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Introduction and Welcome

This resource is designed to help ministers and religious professionals arriving in Canada- particularly those from the United States- navigate some of the historical, cultural, political and religious differences that may shape their ministry here.

Canada and the United States share a border, a language, many cultural influences, and a common UU heritage. However, the two are not two versions of the same country. Our histories, relationships with Indigenous people, racial histories, political systems, approaches to religion, health care systems, immigration histories and regional cultures differ in significant ways.

For a minister, these differences will shape how congregants understand justice, community, authority, religion, identity, pastoral care, political engagement, and the role of a minister.

This is a non-exhaustive guide, with lots of pieces that could be added still and of course there is no one singular “Canadian experience”. Canada is large and diverse! The experience of someone living in Edmonton will vary compared to someone in Montreal or Winnipeg or Yellowknife or Halifax, etc. Then within our provinces, there is even more regionality and so much layered history to engage with.

Think of this as a place to begin: a collection of snapshots, questions, historical touchstones, and resources that can help you identify knowledge gaps and continue your learning as you move into ministry here in Canada.

Written by Camellia Jahanshahi, the Dismantling Barriers Lead at the Canadian Unitarian Council in 2026 with support from the Congregational Life Leads at the time, Anne Barker and Nicoline Guerrier. It reflects the time and context in which it was written and should be revisited and revised as Canadian political and social realities change.

Section 1: Canadian Unitarian Universalism

A brief overview:

Unitarian Universalist communities have been present in Canada since the 19th century. The Unitarian Church of Montreal was founded in 1842, the Universalist congregation in Halifax in 1843 and the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto in 1845.

In 1961, the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) was established as a national Canadian organization within the broader continental UU framework. The CUC and the UUA continued to have a relationship for several decades before the CUC branched off more officially in 2002. The reason for the split was because of the differences that lay between Canada and the United States and the needs of Canadians to feel more fully represented.

The two organizations have many ongoing relationships and share resources, but they are two distinct organizations serving primarily different national contexts.

As you arrive into Canada, don't assume that;

- Canadian UU history is simply U.S. UU history further north;
- The same social justice issues have the same histories or meanings;
- Congregations understand ministry in exactly the same way;
- CUC and UUA structures or programs are interchangeable

Canadian UU history: a few moments to know

You don't need to memorize a timeline, but some moments and movements that are key to our development. I encourage you to do your own exploring on these topics;

- the establishment of the CUC in 1961
- the growth of lay chaplaincy, [find more on that on this link](#)
- the CUC becoming an independent national association in 2002
- Canadian leadership in LGBTQAI+ rights
- engagement with Indigenous justice and reconciliation
- [the work of the Dismantling Racism Study Group](#)
- the adoption of the 8th principle in 2021

Fun History!

In 1974 Rev. Norm Naylor of the First Unitarian Church of Winnipeg officiated the first same-sex marriage in Canada. While it wasn't legally recognized at the time, it is an important moment in Canadian LGBTQAI+ and UU history. Their marriage certificate is now on display at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Equally fun, a piece of a giant rainbow banner made by a UU youth group in Calgary Alberta is part of the permanent collection at the Canadian Museum of History after it was used in 2005 to rally and show support for the passing of the Civil Marriage Act.

The 8th Principle

In November 2021 the Canadian UU congregations adopted the 8th principle. It was approved by 95% of delegates at a special meeting that the CUC facilitated. It was the first addition to the Canadian principles since the 7th principle was added in 1985.

“We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, covenant to affirm and promote:”

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

The 8th principle is a call to action and change, it is not just an acknowledgement it is a commitment to changing and removing barriers to inclusion.

Please review the Dismantling Barriers toolkits for engaging in this work. It effects your worship, pastoral care, leadership, congregational culture, hiring and staffing, conflict, decision making, accessibility, partnerships, and whose knowledge is treated as authoritative. This work is never ending, and our congregations have committed to it and so our ministers must engage.

Consider;

- What assumptions about race and power am I bringing from my previous ministry context?
- What does “accountability” mean in practice in this congregation?
- How will I respond when someone tells me that something I have done has caused harm?
- Am I prepared to learn Canadian histories rather than assuming my existing UU justice framework translates automatically?

Section 2: Canadian History Snapshots

Again, you don’t need to become a Canadian historian before beginning your ministry or memorize any big timelines. You do need enough historical context to understand the communities you are serving though and there are three areas of particular interest I want to highlight.

Indigenous histories and ongoing relationships

Canada’s history is inseparable from the histories, sovereignty, cultures, and ongoing presence of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

There are some concepts you should become familiar with, like;

- Treaties
- Colonization
- The Indian Act
- Residential schools
- The Sixties Scoop

- Forced displacement
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQAI+ people
- Truth and Reconciliation
- UNDRIP
- Land and territorial relationships
- Indigenous Sovereignty

If these terms are unfamiliar to you, it's time to do some research! [Thankfully there are a lot of great ones available on the CUC website you can start with.](#)

Things to consider;

- Whose traditional territory are you serving on?
- What treaties or agreements apply?
- Which Indigenous communities are connected to this place?
- Does my congregation have relationships with Indigenous people and communities, or primarily make statements about reconciliation?
- What does accountability look like beyond land acknowledgements?
- What is my own history to the concept of belonging?
- How comfortable with the idea of uncolonizing and decolonizing am I?
- What is my experience and understanding of reparations in pursuit of reconciliation?

[Land, Consent, and Indigenous Jurisdictions Toolkit](#)
[Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Reflection Guide](#)

Black Canadian History

Canada has a long and complex Black history that includes slavery, Black Loyalists, refugees, the Underground Railroad, historical Black settlements and communities, anti-Black immigration policies, segregation, displacement, activism and huge cultural achievements.

Do not assume that knowing U.S. Black history means you know Black Canadian history, there is overlap but there are also distinct differences. Especially in how Black lives and histories are archived and acknowledged as compared to in the U.S.

Canada's racial history is different from the U.S. but is not free of slavery, segregation, racism, or white supremacy and it deserves to be known. Many Black Canadians from historical Black neighborhoods are in process of seeking repair and reparations for this erased history and understanding that presence where you are is important.

Explore the Black History Month Toolkit and the Black Canadian History Starting Point resource for this exploration.

[Black History Month Toolkit](#)
[Black Canadian History Starting Point](#)

Things to consider:

- What Black communities have historically lived in this region?
- What histories of anti-Black racism exist locally?
- Whose stories are represented in my congregation's understanding of Canadian history?
- Am I relying primarily on U.S. racial history when talking about race in Canada?

Immigration and Refugees

Canada's population has been shaped by several waves of migration and refugees, including French and British colonization, Black migration, Chinese immigration, South Asian migration, Caribbean migration, Jewish migration, refugee movements, and more.

Canada officially adopted multiculturalism as a government policy in 1971 and moved it through legislation in 1988 with the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

But multiculturalism does not mean that racism, xenophobia or colonialism have disappeared. It just means that Canadian communities may have a different relationship to cultural and religious differences than you may be used to.

Some things to research:

- Chinese immigration, the Head Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1885-1947)
- Japanese Canadian internment and dispossession (1942-1949)
- The Immigration Act (1976)
- Chilean refugees under Augusto Pinochet (1970s)
- Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees starting in 1975
- The MS St. Louis and its Jewish refugees (1939)
- The Points System for Immigration (1967)

Section 3: Politics, Culture and Social Landscapes-2026

How the Canadian government works:

- Federal- Parliament and federal government
- Provincial/Territorial- provincial and territorial legislatures and governments
- Municipal- cities, towns, and other municipalities

Canada is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy, rather than a presidential system. The Prime Minister is the head of government and the British Monarchy is the head of state, represented federally by the Governor General.

For everyday life, the division matters for what level of government oversees what issues.

If you're coming from the U.S. don't assume that a Canadian political range matches with an American one. "Conservative" "liberal" "left" "right" "progressive" and "socialist" have Canadian histories and meanings that don't always line up perfectly with the U.S. political categories.

Healthcare and accessibility

Canada has publicly funded universal health care, but there isn't one single Canadian health care plan. Each province and territory administers its own public health insurance plan within the larger framework of the Canada Health Act.

That said, there is a push for more private health care and much debate happening now in 2026. Different public insurances will cover different levels of services with great discrepancy across provinces and territories and then greater discrepancies for individuals depending on their access and status.

Within the differing landscapes in the health care, it means differing access to services based not only on location but also personhood. There is a lot to learn around different access points to medical services, harm reduction services, and other social assistance services.

There are especially things to understand around dying with dignity, immigrant and refugee needs around health and social services, the history of Indigenous communities and the medical system, and the current realities for trans and gender non conforming individuals as they intersect with health and government policies

Check out the Trans Solidarity and Engaging with Solidarity tool kits to explore more of these power dynamics. Don't assume "universal health care" means everything is free and equally accessible.

[Trans Solidarity Toolkit](#)

[Engaging in Solidarity Toolkit](#)

Police, prisons, and state violence

Canada has its own histories of police violence, incarceration, anti-Black racism, and violence of Indigenous people.

The policing system is also structurally different from that in the U.S. where the RCMP is a federal police service but also provides policing to many provinces and territories. Ontario and Québec have their own provincial police services.

I encourage you to learn the local context from your congregation and keep up to date with policies as they change. There is a rise in police brutality in recent years

Multicultural Mosaic vs. Melting Pot

When you're placed with a congregation, invest some time in exploring the specific region where you will be living. The country is vast and spread out so there is lots of opportunity for different textures of life to come through. When you find your placement, challenge yourself to see what kinds of assumptions you have about it and then dive into some learning to see all the ways you can be surprised.

Canada is officially bilingual at a federal level, and French and English have very different histories and relationships depending on where you live. Quebec and Francophone pockets around Canada have distinctly different cultural experiences. And of course, we have lots of different Indigenous nations that exist here all with their different languages. You'll notice multiple languages on different signs in each province and it's worth your while to spend a little time learning how the locals speak.

Add onto that, the deep history of immigration and the current boom of refugee support, and the social landscape across Canada gets more and more nuanced. Check out your local cultural centres, learning spaces, museums, and galleries to get to know the people around you and their varied histories.

Québec and Laïcité

If you're serving in Québec, there is a deep history shaped by Catholicism and the Quiet Revolution, followed by rapid secularization. Today there are legal and cultural frameworks around state secularism that are heavily debated centered around freedom of speech and freedom to wear religious symbols. If you're serving in this province, it's important to understand the current religious frameworks here are different from the rest of Canada and many religious leaders are supporting the work to advocate for freedom of speech and religion. This work becomes especially layered when we add in the higher immigrant population coming from Muslim countries and we look at the challenges that the immigrant and refugee population face.

Section 4: Ministry in a Canadian UU Congregation

Remember, you're entering a new congregation with its own needs and unique history, importing a past ministry model might not work the way it might in other areas.

Before assuming, spend some time learning;

- The congregation's history
- Its relationship with previous ministers
- Its governance structure
- Its lay leadership
- Its relationship with the CUC
- Its history around conflict
- Its expectations of pastoral care
- How authority and the role of the minister is understood

Ask:

What does this congregation believe a minister is for?
What responsibilities belong to the minister, what belongs to lay leadership?
How are decisions made?
How does the Board relate to the minister?
How does the congregation hold ministers accountable?
What does shared ministry look like here?
What does this congregation expect from its minister that may not be written anywhere?
What has worked well here before?
What has caused harm or conflict in the past?

Who experiences you as an authority?
Who feels comfortable disagreeing with you?
Whose concerns are treated as credible?
Who does emotional labour?
Who gets asked to educate others?
What happens when you cause harm?
How will you participate in dismantling systemic barriers rather than simply preaching about them?

The 8th principle has been voted in by congregations and asks for individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers— including within our own institutions.

Start by getting curious, curious about your new congregation, curious about the region, curious about the history of harm and of resilience in your new area.

Explore museums, Indigenous led cultural centres, community events where possible, institutions and sites connected to cultural heritage, public pow wows, and local restaurants and shops to really get to know the layout- old and new.

Section 6: Keep Learning

You don't need to know everything before you begin, or even as soon as you get here. But it is important to develop a practice of learning with the community rather than expecting the community to teach you everything.

Learn the land: whose territory do you live and work on?

Learn the history: what happened here before you arrived?

Learn the community: understand the racial, cultural, linguistic, economic, religious and political context around your congregation.

Learn the congregation: understand its history before trying to change it.

Listen locally: national narratives are useful but local histories matter enormously!

Keep learning!

Reflect:

- What am I assuming about Canada because I am comparing it to the United States?
- What am I assuming about UUism because I am learning it in another national context?
- What do I need to learn before I try to lead?
- Who in this community already holds the knowledge I need?
- What would it look like for my ministry to be shaped by the place where I actually am?

Resources to explore:

[Assessment and Accountability Toolkit](#)

[Introductory Guide for Black History Month](#)

[Burnout Tool Kit](#)

[Talking About Bylaws Workbook](#)

[Solidarity Toolkit](#)

[Engaging Joyfully Toolkit](#)

[Land, Consent & Indigenous Jurisdictions](#)

[Engaging with Trans Solidarity Toolkit](#)

[Funding Our Values: Economic Justice, Solidarity and Accountability](#)

[Black Canadian History Starting Point](#)

[UU Expressions Podcast](#)

[8th Principle Vote](#)

[Uncolonize or Decolonize?](#)

[Dying with Dignity](#)

[Lay Chaplaincy](#)

[Dismantling Racism Study Group](#)

[Dismantling Racism Study Group Final Report](#)