



THE VANCOUVER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY RECEIVES MAJOR GRANT FROM LILLY ENDOWMENT TO ESTABLISH THE REIMAGINING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION PROJECT

December 5th, 2025

The **Vancouver School of Theology** has received a grant of \$9,923,200 USD from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help establish *Reimagining Theological Education Across The United Church Of Canada Affiliated Schools: Confronting The Narrative Of Decline*.

The project is being funded through Lilly Endowment’s Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative, which is designed to help theological schools across the United States and Canada as they prioritize and respond to the most pressing challenges they face as they prepare pastoral leaders for Christian congregations both now and into the future.

The grant to the Vancouver School of Theology is one of 45 that was approved in this round of funding to support theological schools as they lead large-scale collaborations with other seminaries, colleges and universities, and other church-related organizations. With its large-scale grant the Vancouver School of Theology is partnering with The United Church of Canada, and its seven other affiliated theological schools across Canada to act on this initiative.

The United Church of Canada (UCC) is observing its Centennial. *Reimagining Theological Education Across The United Church Of Canada Affiliated Schools: Confronting The Narrative Of Decline* is part of a church-wide effort to disrupt the narrative of decline. This intention is signaled by the Strategic Plan of the UCC, which identifies “Growth” as the overarching priority. Closely related to the prioritization of “Growth” is an emphasis on leadership.

Vancouver School of Theology joins The United Church of Canada in affirming that there is no single factor more critical to the future of the church than excellent pastoral leadership. In addition, The United Church of Canada has committed itself to “Re-Imagining Theological Education.” Vancouver School of Theology believes our proposal flows directly from and furthers these stated, urgent priorities.

This project is rooted in the collaboration of the eight institutions of theological education directly affiliated with The United Church of Canada. Beyond the Theological Schools Circle (which includes the UCC), the 2000+ congregations of the UCC will be impacted by this endeavor. Ministry is not a one-person show. It is the work of a community of faith in the name and spirit of the Risen One, Jesus Christ. Congregations have a role in practicing good stewardship of leadership, whether clergy or lay.

We believe the best possible future imagined through this [project] will strengthen the whole ecology of theological education by effectively and strategically increasing and transforming financial and educational capacity of United Church Theological Schools and Centers in Canada. We believe that the outcome of these increases, and the robust formation and education engendered by them, will function to prepare and sustain pastoral leaders in community to thrive in their common service to the Gospel in Canada in the early 21st century.

- Rev. Dr. Richard Topping, President, Vancouver School of Theology

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The United Church's strategic plan has two key foci: growth and leadership. This collaborative project, to Reimagine Theological Education, attends to both focal areas, as we look at new ways of being church, church planting, and the lay and ordered leadership needs of the church. The United Church is grateful for the leading role and initiative taken by the Vancouver School of Theology to secure the support of the Lilly Endowment, and to all affiliated schools for sharing the vision for reimagining theological education.

- Rev. Dr. Michael Blair, General Secretary General Council, The United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada and its eight affiliated schools have long enjoyed collaborative relationships; this grant will provide significant resources to further strengthen and deepen our shared work to form theologically educated, faithful, effective, and adaptive ministry leaders, both lay and ordered, for our communities of faith now and into the future.

- Rev. Dr. Jennifer Janzen-Ball, Executive Minister, Theology & Ministry Leadership Unit, The United Church of Canada

This [project] is timely to meet the changing needs of communities of faith across the Country and Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre acknowledges its support of the Lilly Endowment Pathways for Tomorrow initiative to strengthen and enhance the efforts of ministerial leadership for The United Church of Canada (UCC). We believe that this collaboration will shape the future of theological education and will strengthen the schools' collective ability to prepare and empower leaders across the country.

- Aliesha Desjarlais, Keeper of the Circle, Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre

Centre for Christian Studies is grateful for the Lilly Endowment Pathways for Tomorrow initiative and Lilly's commitment to supporting new avenues for excellence in ministerial leadership. It is clear from our experience and research that our system of theological education needs to pivot for the benefit of the whole church through its preparation of pastoral leadership.

- Rev. Marcie Gibson, Interim Principal, Centre for Christian Studies

I want to express the full support of our faculty and Board of Governors for our recent work towards a large-scale collaborative grant from the Pathways to Tomorrow program of the Lilly Endowment. We believe that this project is a critical way to strengthen the ministerial leadership of the church to support flourishing congregations.

- Rev. Dr. Jesse Zink, Principal, Montreal Diocesan Theological College

This [project] is an exciting opportunity to collaborate on theological education in ways that promise to build on each schools' strengths and creatively enhance opportunities for recruitment, discernment, education, formation and sustenance for ministry in the church.

- Rev. Dr. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Principal, Emmanuel College

- Rev. Dr. Pamela McCarroll, Acting Principal, Emmanuel College

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Atlantic School of Theology is pleased to be part of the consortium of theological schools dedicated to reimagining theological education within The United Church of Canada. The [project], is aligned with the mission of AST which “serves Christ’s mission by shaping effective and faithful ordained and lay leaders and understanding among communities of faith.”

- Rev. Dr. Susan MacAlpine-Gillis, Academic Dean, Atlantic School of Theology
- Rev. Dr. Heather McCance, President, Atlantic School of Theology

The [project’s] objective of inspiring, summoning, and preparing a new generation of pastoral leaders for the UCC’s communities of faith in this present time represents well St. Andrew’s College’s commitment to the provision of flexible, culturally relevant, and contextually viable theological education, as expressed in the elaborations on our mission. This commitment across all educational domains, including continuing education for clergy and laity, is integral to the college’s charism, one that would complement well those of the schools of the network of affiliation that the [project] seeks to empower by its initiative.

- Dr. Bernon Lee, Executive Director of the Oliver & Gruchy Learning Centre, St. Andrew’s College
- Dea. Dr. Richard Manley-Tannis, Principal, St. Andrew’s College

We live in challenging times, and the Pathways program empowers theological schools to boldly, courageously, and audaciously rise to the task of training church leaders who are meaningfully relevant to their local faith communities. [...] St. Stephen’s is particularly pleased to participate in the Reimagining Theological Education initiative because this collaboration affords an opportunity to deepen and strengthen those areas of our programming that directly serve the needs of Christian church communities in the Canadian context.

- Dr. Fred Tappenden, Principal and Dean, St. Stephen’s College

This project will extend over the next five years to foster a new responsive, collaborative framework involving the UCC and all affiliated schools. In addition, it will lead to the formation of a permanent endowment, supported by the Lilly Endowment, matched by additional fundraising by the collaborative partners, and with support through The United Church of Canada Foundation. Ultimately, this endowment will enshrine the new collaborative model of theological education with all United Church of Canada affiliated schools.

Lilly Endowment launched the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative in 2021. Since then, it has provided grants totaling more than \$700 million to support 163 theological schools in efforts to strengthen their own educational and financial capacities and to assist 61 schools in developing large-scale collaborative endeavors.



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About Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is a private foundation created in 1937 by J.K. Lilly Sr. and his sons Eli and J.K. Jr. through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company. While those gifts remain the financial bedrock of the Endowment, it is a separate entity from the company, with a distinct governing board, staff and location. In keeping with the founders' wishes, the Endowment supports the causes of community development, education and religion and maintains a special commitment to its hometown, Indianapolis, and home state, Indiana. A principal aim of the Endowment's religion grantmaking is to deepen and enrich the lives of Christians in the United States, primarily by seeking out and supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations and strengthen the pastoral and lay leadership of Christian communities. The Endowment also seeks to improve public understanding of about religion and lift up in fair, accurate and balanced ways the roles that people of all faiths and various religious communities play in the United State and around the globe traditions in the United States and across the globe.

About VST

The Vancouver School of Theology is called to educate and form thoughtful, engaged, and generous Christian leaders for the church and the world. A change agent and innovator for the church, VST is recognized internationally as a leading theological school and is an affiliated college of the University of British Columbia. VST celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2021 and continues this longstanding legacy of theological education in the region.

The Vancouver School of Theology acknowledges that it is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam) People.

To comment on the *Reimagining Theological Education Across The United Church Of Canada Affiliated Schools: Confronting The Narrative Of Decline* project or receive more information about the project, please contact:

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