

A Community Profile

from the perspective of a recent graduate of the Centre, Hubert Den Draak.

The Centre for Christian Studies (CCS) is a Canadian theological school that has been training students from across Canada for diaconal ministry, a ministry of compassion and justice, grounded in the example of Jesus who “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

Its roots are in the deaconess training schools established in the late nineteenth century. Today, the Anglican and United Churches of Canada acknowledge and endorse CCS as one of only two Canadian theological schools to offer formal education for diaconal ministry. Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre offers education for diaconal ministry to Indigenous students. CCS considers itself part of the wider diaconal community through the Diakonia World Federation and its regional body, Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC).

Students learn in sacred community, guided by a model of action and reflection, integration and transformation. They are trained to live a theology of justice with those who find themselves on society's "edges."

From this same perspective, CCS also provides shorter theological programs for those seeking new skills for their life in faith, and for ministers and leaders seeking continuing education. Examples are the two-week intensive leadership development module “Learning on Purpose” (“LOP” taking place both in Winnipeg and in locations across the country) and the recently introduced a weekend of mentor training for deacons, currently offered to the Diocese of Rupert's Land.

Diaconal ministry seeks to empower those who find themselves on the margins of social systems as a result of unjust economic, social, sexual and ecological prejudices. Diaconal ministry practices forms of education that engage the whole person as co-learners and co-teachers, and is relevant and collaborative.

This philosophy is reflected in the non-traditional educational model of the Learning Circle. Twice a year students gather (usually at CCS but sometimes elsewhere) to learn in community for an intensive two-and-a-half-week period. It involves rigorous internal academics with extensive readings and assignments that seek to engage the entire person. As a result, CCS students frequently remark on the powerful transformation they experience as they go through their training; similarly, CCS staff often note how much they learn from the skills and wisdom that the students contribute to the learning process.

The experiential learning, internal courses and assignments that the students receive at CCS are balanced by a number of required external university courses, connecting the students with more traditional models of learning as well as other students that are not in a diaconal program.

After three Theme Years, students in their fourth and final year enter the Integrating Year. Their Learning Circles are separate from the Learning Circles of the first three years, and offer the opportunity to incorporate their learnings, both in theory and practice, faith and action. A significant part of the Integration Year is the two-week "Global Perspectives" trip, in which the students place themselves into a context and culture that is unfamiliar to them, in an effort to observe and experience up-close what it means to live on the margins. This is preceded by a period of in-depth orientation and is followed by various approaches to integrate the learnings that have emerged from the experience.

In my experience, as with everything else that the students are expected to do, CCS staff are deeply involved in preparing for and debriefing from this intensive experience, sometimes having to deal not just with educational and theological issues but also with unexpected logistics and emotions.

"Learning in community" is a powerful experience for students and staff alike. It forms solid common ground and enduring bonds. After graduation, most students keep connected to CCS in some form or shape - be it as committee volunteer, as financial donor, as a Council member or as a guest instructor. Graduates typically have a sense of ownership in and passion for a form of transformational theological training that continually seeks to engage the entire person, from head to heart.