



News Update

From my perspective...

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Those of you who have been following the stories in the media will know that First United has been the target of some fairly intense media coverage as information about six alleged sexual assaults in our building was made public. Let me say upfront that yes, there were sexual assaults that took place at First United. We knew about them. We reported them to the police. Our staff comforted and supported the women who had been victims. Let me also say that we are deeply unhappy when violence of any kind takes place in our building. There is no situation in which sexual assault is okay. Even one sexual assault is one too many. We have been working closely with the Vancouver Police Department, the City of Vancouver and BC Housing over these last three winters to improve the safety for everyone in our building.

Having said all of that, let me also say that this is a more complicated place to be than some people would like to acknowledge. Someone recently described First United as the “one place in town where triage doesn’t happen.” We have committed ourselves to standing with those who are among the most marginalized in this commu-

nity. In practical terms this means that we don’t turn anyone away no matter who they are or what they have done. We do not ban anyone knowing that if they are not welcome at First United, there is a good chance that they will not be welcome anywhere else in the Downtown Eastside. We welcome individuals who are among the most challenging to deal with in this neighbourhood. When we do welcome challenging people, sometimes the behaviour that happens on the streets crosses the threshold and comes into our building.



This is what we are committed to do. This is who we are committed to be. It is not a safe position to take in a world obsessed with liability and image production. It is not an easy place to be when you are trying to be faithful to the vision of

those who have gone before you in this place. Sometimes our reputation will take a painful hit. Hopefully though you will observe that our behaviour emerges from a place of deep integrity, compassionate action and lived faith. If you can name what you see and remind us who we are, you will give us strength and courage.

*Sandra Severs,
Deputy Executive Minister*

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A perspective from Atira Women's Resource Society

First United is indebted to Atira and the Executive Director, Janice Abbott for their support and encouragement during the past weeks. When the media publicised the alleged sexual assaults, Atira immediately offered to provide additional female staff for a number of days. At their own initiative Atira then provided First United with an independent assessment of the situation. They conducted interviews with female and male members of both the community and the staff. The assessment recorded positive and negative comments as well as suggestions that were made about areas for possible improvement. The Atira staff were able to assess and evaluate what measures had already been in place to better serve the needs of the First United community. On February 28th a member of the Atira team indicated in the report that "conditions at the First United Church have greatly improved since I worked here through a third party three years ago." She pointed out that "This population of disenfranchised people in such a small area will experience some conflict. Threatening to close or remove funding from the shelter will merely exacerbate this conflict." She pointed out that "staff have taken the reported sexual assaults seriously and implemented plans of action to improve the situation with available resources." An anonymous female community

member was quoted saying "Church fathers have no idea what the staff have to deal with – or what a good job of it they do." Among Atira's observations were that more resources should be directed towards staff remuneration and that an overlap of staff members is necessary to adequately pass on information to the next shift. Female community members asked that the women-only area should be extended and better secured although "as it stands now, it is not overly used." Other suggestions were the introduction of more books and activities, the acquisition of a community psychiatrist and more staff who will be able to intervene on behalf of women.

Mission Statement of Atira Women's Resource Society (<http://www.atira.bc.ca>)

"Atira Women's Resource Society is a community-based organization that supports all women, and their children, who are experiencing the impact of violence committed against them and/or their children.

Through education, advocacy and outreach, Atira is an active voice in the struggle to end violence against women and their children. Our feminist-based philosophy informs all our work with ourselves, each other and the community."

Some of my best memories did not happen there

Sandra Severs, Deputy Executive Minister, writes: A friend of mine whom I lost touch with for over twenty years reconnected with me recently via the internet. We were friends at seminary both of us coming from small town Ontario and going into ministry at the same time. John had had a difficult early life including a period of homelessness where he found himself in Vancouver and at 320 East Hastings. Here's what he says about his time at First United:

Wow, Downtown east side, First United (if I recall correctly it was a brand new building), some of my best memories did not happen there,

however it was a stop in my life's journey, you never know, some guy might just drop in for a meal and asking for a place to crash, some people there might even be nice to him, attitude and all, the guy might think maybe he's not such a loser after all and maybe think of going back to school and get a trade, might even like school and overdose on it and end up in university, even then working a job to help people because people helped him, might even start believing the message of that institution called the church, might even overdose on stuff there and get ordained, wow, downtown eastside, some of my best memories did not happen there.

Building our community one block at a time

Jenn Dame writes:

One sleepy winter evening Simon, a Host at First United Church, was working the late shift. A Lego fanatic himself, he decided to bring in his collection and see if it inspired any of our community members. It did more than just inspire people creatively, it brought people together to chat, share and build their dream homes. One com-

munity member named Kelly, coined the phrase “Lego Therapy”. In a place that can sometimes seem dark and hopeless, people are looking towards their futures and dreaming up the most beautiful homes. One block at a time. We look forward to expanding our Lego collection and welcome any donations for this invaluable program.



Yesterday Rain with her house, made from Lego blocks. The Lego Club welcomes the donation of unwanted Lego blocks.

A tote story

Amanda Trimble writes:

I received a call sometime ago from VGH and the triage nurse was trying to get a sense of who her unconscious “Jane Doe” was. The nurse described this person who had been brought to the hospital from the streets in an unconscious state with dangerously poor vital signs. She had no ID on her person, only my business card with a number written in big black felt across it. I looked in the storage database and was able to identify

her using the number written on the card as it was her cart number. Knowing she was in the hospital, I left a note for staff to not expect her to come in for a while. When she was released, she was delighted that her possessions were still there waiting for her—and that the storage facility had helped the hospital to get to know her name and identity.

Thank you for your donations to the Emergency Clothing Room and the Thrift Store. There is no more room! We can only accept spring & summer clothing that is less than 5 years old From the beginning of April Thank you for your support and understanding.



“It’s the next best thing to the hug that is really needed”

The First United Thrift Store is approaching its second anniversary this coming June. During that time, Store Manager Leona Bentz has streamlined the operation so that Downtown Eastside residents are able to find suitable, affordable clothing. “Since self-esteem and dignity are so often linked to how we look, we strive to provide clothing that is in good condition, the right size and style for those who shop here,” says Leona. “Unfortunately, a large amount of donated clothing is unsuitable because it is broken, soiled, stained and unwashed. It is extremely disheartening to hear the words ‘well, its good enough for them.’”

Leona points out that the Thrift Store customers are young in age and they like to dress casually (jeans, t-shirts, hoodies). “The average man is 45 years young, underweight and wears size 30-32 pants. Women range in age from 18-45, petite size 00-7/8”. She says that “when you are cold, drug sick, lonely and scared a current, pretty trendy hoody would be the next best thing to that hug that is really needed.”

Please donate clothing for older women to Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre @ 302 Columbia St. @ Cordova St. 604-681-8480. Kids clothes and toys please donate to @ 533 East Hastings St. 604-216-1650.

Sun Run Fundraiser for Health and Healing Programs

Are you looking for a good excuse to get out on the road and get healthy? How about running in this year's Sun Run on April 17th? Collecting pledges and raising funds is a really good way to get friends and family to cheer you on. Perhaps a 10km run may not be for you but sponsoring a runner/walker from the First United community is also a great way to support this initiative. The goal this year is to raise \$50,000 for Health and Healing programs at First United. "Run/Walk for the Homeless" will once again be part of the annual Vancouver Sun Run, on April 17th, Canada's biggest 10 km community run. This time, community members are being en-



couraged to participate and so partnerships have been set up with the Carnegie Center, the Vancouver Native Health Society, and Benji Chu from Run for Change to provide training clinics.

There are a number of ways you can be involved: Join our team (go to https://activenet1.ca/active.com/vancouver_sunrun) and collect pledges as a corporate team member, collect pledges as an individual runner or sponsor a member of our eastside community or donate online at www.firstunited.ca If you have a question please con-

tact Isabelle at (604) 681-8365 Ext 121 or ipec-queur@firstunited.ca.

Golf for a great cause

Mark your calendar for this year's Silver Wheaton Golf for the homeless community to be held on Monday May 30th at the University Golf Club.

The day begins with a 1pm Shotgun start (Texas Scramble). The dinner will be emceed by CBC's Rick Cluff. The cost will be \$200 per player which includes a bucket of practice balls, light lunch, pull cart, green fees, barbeque dinner and a tax receipt for \$60. There will also be a silent auction. Be sure to register early online at www.firstunited.ca for a great day of golf. Please contact Isabelle at (604) 681-8365 Ext 121.



Shoppers points working for First

First United Church would like to say a big Thank You to all who donated Shoppers points. With your points, we are able to purchase basic essentials such as first aid supplies, feminine hygiene products, lice shampoo, and toiletries. It is a huge help! Thank You. Points can always be donated through our website (click on Donate now and scroll down to Donate your Shoppers points) or by simply calling Isabelle at (604) 681-8365 Ext 121.

Spring cleaning your kitchen?

Mugs, bowls, forks and spoons are all needed in the First United kitchen. If you can help, please call April Pringle at 604.681.8365 ext 106.

Hockey for the Homeless" dedicated to ending homelessness, recently donated an amount of \$30,000 to First United for the purchase of a cargo van. Don Evans, Director of Finance explained, "For over a year there has been an urgent need for a reliable vehicle to pick up donations of essentials such as food, toiletries and clothing. We are indebted to Lucas Riedl and the Board for their generosity."