



# News Update

## The picnic and the door that could not be locked

*Rabbi David Mivasair reflects on the recent annual Community Picnic held at Deep Cove at the beginning of August:*

For me, the greatest thing was emptying the First United building, getting people out of the hot and crowded concrete and asphalt world of the DTES and into the gorgeous wide open space that surrounds us.

Cool green grass beneath our feet, blue sky above, lovely clean water sparkling below, forests and mountains all around, fresh air, sunshine – it’s a different world only a few kilometres away. So near and yet so far.

Many people at First United never go to Deep Cove, never have been there. One elderly man in the community has been here at First United and in this DTES neighbourhood for well more than 15 years – maybe many, many more. He was reluctant to go to the picnic, to go to an unknown place and to do he knew not what. I nearly kidnaped him – and he went.

Once we crossed the Second Narrows Bridge, he was in *terra incognita* – unknown territory. Never been there before. Never seen it. Ever. All along the way, every half kilometre or so, he kept exclaiming, “Oooooo, this is so beautiful! I love it here out in the countryside. It’s so clean, so big.” Even though the 211 bus to Deep Cove runs right past his place on Cordova Street and he can go for free any time with his bus pass, he’s never been there -- despite living here for decades.

When we first got to the picnic site, he was anxious to get back to the ‘hood, to the familiar. He asked me about four or five times if we could leave early and come back. Little by little, he relaxed. After an hour or two, he took off his shoes. After another hour or two, I saw him without a shirt. And then, he went down to the cool,

delicious water and waded in halfway up to his ankles. He told me later he hadn’t been in the sea for probably twenty years or more.

My greatest memory is of a very quiet native elder who is somewhat crippled and always a bit crumpled in a wheelchair finding himself being caringly wheeled down the grassy slope to the water’s edge by a couple of strong young guys. In the surf’s edge, they gently lifted him up and over the gunwales and set him down in the bow of a canoe. What a sight! What a great blessing! They paddled him out on the water all around Deep Cove and then brought him back, lifted him again into his chair and pushed him back up the hill.



George and Musie taking Eli for a ride in a canoe

One last story: The front door at First United hadn’t been locked for so very long that the latch slot was filled with dust and dirt and needed to be scraped out before we could even shut the door. May we all learn to live in a way that will bring on the day when public buildings made for us people to gather in all have rusty, dirt-filled locks from disuse.

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## An Inclusive, intentional community at the margins.....

*What does this even mean?*

**The First United School for Community Living**, starting this fall will be exploring "Community" from many different angles. It is hoped that participants will gain important insights and also be involved in building community by learning together.

First United will be presenting four semesters this fall and winter. Each of the semesters will address a different theme over a block of four consecutive Thursday evenings from 7pm to 9.30pm. Every semester will offer participants a weekly plenary session followed by a choice between 4 different electives, each addressing the semester theme. The electives include theological reflection, Bible study, practical skills development, and creative artistic expression. All are welcome. The semester themes this year will be:

**Belonging and Community**

October 20th—November 10th

**Embracing the Margins**

November 24th—December 15th

**An Intentional Community**

January 12th—February 2nd

**Radical Hospitality / Ubuntu**

February 16th—March 8th

For more information, contact Ying

at [ydwyer@firstunited.ca](mailto:ydwyer@firstunited.ca)

## Exploring Ubuntu at the Southern tip of Africa

A group of travelers will be making a journey to Southern Africa in April 2012 led by Ric and Nina Matthews. The trip is designed to be an encounter with the African concept of "Ubuntu." Ric Matthews, says, "We hope that the journey will help inform and add to the richness of our understanding and experience of Community at First United." The tour will encompass a number of different threads which will weave together a colourful and textured experience of "the Rainbow Nation." Places of scenic beauty and historical significance will be explored. Grass-roots community projects will

be visited and travelers will have the opportunity to experience the energy, creativity and resourcefulness of the people. "Homestays" have been included to afford travelers the experience of an ordinary South African household. The itinerary includes visits to wineries, a river cruise at sunset in a game park, barbeques under the African stars and a sunrise celebration on the beach on Easter Sunday.

Ric and Nina grew up in Apartheid South Africa and will delight in introducing travelers to the land of their birth and its people.

## "Home" to people who don't fit anywhere else

*Sandra Severs writes:* For the past two and a half years, First United has provided a Place of Refuge to over 300 people day and night. We are open 24/7, 365 days a year. Our numbers have remained consistent over this time as people have moved in from the alleys and the parks to take up residence not only in the winter but in the summer as well. Their presence in this building has enabled us to build relationships, to put names to faces, to stabilize health by providing three meals and a snack every day, to find housing for those who have wanted housing, to support and comfort and walk with individuals in their struggles with the mental health, hospital and correctional systems. Together we have become the community of First United Church.

In the best of all possible worlds, no one at First United would say that what exists here is an ideal living situation. It is, as Judy Graves, Coordinator of the City's Tenant Assistance Program, says a "housing disaster response." Despite that, this is a model of engagement that works. Despite the public's

concerns about safety, men and women come here and stay. They choose to sleep here rather than take their chances in the public parks. By welcoming those who are the most marginalized in this neighbourhood we have found a way to engage with those who are chronically homeless. We have been able to get the kind of mental health and physical care that many people need. We have been able to advocate for individuals who cannot advocate for themselves when they come in contact with the hospital or judicial systems. We believe that we have filled a need in this city that no one else is able or willing to fill. If there was another model working in the City that would welcome those who are not welcomed anywhere else, we would gladly close our doors at night. Unfortunately such a model does not exist. Until that time, we believe that there needs to be a space made on the City and the Province's housing continuum for Places of Refuge and for the kinds of people who call First United Church "home".



"Time for Spiritual Focus" held each day at 9am

Photo: Sarah Perrin

## Talking, praying and sharing together

*Rabbi David Mivasair writes:*

Each morning's "Time for Spiritual Focus" brings its own gifts.

This morning was beautiful... James, an evangelical Christian from Canada who is a very regular participant sat next to The Duc, a Chinese man who fled from Vietnam for his very life as a boat person refugee some 30+ years ago and has been a Christian preacher and across from Omar from El Salvador, Nasim from Mo-

rocco, who was fasting all day long for Ramadan, and me, a religious Jew. We're all sitting under the vital image of the spirituality of the people who preceded us in this land and talking together about Psalms, praise, the Koran, prophecy and so much more. As rich and deep as the content was, more significant is simply that we were there talking, praying and sharing together.

## From my perspective

*Rev. Sandra Severs writes:*

It is hard to know these days what kind of spiritual/religious/institutional forms are needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The familiar structure of the denomination, anchored as it is in congregational membership, no longer seems to be working for many people. Our membership numbers show steady decline despite our best efforts. For ministers like me, trained to serve in this model, this is a very unsettling time. We remain committed to the ethos and theological diversity of The United Church of Canada. Yet we sense that the model is seriously damaged and we don't know how to fix it. We know that this is a time for change but we are unsure what that change should look like.

Perhaps the way forward for us is through experimentation. Perhaps it is a time to risk making a mistake. Succeed or fail, the opportunities for learning are all around us! Barbara Brown Taylor points us in this direction:

*"Wisdom is not gained by **knowing** what is right. Wisdom is gained by **practicing** what is*

*right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds and when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice will teach them what they need to know. If you are not sure what to think about washing feet, for instance, then the best way to find out is to practice washing a pair or two."*

These past months Ric and I have focused on a need for change in our governance. We have been trying to imagine a way of being a church that is responsive to the particular challenges of the community that we serve. Because there are no models in our denomination that meet our need, we have looked at what is currently in place and, after careful consideration and much thought, proposed a hybrid model of governance which combines the best of the congregational and community ministry models. What we have proposed is not simple or tidy. It is foolish, risky business.

But then so too is the dream of the Kingdom of God.

## Hope—is that a four letter word?

*Stephen Gray writes:*

I have been reading "The Way of Jesus Christ" by Jürgen Moltmann and in this morning's section he was discussing the passion of Jesus. He distinguishes between the passive passion of his suffering and death, and the active passion of his ministry with the poor, vulnerable and outcasts, which is also about suffering, but it is also about embracing the intensity of that suffering as what makes us truly human and alive. That is a hard message for me when so much of what the dream for life in the modern age is comfort and ease and lack of pain and suffering. Except it is not perhaps even a dream for many of the people who we are in relationship with in this community and thus by that very fact how can it be my dream.

As I was leaving the building two nights ago there was a man of about my age sitting on the Gore Street steps who had the brightest shiniest green eyes. We exchanged some pleasantries and he asked me to sit down with him

which I did. In the course of the conversation I asked him what his short term hopes were. He scoffed and laughed and said "Hope - is that a four-letter word?" We talked a bit more and he ended with, "I'm done, man, I'm really done, I'm done." Then he thanked me for the conversation and we parted. His green eyes were still shining though, and I guess his eyes were what made me think of hope. But I realized that my question to him had come from the place of the modern dream for life which he no longer, if he ever did, shares. But in embracing the intensity of his suffering, at least for a moment, which possibly in less intense or different ways is my own as well, I imagine I was more truly alive. At least I hope so. And in expressing his suffering to me perhaps he was too.

I think what we are feeling these days is the active passion about which Moltmann speaks. It is obviously not pleasant or comfortable, but I have to keep reminding myself it is what we are here for.

**Mark your calendar**  
**Welsh Men's Choir and**  
**Trelawny Male Choir (Cornwall**  
**UK) sing at St Andrews Wesley**  
**United Church**  
**September 27th at 7:30pm**  
**A fundraiser for First United**  
**Tickets available at your local**  
**United Church or at First United**



The Community Picnic at Deep Cove on August 4th was made possible by the Mount Seymour United Church Congregation and organized by First United Community Worker Carrie Belanger and Summer Intern Students, Christy Lew and Sivan Havusha. Sincere thanks to all involved in making this a memorable community event.

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## First United's Strathcona United Football Club

Strathcona United FC is back at it again for another season of men's Metro Vancouver soccer. This will be the third season that First United has put a team on the field. In each year First United has given over 20 men with diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, a chance to come together over soccer. This season the team looks stronger than ever with over 25 players, representing 5 continents! Some of the players work at First United, and a few of the players live there.

Each season has been an opportunity for players to stand in solidarity with those they would otherwise

hold no community with. The players find community and friendship, while developing life skills such as teamwork, commitment, responsibility, respect, and integrity. The team moved up 5 places in the standing last year. Michael Politano Bowles, Manager/Coach says, "This year we are excited to live into the possibilities that are in front of us. Perhaps you might even enjoy coming out to watch a couple of our games this year!"

*You can follow the team by 'liking' us on Facebook. Search: Strathcona United FC.*



### Thrift Store is gearing up for winter....

As we begin preparing for colder weather generous supporters begin knitting scarves, touques, hats and gloves. These are greatly appreciated by community members who receive them. Just in case you are wondering what colours to make them, here is some information passed on by the Thrift Store and based on the experience over the past two years. Men prefer one-tone garments in darker colours such as black, gray, dark blue, dark green and burgundy. Women also like one-tone colours usually but choose baby-pink, baby-blue, white, red, magenta.

We have exhausted our supply of socks and these are needed urgently for the daily foot care program. Towels are also in constant demand as are jeans, hoodies and runners.

Please call the Thrift Store at 604-569-1117 to arrange drop-off times. The address is 340 East Hastings Street.

## Making a difference.....

Danielle Xu of Richmond BC received a Pepsi Refresh grant for \$5,000 to go towards assisting DTES folks with transportation. She donated 114 books of bus tickets (total value \$2488.50) to First United for use by the Community. This generous gift enables Community workers to hand out tickets to those in need of a bus ride.

Eight-year-old Leo Harper, an enterprising young man, sold rocks from his garden to friends and neighbours and raised \$34. Thank you Leo for your wonderful thoughtfulness.

Save-On Foods (Park and Tilford in North Vancouver) have been donating large quantities of baked goods since February 2010. Thank you to Store Manager, Ron Ballendine and Bakery Manager, Mike McColl.

Thanks also go to Barb McKenzie and other dedicated helpers collecting the goods so regularly and bringing them to First United.

Thanks to your response to an Appeal that was sent in April this year asking for donations to enable much-needed upgrades in the kitchen we are able to report that we are able to move ahead with the upgrades. A sincere thank you for your donations.

A Mental Health Specialist position has been funded at First United thanks to generous grants from the Heiros Foundation and the Canada Post Foundation. This position is important to be able to help address the needs of a large numbers of community members who have challenges in this area.

## Camp Fircom stands ready to welcome you....

Camp Fircom is open again and running at full speed. After a 7.5 million dollar renovation, there were four summer camp sessions during 2011 and each was heaps of fun. Campers enjoyed costumed dances, paddle trips, exploring the bay, and planting seeds in the new farm. There were conversations about life, God, and everything in between. Children and adults alike arrived excited beyond belief and went home happy and full of new memories from their time together.

Come out and join us this fall! Fircom is planning a Thanksgiving Weekend with lots of optional programming, activities, and time for reflection. Go to [www.campfircom.bc.ca](http://www.campfircom.bc.ca) for more information. Camp Fircom was started by First United Church in 1923.

