



First Things First

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Electronic News Updates
are published monthly.

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Signs of Hope along the way

This Fall's newsletter with its mail-out to about 5000 people provides a good opportunity for us to pause, and reflect. Looking back over 126 years in the Downtown Eastside, we give thanks for those who have worked here and shaped the ministry of First United over the years. We also give thanks for the amazing and generous support of those who enable the staff and community of First United to do their work, those who have embraced the vision of First United Church and have committed their financial resources and time to serving the needs of this Downtown Eastside community. We give thanks to those who have entrusted us with the ministry of this place and have charged us with the task of leadership. We take that responsibility very seriously and work hard to be faithful to the challenge given to us.

During these past four years, First United has been on a journey of self-discovery as it has worked to redefine its role in the neighbourhood in response to changing needs in the Downtown Eastside and in light of new thinking about what it means to be a church. Phyllis Tickle calls this time of change in religious organizations "the Great Emergence" and although First United does not appear to operate like other churches, we have not been immune to the changes or the lessons to be learned in this time period. We

don't yet know what shape faith communities will take in the future. We only know that there is a movement larger than any individual community that is shaping us all.

In our own discernment of what kind of church First United should be going forward we find the clearest description of our purpose in the statement that we are called to be "**an intentional, inclusive community at the margins.**" In a time of transition, that statement is both a description of what is here in the present and also a vision for the future. It both **is** and **is not** a reality at the same time. Some days we catch glimpses of its fulfillment in the life we share together and we feel a sense of the Spirit at work in our midst. On other days, we despair at how far we have to go.

This newsletter holds up some of the stories and signs of hope that keep us working toward that vision. We have divided them into four themes: Belonging and Community, Embracing the Margins, Intentional and Inclusive, and Radical Hospitality. We have gathered some stories that we think point us in the direction of each of these themes. We offer them to you in a spirit of Thanksgiving for the wonderful gift of life in all of its complexity that together we share.

Talking, praying and sharing together

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 Morocco, 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. *Rabbi David Mivasair*



A glimpse of Grace on East Hastings

Some weeks ago, a member of our community was hurt outside the building. He had accidentally wandered off the sidewalk and stepped out into the path of an oncoming truck. As we waited for the ambulance to take him away, the elderly couple who had hit him stood beside their truck looking shaken. Two women from our community, both of them damaged by addiction and years of living on the street, went up to the woman and talked to her. And then each of the women hugged her and told her that it wasn't her fault. That it had been an accident....A moment of grace on East Hastings.

The community member is going to be fine. He had a big bump on his head and a broken arm but nothing more serious than that. One of our staff contacted the couple from Surrey who were in the truck the next day to let them know that everything was going to be okay. Elsie, the wife of the man driving, said that she was touched by the kindness of those who came up to her, hugged her and reassured her that it wasn't their fault. She said, "I used to be uncomfortable, even afraid, when we drove through this neighbourhood. After this incident, I don't think I'm ever going to feel that way again."

Spreading our wings....

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 kidnapped 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

Sandra Severs posted these comments on her Facebook page the day after the incident. As I remember yesterday's incident outside of First United, I am humbled by the example of radical hospitality offered by women in our community to the woman in the truck. They were able to put themselves in the shoes of the "other" and imagine what it would be like to live with the memories of the accident. They knew something of the sense of guilt that comes even when one is not at fault and they offered the gift of forgiveness. They knew that sometimes when things are really bad, the physical touch of another through a hug helps us feel like we are not alone in our struggle. They offered their hospitality to the stranger in our midst and through their act of generosity they created an experience of community that broke through the barriers of prosperity. Through their witness, being a "church" became more than being an institution. It became the living, breathing presence of the Spirit among us.



George and Musie taking Eli for a ride in a canoe

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.

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.

A question of safety

The question of safety is always a question that is at the forefront in the minds of those of us who work and participate in the life of the community at 320 East Hastings. We want this place to be safe for everyone – for those who use this place as a daily drop-in, for those who sleep here nightly, for those who participate in programs from other neighbourhoods, for those who come as practicum students to learn and share, for those of us who are staff and who are in this building daily. We want this place to be safe.

The question of whether First United is “safe” is a complicated question to answer. Although it seems very straightforward on the surface, the question itself carries many layers of meaning. It cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” We all live with a certain amount of risk in our lives in order to enjoy our lives to the fullest. That risk is calculated risk and we all do our best to minimize the amount of risk we encounter. When I drive my car, I trust that the guys in my local garage have done all of the safety inspections that are necessary. They’ve checked my brakes and my tires. My car passes all of the safety regulations put in place by the province. I am a competent driver. I don’t drive if I’ve consumed alcohol. I drive my SMART car cautiously (especially when I go past a BIG truck) and I don’t venture out in horrendous weather.

And yet bad things happen. We know that people die in car accidents. Despite our best precautions, situations happen that are beyond a person’s control and the consequences are tragic for all. I suppose that if one was making a choice between walking and driving a car one might logically surmise that overall one is safer if one walks. That doesn’t stop us from owning, riding or driving cars. We all live with a certain amount of risk, an amount that we deem appropriate, in order to take advantage of the benefits of car riding, to achieve our goals and to live our lives to the fullest.

Working with those who have been chronically homeless and who are struggling with physical and mental health issues carries with it a certain amount of risk. We know that First United is not a risk free environment. But like my image of a car, we have worked carefully to put in place the correct policies and procedures to minimize that risk and to help people be safe. We have committed significant financial resources to

increase the number of staff who are on the floor at any one time.

Despite our very best efforts we have had violence in our building. It is the hard reality of this neighbourhood and those with whom we are in community. The chaos of personal lives spills over into relationships with other people and sometimes conflict erupts or those more vulnerable are taken advantage of. When incidents occur, we take it very seriously because violence between people violates the very goal of building community to which we remain committed. Our staff respond to provide care and incidents are reported to the police.

We have had many individuals and groups tell us that the solution to the problem of violence is to ban those who exhibit such behaviour. We refuse to ban because banning doesn’t work. It is a band-aid solution that absolves an organization of liability but it doesn’t do anything to solve the deeper underlying problems of what to do with the really difficult, damaged people who are known by every organization in this neighbourhood. In our case, it simply displaces the problem from inside the building to outside of it. Rather than being a step forward in making the neighbourhood safer for everyone, it is a step backwards. It breaks the fragile bonds that our staff have established with those who are problematic making it impossible for us to develop the kind of interventions needed to help those who are most troubled. We cannot get alongside people when we don’t know where they are. You can’t build trust if you’re not willing to meet a person’s basic needs for food, shelter and companionship. From our perspective, it is better for us to engage those individuals under close supervision in restricted areas within our building than to have them wander the streets disconnected from healthy human community.

The measures of success are often difficult to see. They don’t show up in the reports issued by agencies or governments. Sometimes they are encapsulated in a small story told in passing by a community worker who has a conversation with someone who has not spoken to another living soul in a year. While the stars in the heavens might not have realigned themselves or the heavenly choruses offered a resounding “hallelujah!” each tiny step towards health and wholeness is celebrated. For those of us who work at First, these tiny steps are enough. They are more than enough. *Sandra Severs*

A moment of community was created....

Last night I was standing on the steps on the Gore Ave side of our building waiting to let someone into the building for a meeting. While I was waiting, I noticed a young black man sitting on the step. Another man was standing on the sidewalk near him. When the young man asked to share the other man's cigarette, he received an emphatic no and the man he asked walked away. After a few minutes, an older aboriginal woman walked by. Passing the young man, she stopped and asked him how he was doing.

As she was getting ready to move on, she looked at him and said, "Do you need a cigarette?" He hesitated and then said yes. She pulled a pack out of her backpack and I could see that there were three cigarettes remaining. She gave him two of them.

In that act of generosity, a moment of community was created in need and racial differences did not matter. *Sandra Severs*



Saying Goodbye at First

A few weeks ago we had a memorial service at First United for Dexter Miller. Dexter, who was black, was known to all of us who worked, hung out and lived in this place. When we opened overnight 3 winters ago Dexter lived here. Because he was kind of scary and familiar with the street, but also emotionally pretty solid considering where he came from, we hired Dexter that first winter to work security for us. He could scare the crap out of just about anyone and he did.

Over time, Dexter's life became more stable. He had some serious health issues because of addiction but he managed to get them under control when he realized that without a change, his life would be short. He found housing in Surrey but he came back here regularly to eat his meals and to hang out. We hired him to work part-time doing security in our housing buildings and he kept things under control. Those who dealt drugs in the neighbourhood knew that he was not a man that you wanted to mess with.

A long history of hard living caught up with Dexter land after a long stay in hospital and a short return at home, he died. On paper, the cause was probably something like pneumonia but the real cause was a tired old body. Chronologically I don't know whether he had reached the age of 50 but his body was much older than that.

A memorial service at First United is an amazing event to participate in. It is held in the gym, in the area where we eat. Ajai, our Hindu priest/head of janitorial services, had placed candles on all of the tables and flowers at the front in addition to a

photo of Dexter. The big screen had a picture of Dexter, larger than life.

Ric wore his black Geneva gown from his white South African Methodist roots together with a prayer shawl given to him by his daughter-in-law's Jewish parents. He chose his words very carefully being as inclusive as he could in his language about God/ the Divine/that which is Sacred. Rabbi David Mivisair, our chaplain, spoke about Dexter, sharing from David's tradition. We played two of Dexter's favourite songs – "There'll Be Peace in the Valley" – an old gospel standard sung by Elvis and "Red, Red Wine" sung by Neil Diamond. Ric shared the 23rd Psalm and prayers.

And then members of Dexter's family and the community spoke. There were words from those who were white, from those who were black. Stories were told by those who were First Nations. Kind words were spoken by a Chinese Peruvian resident of housing. Mike, who had worked with Dexter and is Inuit spoke, and then sang a song from his tradition. Together we shared stories, laughter and tears, heard scripture read, listened to music and honoured the life and contribution of Dexter. At the conclusion people greeted Dexter's brother, welcomed him fully into the First United community and then we shared food.

Looking around I was struck by how we had managed to be intercultural without really trying. Need and love for Dexter had brought us together.

Sandra Severs

Shaped and driven by the call of the Gospel

In the light of recent media reports questioning the hiring policies of First United we encourage you to read the statement on our website (at www.firstunited.ca). There is understandably, but unfortunately, a very strong systemic push for us to conform to the standard practices for formal shelters and outreach agencies. We remain deeply committed to respect for the law and for statutory requirements, but the real issue is not about that. It is a reflection of the regrettable stuckness and the paralysing politics of the Downtown Eastside. This intense drive for conformity seems to miss the points that we are not a shelter that ensures the wellbeing of the majority by excluding the few who threaten that, but a Church committed to caring for "the few" who are

excluded elsewhere. It overlooks the fact that the need is not simply for more "services" for "clients", but for *community* in which *members* find belonging and self worth. It ignores the fact that simply doing more of what we have done for the past decade will not address the massive challenges that we still face despite all that effort. **It misses the point that we are shaped and driven by the call of the Gospel and not by what serves us best in the competition for funding.** First United Church will continue to do all we can to maintain constructive and respectful relationships with other agencies and departments – and we will do all we can to remain true to the legacy built so carefully over the past 126 years. *Ric Matthews*

*Tickets are on sale now for the third Annual
"Sacred Music of Duke Ellington" Concert
November 18th at 8pm at St Andrews Wesley United Church
Purchase tickets online at www.firstunited.ca*

*Featuring Dee Daniels, Marcus Mosely, Fred Stride Orchestra, Sacred Music Gospel Choir
the Sojourners and tap dancer, Alex Dugdale*

All proceeds from ticket sales will be used to support programmes at First United Church

