

## The United Church of Canada: Working to Become an Anti-Racist Denomination

The United Church of Canada has started to work on becoming an anti-racist denomination. Why has the church made this commitment? What does this commitment mean? And how might the church go about doing this work?

### ***Why become an anti-racist denomination?***

Racism exists in many forms in both church and society. For decades, the United Church has condemned all forms of racism, named racism as sin, and worked to eliminate systemic racial discrimination. People in the United Church have developed [anti-racism](#) policies and education programs, worked towards reconciliation and [Indigenous justice](#), adopted the [Calls to the Church](#), and created [intercultural policies](#) and initiatives. In spite of this steadfast and faithful work by committed people over generations, the reality of racism in the church is ever-present.

At the United Church's General Council meeting in 2018, in the final two hours of the afternoon session, many of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour participants lined up at microphones to [share their painful stories of racial exclusion](#) within the church. Ministry personnel who are racialized as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour spend more time searching to find appointments or calls when compared to their White colleagues; many are also sharply critiqued for their diverse accents. In a national [United Church survey on intercultural ministries in 2019](#), several racialized and Indigenous people shared their stories about their experiences of racial discrimination, including tokenism and a lack of safety within the church.

There are many more specific examples of lived experiences that can be shared. Additional reasons for why we need do to this work are detailed in written United Church statements, policies, and documents. What is clear now is that much more needs to be done to dismantle systemic racism within the church. The June 2020 proposal, "[Towards an Anti-Racist Denomination](#)"—which was written for the General Council at the height of global protests for racial justice and in the midst of deepened awareness for the Black Lives Matter movement—names this dynamic clearly:

Public statements are not enough. Words are not enough. This is a moment for The United Church of Canada to wrestle with its White privilege, its role in systematizing anti-Black racism within its own policies, procedures, and practices, and its role within the wider Canadian context. There is a need to make becoming an anti-racist denomination and dealing with anti-Black racism within our denomination a missional priority at all levels of the denomination.

As people of faith, our call to act justly is named as part of our anti-racism policy, and this call is a part of our Christian faith and discipleship journey. The theological and scriptural basis for anti-racism work is well-documented in the United Church's policies, including our anti-racism policy, "[That All May Be One](#)": "As a community of believers we are called to live out God's love

in the world, to advocate for and with the oppressed, to model moral leadership and to seek justice for all people.”

A World Council of Churches [statement on discipleship](#) also reminds us of the importance of dismantling racial discrimination: “We are called as disciples to belong together in just and inclusive communities, in our quest for unity and on our ecumenical journey, in a world that is based upon marginalization and exclusion.” As a church, we also have a role in speaking to the world, and in being prophetic. This prophetic witness follows in the ways of Jesus, who not only spoke of uncomfortable realities in his time, but also challenged power structures and took tangible action for justice. We engage in anti-racism work to follow Jesus’ example of dismantling unjust power and creating better places of belonging for all.

### ***What does this mean?***

An anti-racist denomination is one that actively works at dismantling racism and White supremacy at all levels of the church, continues to work at decolonizing its theology, and strives to redistribute racial power more fairly. It does this anti-racism work so that people from all racial backgrounds can participate in the church’s life fully and freely.

“Anti-racism” and “racial justice” are related terms, but should not necessarily be used interchangeably. Racial justice describes the utopic and intercultural dream where people of all races are engaged in equitable communities, where people are treated fairly and without racial discrimination, where unjust power is dismantled, and where all are welcome. Anti-racism is a verb: it includes specific recognition of the presence of racism and the sustained active efforts to overcome it.

The dream of a racially just community is not quickly or easily attainable. Racial justice will never be fully achieved by attending one workshop or preaching a single sermon. “Racial justice” is also not a simple action that we can check off our “to-do” lists. But because racism is so deeply embedded in our churches and communities, dismantling racism will be an ongoing effort. Anti-racism, therefore, demands energy and attention from all parts of the church. The work of becoming an anti-racist denomination is a journey and process that requires continuous reflection and action.

[Ibram X. Kendi](#) describes the meaning of becoming an anti-racist organization and society. He is a Black American historian, award-winning scholar, and the author of the book *How to Be an Antiracist*. Kendi shares that when people deny the reality of racism, then people allow racism to persist. Through being passive, or through inaction, systemic racism is upheld. Instead, anti-racism requires concrete action. The United Church’s anti-racism policy also states this: “Even though by action we may not have been racist, by inaction we have helped sustain a social climate where racism can occur.” Kendi, along with other anti-racist activists, clearly names that action against racism must be intentional: people must be actively anti-racist.

Kendi also writes that [racial inequity is partly a problem of bad policy](#). Anti-racism must ask what is wrong with our policies. Too often, there are racist policies that allow racism to persist

in church and society. Kendi reminds us that we cannot do anti-racism work unless we are very attentive to policy development. Furthermore, people of the church remind us that in addition to developing strong policies, we need to live out in practice the statements and actions proclaimed in policy.

For the United Church, the work of becoming an anti-racist denomination therefore requires tangible action. It must be intentional, and it must be represented in both policy and practice.

This intentionality and action means:

- *Continuous effort.* Our anti-racism policy notes that: “We believe that the struggle against racism is a continuous effort.” This clarifies that engagement with anti-racism is a process and a continual journey that demands persistent and consistent dedicated work.
- *All parts of the church are involved.* Intentional dialogue will be needed at all levels of the church. Anti-racism work is for more than the General Council Office or for staff, and it is more than policy creation alone. In addition to these key aspects of the work, all levels of the church need to be actively involved—including regional councils, communities of faith, camps, community ministries, and many more. The United Church’s anti-racism policy also reflects this: “We believe we are all called to work against racism and for a society in which the words of the Gospel are realized among us.”
- *Equipping leaders.* The leaders of the denomination—including clergy and senior staff—need to be trained and equipped to effectively integrate anti-racism work as part of their regular ministry practice.
- *Engaging with anti-racist practices.* Some of these practices might ask questions about how we pray and what we pray for, how we preach and what we preach about, how we read and interpret the Bible, how we name and describe Jesus, what curriculum and Bible commentaries we use, how we engage in outreach, how we work with people in our communities, etc.
- *Building on history.* Anti-racism work is not new for this year. The United Church has been engaged in this work for decades, and has embraced an intercultural vision. Many concrete actions have been worked on, and new ones have been proposed. Most recently, the Executive of General Council [issued a strong statement](#) in June of 2020. In addition to what has been named before—including continuing to follow up on recommendations from earlier reports—the work of becoming an anti-racist church needs to be linked with the church’s [intercultural vision](#).
- *Reflecting on theology.* The church’s theological basis for anti-racism work needs to be clear, explicit, and continually reflected upon. At times, our theological basis for racial justice work tends to go back to the simplicity of love for one another and being made in the image of God. While this is true, additional and more complex concepts also need further reflection, including postcolonial theologies or decolonizing theologies.
- *A concrete strategy.* Recognizing that all parts of the church must be involved means that there are different parts of the church doing different parts of the work, and each

would have some level of responsibility for advancing anti-racism work, as well as monitoring and reporting the work being done.

***How might we do this?***

All parts of the church are invited to actively participate in the ongoing work of creating better places of belonging for people of all racial backgrounds, and in continuing the prayer “That All May Be One.” Anti-racism work asks people to deepen their understanding and awareness of racism, acknowledge the presence of systemic racism in church and society, and take tangible action to dismantle racism in all its forms.

Through the active involvement of people throughout the church, and with a concrete strategy in place, the United Church is determined to continue its unwavering commitment to becoming an anti-racist denomination.