, the Theological Circle will serve to support SAC faculty development and research initiatives by bringing under a single roof national and international scholarly exchange (between SAC faculty, visiting scholars, and scholars-in-residence) in providing a dedicated space for conferences, retreats, and collaborative projects for fostering theological reflection on pressing topics such as social justice, Indigenous decolonisation, diversity, equity, and leadership in prairie and global contexts.

With support from the Lilly Foundation's *Pathways for Tomorrow* initiative, SAC will be well-positioned to sustain and expand its mission in transformative ways. The Oliver & Gruchy Learning Centre represents both a physical and strategic investment in the future of theological education—equipping leaders who are faithful, innovative, and prepared to serve a rapidly changing church and world. This initiative seeks to counter prevailing narratives of decline by creating visible and accessible pathways into leadership within the life of the church.

St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta

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St. Stephen's College proposes to undertake three types of innovative activities to create educational programming aimed at developing and cultivating community-based ministry and leadership capacity:

1. **Framework Innovation:** SSC aims to create a new program framework for granting Community Certificates. This framework will include registration and curricular structures that enrol communities-of-faith in collective, joint study. Rather than individuals being formed and assessed on their unique capacity and skill, we envision communities sending teams of individuals who will be formed and assessed on the basis of their collective capacities and skills.
2. **Program Innovation:** SSC proposes to establish a non-testamur Faith and Community Leadership program, which will be available in three different formats: (i) Community Certificate in Faith and Community Leadership, (ii) Graduate Certificate in Faith and Community Leadership, and (iii) MTS in Faith and Community Leadership. The program will be designed for both faith communities that want to develop leadership capacity among their members (available through the Community Certificate stream), and for individuals who wish to enhance their own faith-community leadership capacities and discern calls to bi-vocational pastoral ministry.
3. **Research Innovation:** SSC proposes several research-based activities to drive and bolster the proposed community-based program development. First, SSC will establish a Centre for Spirituality and Community Wellness (CSCW), under which we will utilize Lilly funding to coordinate various knowledge translation events (e.g., a podcast series, online public talks, or annual workshops) and host events aimed at establishing a network of faith communities. One of the chief aims of the CSCW will be to provide ongoing connection, enrichment, education, and support for faith communities with no (or limited) ministry personnel. Second, the College will employ a part-time (0.75FTE) faculty member for the duration of the project. This faculty member will oversee and implement the CSCW, coordinate and execute the Community Certificate program, work closely with SSC faculty in the MTS and DMin programs to ensure broader program integration, and recruit and supervise two Doctor of Ministry students to conduct applied research related to the project's activities. Finally, two DMin studentships will be made available to attract First-Five and post-First-Five UCC ministers to support the program development and to explore research areas related to leadership needs and faith-community identity within the UCC.

Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre, Beauséjour, Manitoba

AN ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTION ROOTED IN INDIGENOUS THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ (*Etuaptmumk*) is a way of seeing the world introduced by Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall. It sees and combines the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and Western knowledge. By promoting co-learning, collaboration, and balance to address complex challenges in education, health, and environmental stewardship, Elder Marshall’s words capture the essence of this proposal to re-imagine theological training with innovation and collaboration.

For more than four decades, SSSC has shaped Indigenous theological education through land-based learning, ceremony, community accountability, and intergenerational discussions.

Within the Lilly initiative, Sandy-Saulteaux offers a living practice that is uniquely positioned to provide leadership in areas that align with the church’s commitments to:

- Decolonizing theological formation by grounding learning in Indigenous worldviews, histories, and spiritual practices while supporting the wider church’s responsibility for this work and without placing the burden of “heavy lifting” solely on Indigenous communities.
- Land-based and experiential education by demonstrating how ministry formation emerges through ceremony, seasonal teachings, community presence, and embodied learning rather than classroom-only instruction.
- Community-centered ministry training by preparing leaders who are relational, contextual, and accountable to the people and places they serve.
- National collaboration by partnering with other theological schools and sharing knowledge, hosting learning experiences, and deepening the church’s collective capacity for Indigenous and intercultural formation.

Participation in the Lilly initiative is both an opportunity and a responsibility. It is an opportunity to stabilize and to strengthen capacity so that Sandy-Saulteaux can engage fully and sustainably. There is also a responsibility to ensure equity, fairness, and context are honoured within a national collaboration.

Guidance from Elders on this proposal affirms that Indigenous Peoples will do Indigenous theology by seeing the Christ story through their own languages, lands, teachings, and relationships with creation, while challenging colonial visions of Jesus and restoring Indigenous spiritualities, cultures, and ways of knowing.

For the church, this is an invitation to deeper reconciliation. By decolonizing its present theology while receiving the understanding of Indigenous people and the gifts of Indigenous theological insight, this work will guide the transformation toward a more just, relational, and spiritually grounded future.

Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, British Columbia

EDUCATION FOR IMPACT NOW!

Vancouver School of Theology (VST) proposes four complementary initiatives to renew theological education and strengthen congregational leadership formation for a changing church context. Three are related to the Curriculum and Capacity work stream and one to Continuing Education. Together, these projects respond to key challenges: limited access to culturally relevant formation, fragmented student experiences, theological education for pastors around end of life and technology advances, and the need for ongoing ministry support beyond graduation. The initiatives collectively position VST as a flexible, community-embedded, and future-oriented hub for theological learning.

The **Expansion of the Teaching House That Moves Around** advances an innovative model of Indigenous theological education by delivering formation directly within Indigenous communities. Rooted in relationships with Elders and local contexts, this approach centers land-based learning, community healing, and reconciliation. By reversing the traditional requirement that students relocate to institutional settings, the program supports leadership development in place. Funding will expand delivery sites, support Indigenous mentors, adapt curriculum, and document learnings for broader application.

The **VST Academy Cohort Model** addresses the growing isolation and fragmentation experienced by theological students. It introduces a structured, cohort-based pathway combining online learning, residential intensives, peer community, congregational mentorship, and vocational discernment. This model emphasizes belonging, accountability, and integration of study with lived ministry contexts.

The **Establishment of a Professor of Christian Ethics and Public Theology** will provide critical intellectual and public leadership for the church. This role is designed not only to strengthen academic curriculum but also to serve the broader denomination through accessible research, national conversations, and practical resources. Addressing issues such as artificial intelligence, end of life care, social inequality, and ecological responsibility, the position connects theological scholarship with real-world challenges, enhancing the church's capacity for thoughtful and credible public engagement.

The **Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Ecosystem** redefines theological education as an ongoing partnership with graduates, clergy, and lay leaders. Through stackable courses, certificates, webinars, and ministry toolkits, the initiative supports continuous skill development and resilience in ministry. Designed for accessibility and adaptability, it also offers potential for earned revenue and shared programming across institutions, contributing to long-term sustainability.

Individually strong and mutually reinforcing, these four initiatives form a cohesive strategy to expand access, deepen community-based learning, strengthen ethical leadership, and sustain lifelong formation. Together, they position VST to serve the evolving needs of the church for leaders who can innovate, collaborate, and think theologically for impact.