



# News Update

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## A right to come in out of the cold?

With winter on the horizon, the conversation about whether or not there are enough shelter beds to keep everyone safe from hypothermia has a renewed urgency to it. Moderate temperatures continue to provide us with wiggle room so discussions have not reached the level of intensity that they undoubtedly will when the snow begins to fall. The province claims that 300 new units of supportive housing coming on-stream will meet the demand and the 160 winter response shelter beds will not be needed. A city report states that only 37 percent of people going into those units were previously homeless and pressures the province for additional shelter beds.



At First United, BC Housing and Carnegie Outreach Team have placed over 100 people in supportive SRO's and social housing. And yet our nightly count of people sleeping in the refuge continues to hover around 240. Where are the people coming from? Are they all homeless? Are some of them inadequately housed and see us as a better alternative? Fire and building inspectors worry about safety and increase the number of inspections in

our building. Others think we are housing people who have housing elsewhere. The police want us to ban people who are problematic. The pressure to conform is intense.

Through it all we have continued to ask the question about what it means to walk with those who are among the most marginalized in this city. Our experience argues that there exists a small group of people for whom no suitable housing is available. Our refuge is all that exists between them and the street. Many in this group have been severely traumatized and lack life-skills. They have untreated mental health and addictions issues. When they act out in inappropriate ways they are

cycled through the criminal justice system. They either cannot sustain housing or they are so difficult to manage no one is willing to house them.

Do we as a society have a moral responsibility to ensure that every person, no matter how disruptive or challenging their behaviour, has a place to come in out of the cold? A place to belong? For those of us who work at First United, our response is a resounding yes.

*From My Perspective  
Sandra Severs*

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## Setting the record straight

After months of remaining quiet in the hopes that we would not need to further erode relationships in the DTES and undermine the good work of many organizations in this community, we feel that it is important to lay to rest rumours and outright lies we have been hearing about First United. It pains us that our commitment to this neighbourhood is being questioned by individuals and organizations that we would have once viewed as allies.

### Facts:

**First United is a church not a social agency.** In keeping with the challenge of the DTES for First United to remain a church, we are living out our prophetic understanding of what it means to be a church. While some in the DTES and in government agencies would like us to function like a social agency, we are clear that that is not who we are. We are not inviting anyone else to live out our understanding of church. What we do expect in return is some measure of understanding about who we are and that our vision is anchored in a radical commitment to be with those in this neighbourhood who are most marginalized.

**First United is not running a shelter.** We have been clear since the day we opened overnight that we were not running a shelter. We are running a refuge. Unlike the shelter system, we have an open-door policy so that people are able to come and go whenever they want. We know from experience that there are people in this neighbourhood who are not able to cope with the demands of the shelter system and if pressured to conform, will choose to sleep outdoors. We are committed to those who are among the most marginalized in this community. Our staff are well trained to deal with the challenging behaviours that present when people who are difficult come into our building. We have had a strong relationship with VPD over these last four winters.

**First United has not been and is not insensitive to the needs of women.** First United has had a women's only area since we first opened. We also have an area for couples. Our women's area is staffed by women 24/7. We have processes and procedures to deal with accusations of abuse. We have worked with VPD to assess the inadequacies of our building. We have done additional non-violent crisis intervention training with the Elizabeth Fry Society. We have expanded our women's only area. BC Housing has recently completed the installation of 32 security cameras in our building. We have continued to welcome VPD to walk through our building. We made requests for additional funding to BC Housing last Fall when our own staff expressed concern about possible issues of safety. With the help of other churches, we sup-

port far more people than are funded by the government. **First United has made attempts to reach out to the Coalition to no avail.** The contact that we have had with the Women's Coalition has been rude and dismissive on their part. We have been verbally abused on the telephone and been shouted down so that there is no room for conversation. We have attempted to engage in respectful dialogue about our shared concern for the situation of women in the DTES and have expressed interest all along in working together with the Women's Coalition to make First United safer. We have received no expression of interest on their part to do anything more than chastise us publicly. Standing on our steps and shouting lies about us, as happened during a march recently, was totally disrespectful. We would not engage in such behaviour toward anyone else. We would hope for the same degree of respect.

**First United staff have not, under any circumstances, blamed women for their victimization.** If we are guilty of anything, it is of trying to explain a complex situation instead of using a sound bite. Deliberately distorted media reporting has damaged our reputation. Our staff have appeared before Mayor and Council to offer the support of First United to a women's only shelter. We have protocols and procedures in place to make staff aware of the presence of sexual predators and all threats are reported immediately to VPD. We are home to many women who have been banned from using the services of other DTES women's organizations.

**BC Housing has not withdrawn funding because of safety issues.** BC Housing, after months of pleading, increased our funding over the summer months because we could not safely operate First United on one-third the rate that other shelter providers enjoyed from BC Housing. We spent \$400,000 of our reserve funds and were down to the last pay period before we would have been forced to cut staff and close the overnight refuge. We have negotiated funding until the end of March 2012 (decreasing after Dec 31). BC Housing has returned money to our reserve funds.

**First United is very careful about its choice of employees.** While First United does criminal records checks on all of our employees, we have never made the existence of a criminal record a reason not to employ someone. Given our location in the DTES and the fact that many people have had experiences with the criminal justice system, we remain committed, where appropriate, to hire individuals from the neighbourhood. We assess each individual on their ability to do the job. We also assess individuals on the risk they pose to vulnerable people. We remain committed to being a safe place for everyone. *Sandra Severs*

## A story of three portraits

The first week we started the ReVision Project of Christmas portraits at First United I met Tessa. It was 2008 and she was living on the street trying desperately to deal with the death of her father, just a year before.

Tessa sat with me, and told me a love story about how she and her father had moved from place to place (she was an army brat) and how deeply he cared for her and how fresh the sorrow was around his death. I asked her if, even though these were supposed to be Christmas photos, I could take a portrait of her weeping for her Dad. That day we shared something very special.

A year and a half later I again had a camera in my hands in front of Tessa.

I was at Fir Square at Women's' Hospital. Fir Square is the only program of its kind in the country. Addicted moms can live in the unit in the months leading up to the birth of their child. It's an amazing, supportive and loving place. Tessa had just given birth to a beautiful boy and I was tak-

ing portraits of the new family. Many of the moms and babies don't go home together but Tessa, her partner and their little boy, Josh, were heading out the door together.

Last Sunday I met Tessa again. This time for more family portraits. Josh is now 18 months old and a real handful. Mom, dad and baby have a little apartment away from the Downtown Eastside. They struggle daily, as all families do, but the joy that came to me from the three of them was almost overwhelming. A third portrait was shot as we tried to corral Josh for just a moment.

First United is only a small part of Tessa's story, but I know that three years ago having someone listen and value her story and life made a difference.

We start shooting this year's Christmas portraits at the end of November.

*Noel MacDonald*



Noel MacDonald taking portraits at Christmas time

## I walked into a family

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dawn Badiuk and I was fortunate enough to become part of the First United Church team. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I am re-locating to Victoria and this means I must resign from my position as Host Supervisor.

Before I go, I feel it is important to write candidly about First United Church. I first entered the Church over four years ago. I was working at what was supposed to be a minimal barrier organization and I assure you, it was everything but minimal barrier. This organization held the contract at First United and we were responsible for staffing First United when it first opened its doors and became an emergency refuge. The church accommodated anyone who wanted to come inside from the elements and attempt getting some sleep in a safe environment.

I accepted a shift at First United and it was clear after my arrival that I most likely would not return. Along with me and three other staff from my organization, were a couple of volunteers from the church to ensure everything went smooth. What was supposed to run smooth, I do not know. People were sleeping all over the pews, on the floors; anywhere there was a flat surface and it didn't matter what your gender was, men and women were everywhere. After a short time had passed in my shift, I realized that there were a large percentage of familiar

faces. These familiar faces were those belonging to the people that my minimal barrier organization had barred! There were personality clashes amongst the First United staff and the staff from my organization. Clearly, First United had no idea what it was doing and I comforted myself by believing it would be shut down in three months. I left my shift early, just walked out and never looked back. From that day on, I sent those I had to remove from my organization to First United as a form of punishment. "You can't behave here, you can go there!" Little did I know, I was sending them to the land of respect,...of caring and understanding. I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time almost five years later and was offered the opportunity to supervise at First United Church. I was sceptical and I was arrogant, but I was at least intelligent enough to check it out.

I walked into a family. I walked into a church with beds enough to hold 240 destitute individuals who had been treated unfairly and turned away from everywhere else.... First United has grown leaps and bounds and during their growth, always held on tightly to the mission that they believe in! They never faltered or strayed from their mission because what First United achieves proves to be honest and unique and it DOES work! *Dawn Badiuk Sept 29, 2011*

*"I encourage anyone who does not have the knowledge about First United to come check it out and make a personal judgment. Trust me it will be the best experience you have given yourself in a long time!"*  
*Dawn Badiuk*

## Mission Congregation to hold the vision and values of First United

By an action of Vancouver-Burrard Presbytery at its September 28<sup>th</sup> meeting, First United Church Mission is working to create two entities under the umbrella of its core identity as a church of The United Church of Canada. First United will create a mission congregation which will hold the vision, values and theological lens of the Christian faith and specifically that identity as a church which is uniquely part of The United Church of Canada. First United will also be setting up an incorporated society in conjunction with BC Conference which

will provide direction for the operations of the church. The incorporated society's mandate will be to fulfill the articulated vision of the mission congregation. Together the two entities and all of the individuals, both in the DTES and surrounding neighbourhoods who participate in the life of this place will make up this wonderful place known as First United Church. While outside of the norm, this complicated hybrid will help us fulfill our vision of being a gospel community at the margins.

## Men's Choirs raise funds for Fircom Farm Project

The Vancouver Welsh Men's Choir and the visiting Trelawny Male Choir from Cornwall, UK sang to a capacity audience at St Andrew's Wesley in a Benefit Concert raising funds for the Fircom Farm Project at First United recently. The audience was treated to uplifting music and songs from Canada, Cornwall and beyond culminating in a few inspiring numbers by both choirs singing together. An amount of \$8422 was raised by both choirs.

First United and Camp Fircom on Gambier Island are collaborating to enable groups of community members from the DTES to visit the camp to establish a vegetable garden that will provide produce for the First United meal programme. Initially groups of community members together with community workers and volunteers will travel to Gambier early in the morning, work alongside Camp Fircom staff for the day and then travel back in the afternoon. The hope is to lengthen the trips to include overnight stays

on the island. Camp Fircom staff will provide guidance on soil preparation, and the planting and maintaining of vegetable gardens. The growers will bring the produce back for use by the First United community. "We are grateful for the opportunity to enable folk to reconnect with the earth and experience the healing aspects of a short respite at Camp Fircom," said Ric Matthews, executive minister of First United. The project is planned to begin in January 2012.



Bob Burrows receiving a cheque from Bud Phillips and Welsh Men's Choir on behalf of First United

## Share your voice

In recent months First United has been the focus of much media attention. We appreciate those who have asked us to explain our perspective and given us the opportunity to set the record straight. We welcome any individuals or groups who wish to visit and see for themselves what is going on. Writing letters is a powerful way to express your opinion on the issues of homelessness and the marginalized members of our community. If you see any arti-

cles covering homelessness, poverty issues or the down-trodden of our society, we encourage you get in touch with the newspaper it ran in.

Vancouver Sun: [sunletters@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:sunletters@vancouver.sun.com)

Vancouver Province : [provletters@theprovince.com](mailto:provletters@theprovince.com)

Vancouver Courier : [blink@vancourier.com](mailto:blink@vancourier.com) We ask that any letters to the editor be cc'ed to Nina Matthews so we know to look for them [nmatthews@firstunited.ca](mailto:nmatthews@firstunited.ca).



**Don't be disappointed—be sure to get your tickets for the third Annual**

**"Sacred Music of Duke Ellington" Concert**

**November 18th at 8pm at St Andrews Wesley United Church (Nelson @ Burrard)**

**Purchase tickets online at [www.firstunited.ca](http://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**