

LAND, CONSENT, & INDIGENOUS JURISDICTIONS: A TOOLKIT FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- pg. 3 Introduction: What is this tool kit for?
- pg. 5 Terms to Understand
- pg. 8 Section 1: Colonial Frameworks
- pg. 10 Section 2: Understanding Land Alienation
- pg. 12 Section 3: Indigenous Rights, Consent & Consultation
- pg. 14 Section 4: Reflection and Integration
- pg. 15 Addressing Discomfort & Defensiveness
- pg. 16 Creative and Somatic Practices
- pg. 21 Section 5: From Reflection to Action
- pg. 23 Reflection Questions based on 8 Unitarian Universalist principles
- pg. 25 Resources and References

N.B.: This guide was put together by a non-Indigenous person largely for other non-Indigenous people to engage in this work. It is not the end all be all and it is not perfect, but it is a place to start. As you move through this, remember that the goal is not perfection, and the goal is not guilt. The goal is transformation and growth.

INTRODUCTION

Before engaging in relationship building with Indigenous peoples, it is essential to increase awareness of our own colonial mindset - both individually and collectively. Without this awareness, we risk repeating destructive patterns across all layers of society, including within climate justice work. This toolkit is intended to support reflections, learning, and action toward decolonization and meaningful engagement with Indigenous sovereignty.

Most of this work comes from resources that were created and/or collected by the Justice and Equity team at the Canadian Unitarian Council who have done much to help us uncolonize our ways of thinking as we work to decolonize our systems and institutions.

This toolkit is a spiritual, political, and practical resource for reflecting on land, consent, Indigenous sovereignty, and our responsibilities as settlers, immigrants, or non-Indigenous peoples living on colonized lands.

INTRODUCTION

As Unitarian Universalists, our principles call us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, respect the interdependent web of all existence, and act to dismantle systemic barriers to full inclusion, including racism and oppression. This work requires us to be accountable to Indigenous nations, their laws, and their ongoing struggles for land, justice, and self determination.

This toolkit is both informational and formative, providing background knowledge, guiding questions, and embodied practices to help communities integrate these truths into their spiritual and justice commitments.

I hope you engage with the things written in this toolkit but also the resources referenced! There is so much rich, multi-layered, important and inspiring information out there and some of it has been linked at the end of this tool kit for your perusal. This is not the end all be all of the work, please keep going deeper.



TERMS TO KNOW

Self-determination: the right of Indigenous Peoples to decide their political, economic, social, and cultural futures.

Sovereignty: the authority to govern themselves and their lands without outside interference.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC): Indigenous Peoples must be meaningfully consulted and give consent before any project affecting their land, resources, or communities proceeds.

Intentional Inclusion: Building relationships, redistributing power, engaging in continuous learning, and committing to reparations.

Reparations: Financial compensation to address systematic injustice.

UNDRIP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Uncolonize: The work settlers (people of European descent) and non Indigenous peoples can do internally to distance and detach from colonial thinking.



TERMS TO KNOW

Microaggressions: Subtle, everyday acts of racism.

Examples:

- “Where are you really from?”
- “You’re so articulate!” (as if it’s surprising).

White Superiority: Holding “whiteness” as the standard that everything else is measured against.

Settler Wound: is the deep pain left behind by colonization that affects both Indigenous Peoples and settlers, showing up as loss, disconnection, or harm that continues across generations.

Land Back: a movement and vision for restoring Indigenous governance, stewardship, and sovereignty over traditional territories. Includes: consent and self-determination; restoring languages, traditions, and governance; resisting extractive capitalism, and more.

SECTION 1: COLONIAL FRAMEWORKS

The Doctrine of Discovery

The Doctrine of Discovery is a reminder that colonialism was not only political and economic, it was also framed as spiritual.

Christian supremacy was used to justify dispossession, enslavement, and genocide. This Doctrine was a series of declarations by popes in the 15th century (known as “papal bulls”) that provided religious authority to Christian empires to invade and subjugate non-Christian lands written at a time when European empires were working on large scale expansion. Even though it took place in the 15th century, it still has major implications today as it had major implications on the creation of Canada. As the Canadian Museum of Human Rights states on its website;

“In the Canadian context, the Doctrine of Discovery has led to the seizure of Indigenous lands and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. As colonial settlement spread over the territory that became Canada, many Indigenous peoples entered treaty relationships defining how they would share the land with the newcomers. Influenced by the absolute claims to power and authority expressed by the Doctrine, Canadian law interpreted these agreements as surrendering title and control, despite these concepts being largely alien to Indigenous cultures..... the ruling also said that Aboriginal title could be defied by the Crown (either the provincial or federal governments) if it could justify such action.....The racist assumption of superiority and dominance embodied in the Doctrine of Discovery underpins many aspects of Canada’s colonial history, including the Indian Act, the reserve system, the Indian residential school tragedy, and the Sixties Scoop...”

While there have been calls for the Doctrine of Discovery to be rescinded, and while the Catholic church has repudiated it in 2023, it is still denied that the Doctrine was a teaching of the Catholic Church and global politics are claimed as the real cause for the Doctrine's abusive use in Canada.

While there is some progress here, the official statement did not rescind the original papal bulls upon which the doctrine was based. Additionally, a significant amount of harm has already occurred due to the ways in which Canadian systems, governance structures, and prevailing ideologies have evolved. These developments often occurred in opposition to, or without meaningful consideration for, Indigenous peoples.

For Unitarian Universalists (UU's), repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and recognizing this history is part of affirming the worth and dignity of Indigenous peoples and committing to dismantling these systems of oppression. As a faith called to accountability, justice, and interdependence, it is essential to understand the religious and moral grounding of this country, especially those shaped by the doctrine and its historical context. Understanding this grounding is imperative to how we will move forward, guided by our own principles at our core.

Reflection questions:

- How does learning about the Doctrine of Discovery challenge or shift your understanding of Canada's legal and spiritual foundation?
- How has Christianity been complicit in colonization and how can faith communities engage in repair?
- What does the inherent worth and dignity of every person mean when systems are built to deny Indigenous personhood?
- How can UUs lean into our principles and stay aware of what systems already exist and what we want to avoid repeating in our own communities, congregations, and institutions?

Creative Exercise:

Draw a map of the land where you live. Mark both colonial and Indigenous names for rivers, territories, and communities. Notice what's missing from your usual mental map.

SECTION 2: UNDERSTANDING LAND ALIENATION

What is Land Alienation?

Land alienation describes the process by which Indigenous peoples were separated from their territories through law, policy, and violence. It rests on the false claim that land could be declared “crown land”, belonging not to the Indigenous nations who cared for it since time immemorial, but to the British monarchy and later the Canadian state.

In Canada, 89% of land is officially classified as “crown land”. This designation was upheld by the Doctrine of Reception, a colonial legal principle that imposed British common law on Indigenous territories while ignoring Indigenous legal systems and governance. Treaties, which were originally meant as nation-to-nation agreements, were reinterpreted through crown law as one-sided land surrenders by Indigenous People, further entrenching dispossession.

These alienated lands became the economic engine of the Canadian state. The 1872 Dominion Lands Act granted settlers 160 acres for only \$10, provided they established farms and homes. Railway, hydroelectric projects, forestry, mining, and oil extraction followed, all made possible by access to Indigenous lands. Today, Canada continues to lead globally in mining, forestry, and fossil fuel export- industries that still depend on crown land and the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous territories
(Source: Yellowhead Institute).

Land alienation– whether through outright theft, resource extraction, or imposed laws– lies at the heart of colonization. Canada’s political economy is built on this foundation with devastating consequences for Indigenous nations, lands, and waters.

For UUs, this reality invites and demands deep spiritual reflection.

Respect for the interdependent web calls us to see that environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty are inseparable. Justice and equity require that we confront how the comforts of settler life are subsidized by stolen land and extracted resources, and to act in solidarity with the Land Back movement.

Reflection questions:

1. How do you personally benefit from land alienation and resource extraction?
2. In what ways has your community normalized “crown land” as belonging to settlers or the state?
3. What does it mean to take the UU principle of “justice, equity, and compassion” seriously in relation to Indigenous dispossession?
4. How might rethinking “ownership” of land change your personal or communal practice?

Creative Exercises:

Create a collage or drawing of “land as resource” versus “land as relation”. What symbols emerge? Share with others or do as a group activity to spark dialogue!

SECTION 3: INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, CONSENT, & CONSULTATION

Indigenous rights are the collective and inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, culture, language, land, and governance. These are not rights granted by governments, but rights that pre-exist colonization and are recognized internationally through documents like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

What is Consultation?

In Canadian law, governments have a “duty to consult” with Indigenous communities when decisions may affect their rights or lands.

However:

- Consultation does not equate consent. Governments and corporations often check a box rather than engage meaningfully.
- True consultation requires relationship, transparency, respect, and accountability.
- Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers remind us that consultation without consent continues patterns of extraction and harm.

When Indigenous voices are silenced:

- land and waters are exploited
- sacred sites are destroyed
- communities face health, cultural, and economic harms.

Recognizing Indigenous rights and practicing true consent means dismantling colonial logics of ownership and control.

This is spiritual work as well as political work and it speaks to our principles as it calls us to:

- Respect the inherent worth and dignity of Indigenous Peoples
- Work for justice, equity, and compassion in land use and governance
- Honour the interdependent web of all existence by following Indigenous leadership in protecting ecosystems
- Engage in individual and communal action to dismantle racism and systematic barriers by challenging extractive projects and supporting Indigenous led initiatives

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you distinguish between “consultation” and “consent”?
2. How might your community be practicing a performative version of “consultation” in your justice work?
3. What does meaningful consent look like in your relationships– with land, with people, with spirit?
4. How can the UU value of the “right of conscience” support Indigenous led decision making?
5. How do my cultural or family backgrounds shape my understanding of property, land, and governance?

Creative Exercise

Print or draw a map of your region.

Mark current developments (pipelines, mines, housing, highways, etc.) Overlay with traditional Indigenous territories

Imagine: what might this land look like if consent were centered?

SECTION 4: REFLECTION AND INTEGRATION

This section is about sitting with discomfort, grief, and possibility before moving into action. Reflection is not passive; it is a spiritual practice. Processing what we've learned about land, law, and colonialism is necessary before moving into action.

UU values call us to spiritual growth, compassion, and accountability. Reflection grounds us in humility, reminding us that unlearning colonization is lifelong work.

Reflection Questions:

1. What emotions arise for you in confronting this history and present reality?
2. What responsibilities emerge from your location as settler, immigrant, and/or ally?
3. How do you imagine Indigenous futures where land restitution and self determination are realized?
4. What is one concrete commitment you can make as an individual? What about as a congregation, community, or group?

Somatic/Creative Exercises

Guided meditation: Imagine yourself sitting with your ancestors—yours and the Indigenous ancestors of the land. What do they ask of you? Now imagine the descendants of this land 100 years from now. What do they ask of you? Journal what comes to mind.

Creative: Write a letter to your future self about how you will stay accountable to Indigenous sovereignty in the next 5-10 years. 14

ADDRESSING DISCOMFORT AND DEFENSIVENESS

WHY DOES DISCOMFORT HAPPEN?

Unlearning colonial conditioning can be painful because it calls us to question what we know about ourselves and the world around us. Colonialism influences all sorts of things that are both personal and social. The goal here is not to feel guilty, but to allow ourselves to transform through our unlearning and relearning. Discomfort is not a lack of safety, but it takes courage to move through our defenses and be willing to learn something from a different perspective.

We have been conditioned to value people based on their productivity and where they fit into the hierarchy of White supremacy culture. While our society has been set up this way and we have inherited these conditions, it now becomes our responsibility to undo these things. We must recognize that our discomfort does not make us unsafe, instead it invites us to consider the safety and capacity for joy of those that colonialism and racism deems less than.

When we engage in this work of uncolonizing our minds to confront racist teachings, we are giving ourselves the gift of expansion. Expanding our notions of joy, pleasure, beauty, and love....our discomfort is a sign of limitations of rigidity, but if we can move past that discomfort we open ourselves up to so much more.

CREATIVE REFLECTION PROMPTS

Journaling Prompts:

- What does my discomfort teach me?
- Where can I view discomfort as a chance for expansion?
- What does safety feel like to me?
- How do I react when I'm called out/in?
- How can I stay engaged when I feel defensive?*
- Write a letter to your past self - what do you wish you knew about colonialism 5 years ago? What advice would you give your past self?
- Write a letter to your future self - what do you hope for yourself in 5 years?
- Reflect on how similar these questions are to the questions asked during Black history month and write about how those connections feel for you.

Remember, staying engaged doesn't mean responding right away. You can and should take a pause when you notice defensiveness in order to come back fully present to a conversation

SOMATIC PRACTICES

1. Pause and Breathe: The 4-7-8 Breath

Defensiveness often triggers a fight-flight-freeze response, making it harder to listen and engage thoughtfully. A simple breath practice can help slow down this reaction.

- Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 4.
 - Hold your breath for 7 seconds.
 - Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds.
 - Repeat this cycle 3-4 times.
- ◆ Why it helps: This practice activates the parasympathetic nervous system, signaling safety to the body and reducing stress so you can move from reaction to reflection.

2. Hand Over Heart: Releasing Tension & Self-Compassion

Defensiveness often comes with tension in the chest, shoulders, or jaw. Placing a hand over the heart can create a sense of connection and shift the nervous system out of defensiveness.

- Sit or stand comfortably. Place one or both hands over your heart.
 - Take a deep breath in through your nose and exhale with a sigh.
 - Notice any tightness in your chest, shoulders, or jaw—imagine softening those areas with each breath.
 - Silently repeat a grounding affirmation like:
 - “I am open to learning.”
 - “Curiosity is more important than being right.”
 - “I can listen without fear.”
- ◆ Why it helps: This practice builds self-awareness while offering self-compassion, helping shift away from shame or reactivity.

SOMATIC PRACTICES PT. 2

3. Shake It Off: Releasing Stored Tension

When we feel defensive, stress hormones build up in the body. Shaking—like how animals shake after a stressful encounter—helps release that stored energy.

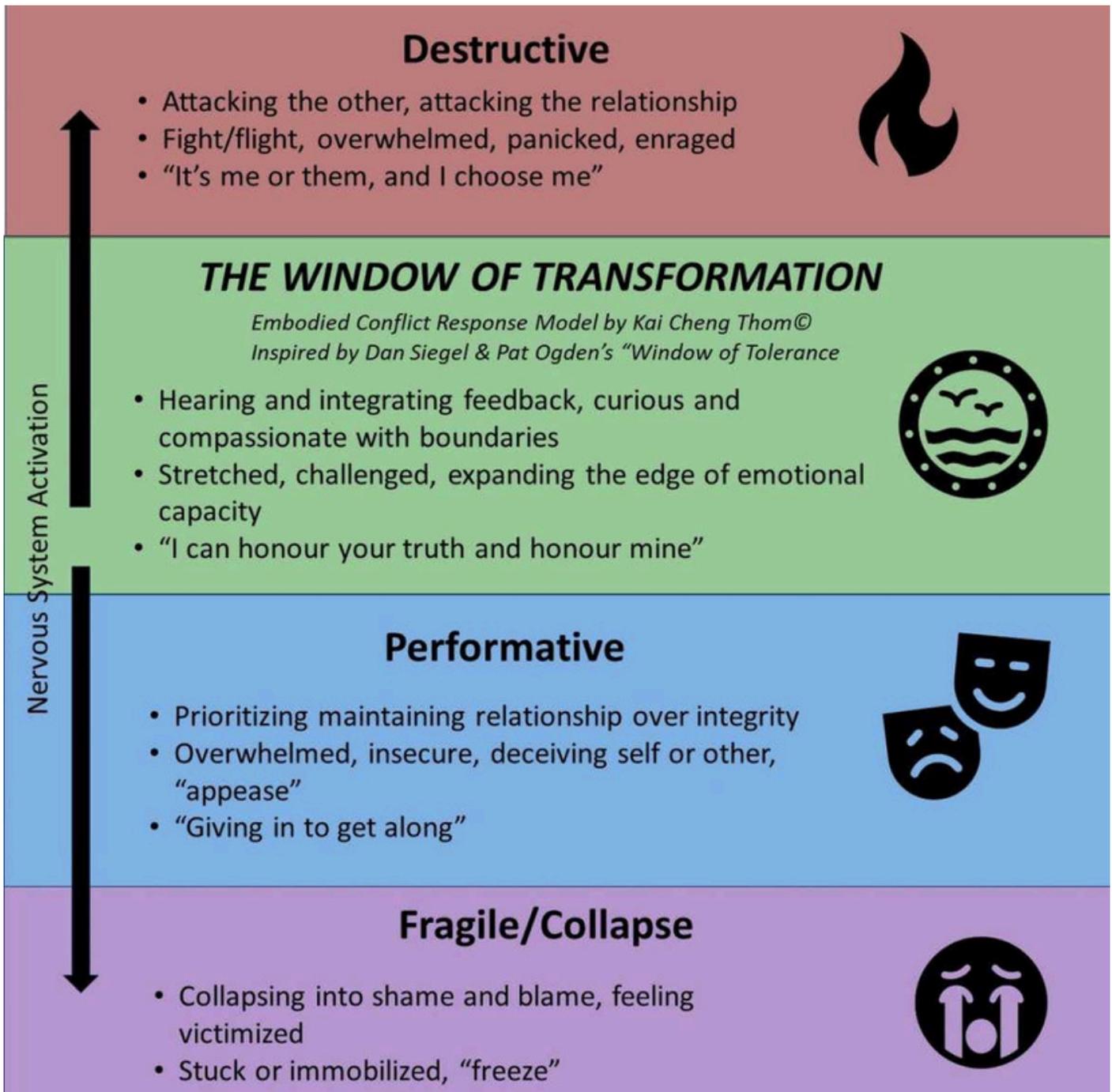
- Stand up and let your body be loose.
 - Shake out your hands, arms, shoulders, legs—one at a time or all together.
 - Let your jaw go slack, wiggle your fingers and toes.
 - Take deep breaths as you move, and let yourself laugh or sigh if it feels natural.
- ◆ Why it helps: Shaking helps reset the nervous system, moving stress out of the body instead of letting it build into resistance or withdrawal.

4. Journaling With the Body: Writing Through Defensiveness

Sometimes, defensiveness hides an important lesson. Instead of pushing it away, try writing from the body's perspective to understand where it's coming from.

- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
 - Ask yourself: Where do I feel defensiveness in my body? (Jaw? Shoulders? Stomach?)
 - Place a hand on that spot and breathe into it.
 - Open a journal and start writing, using one of these prompts:
 - “My body feels defensive because...”
 - “Underneath this reaction, I’m afraid that...”
 - “What would happen if I stayed open instead of shutting down?”
 - “What does this feeling want to teach me?”
- ◆ Why it helps: Naming and externalizing emotions through writing helps break down resistance, making space for deeper self-awareness.

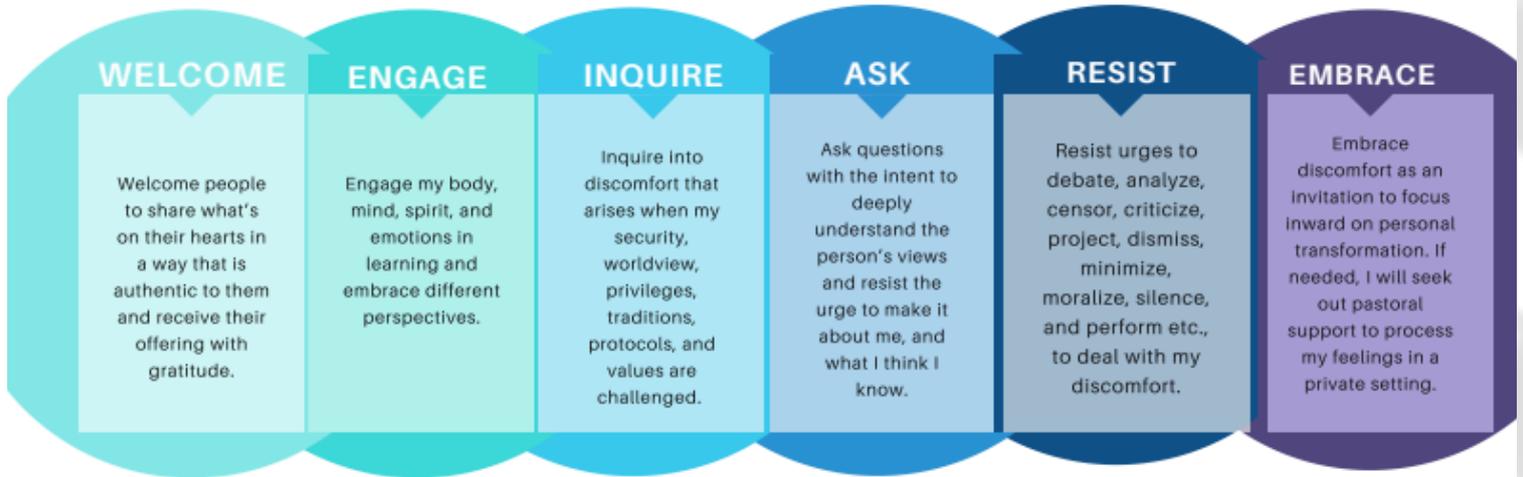
Made by Kai Cheng Thom - "Window of Transformation"
Inspired by Dan Siegal and Pat Ogden's Window of Tolerance



Responsibility Covenant

My UU Principles call me to be accountable in relationship.

I will...



Curious about the CUC's Responsibility Covenant? Learn more about it here!



Healing Spiral by Kai Cheng Thom

SECTION 5: FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

Justice work must move beyond awareness into reparations, redistribution, and solidarity. Justice requires imagination, courage, collective action, and mutual aid. Our principles as UUs compel us to join this work as part of our spiritual practice. Not out of charity, but because our principles call us to action in dismantling racism, protecting our environment, and advocating for Indigenous self determination.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does mutual aid differ from charity?
2. What resources (financial, relational, material) can your community redistribute?
3. How do reparations connect to spiritual commitments and UU values?
4. What concrete step can you take to support Land Back movements in your region?

Actions to explore:

- Supporting local Land Back campaigns
- Redirect resources (time, money, land, skills) towards Indigenous nations and organizations
- Incorporate reparations into congregational budgets
- Engage in mutual aid: redistribute wealth, provide housing support, or resource sharing that prioritizes Indigenous communities
- Advocate for federal and provincial compliance with UNDRIP and Indigenous consent frameworks
- Paying a land tax or rent to Indigenous nations where you live
- Learn about your local treaties and Indigenous laws
- Buy from Indigenous businesses
- Reduce reliance on extractive industries

REFLECTION QUESTIONS CENTRED AROUND OUR UU PRINCIPLES

First Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

- How does the history of land alienation deny the inherent worth and dignity of Indigenous peoples?
- In what ways can we advocate for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in the name of inherent dignity?

Second Principle: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations

- How has land alienation created ongoing inequities in health, housing, and wealth for Indigenous communities?
- What does compassionate solidarity look like when confronting the reality that our comforts are tied to stolen land?

Third Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth

- How can facing the history of land alienation deepen our spiritual growth rather than shut us down with guilt?
- What practices help us move from defensiveness to openness when engaging with Indigenous perspectives?

Fourth Principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning

- What truths about Canada's political economy, built on alienated land, do we need to reckon with?
- How do we balance acknowledging the violent history of land alienation with imagining new, life giving possibilities for relationship and repair?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS CENTRED AROUND OUR UU PRINCIPLES

Fifth Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

- In what ways do crown land policies and extractive industries undermine Indigenous democratic processes and governance?
- How can settlers and immigrants act from conscience to challenge unjust systems while respecting Indigenous leadership?

Sixth Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

- How does the struggle for Land Back connect to global struggles against colonization and resource extraction?
- What would it mean to extend solidarity across borders in ways that do not erase or dilute local Indigenous struggles?

Seventh Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

- How does land alienation distort our relationship with land, water, and more-than-human siblings?
- What changes in how we live could reflect a truer respect for interdependence and reciprocity with the earth?

Eighth Principle: Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions

- How does land alienation intersect with systematic barriers?²⁴

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- [CUC Un-colonizing Focus Group Materials](#)
- [Un-colonizing Climate Justice](#)
- [CUC Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Guides](#)
- [Bruce McIvor: What is the Doctrine of Discovery](#)
- Kris Statnyk, Throwing Stones: Indigenous Law as Law in Resource Management
- [United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)
- [Yellowhead Institute: Land Back: A Red Paper 2020](#)
- Dean Space, Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)
- Assembly of First Nations, Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery 2018
- [Statistics](#)

All of the underlined resources above are hyperlinked to bring you to even more resources to explore. Please take some time this month to explore the wealth of knowledge available here.

