



Our vision is a neighbourhood where everyone's worth is celebrated, and all people thrive.



OUR STORY

The *First United Church Community Ministry Society*, more commonly known as First United, is an inner-city ministry of the United Church of Canada.

We have been operating in the **Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver** for over 130 years, primarily serving a community of adults with complex needs.

Our doors are open to our neighbourhood as a place to find sanctuary and connection, and our commitment to the struggle for social justice includes being an advocate for social change and providing programs of support, housing and healing.

First United strives to be a place where those who are most vulnerable can feel safe.



Since it was founded as First Presbyterian more than a century ago, First United has always been a presence of ministry in Vancouver that represents the efforts, care, ministry and mission of the wider church community.

Donations and grants from the wider church and region, and a variety of paid staff and volunteer efforts have ensured that ministry continues in this historic place.

More recently, we have begun to see an increase in congregational support, and more a intentional commitment to taking ownership of the fact that this is a Mission of the United Church of Canada.

It is our hope that, in embracing our role as a Mission of the church, congregations and individuals will support a campaign to build the new First United, and continue to support our daily operations with multi-year pledges that would help give us more certainty in knowing what to expect.

The Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne
—Executive Director



“FIRST” IS THE STORY OF FIRST UNITED

Historically, as a church, First United pre-dates the city itself.

In 1885, a year before the formation of the City of Vancouver, the Presbyterian Church in Canada established a congregation near the harbor and called it First Presbyterian Church. In 1892, having outgrown its original site, First United moved to its current address at 320 E. Hastings.

In 1925, as part of the establishment of the United Church of Canada, First Presbyterian became First United Church. During the Great Depression, it served as the major support hub for the city, feeding a nourishing meal every day to more than 1,200 people in 1931–32.

As one of the first organizations to advocate for those seeking housing, health or social services, First United developed and expanded the vital outreach efforts that continue to this day in the downtown eastside of the city.

The 21st century brought rapid growth in the need for community programs, while at the same time the church was facing the reality of years of declining congregation numbers. In 2007, the decision was made to fold the congregation and focus efforts on outreach services as a professional social service ministry of the United Church of Canada. It was incorporated as a society in 2013.

RESPONDING TO THE NEED

Responding to the city's need, First United established its **low-barrier shelter** in 2008 as it transitioned to using the church building for new initiatives. While initially supporting literally hundreds of people in need every night, regulations now limit capacity to a 60-bed emergency shelter that provides 40 male-gendered and 20 female-gendered beds.

In addition, through the First United Church Social Housing Society, First United manages the operation of 189 units of social housing in three other buildings in the area.

Core community services at First United include a **Meal Program** that provides over 3,300 nutritious

meals each week to shelter residents and community members, **day-time programs**, groups for women and seniors, social activities, and **health and hygiene services** that include hot showers, toiletries, emergency clothing and foot soaks.

The **Keep Connected** initiative provides a mailing address for over 400 people and free telephone access, and the **Tax Program** has filed some 4,000 free tax returns for low-income earners in the past twelve months. This is a vitally important program, as tax returns must be filed to qualify for income assistance and disability benefits.

Social justice and **new advocacy** initiatives have actually been part

of First United for half a century. The **Legal Advocacy Program** begun in the 1970s now provides legal advocacy for 3,000 or more low income people annually who need assistance with income security and tenancy, family law, debt collection, identification and disability benefits.

While no longer a traditional church centered around worship, **Spiritual Care** is still at the core of our mission. Our Community Ministry offers spiritual care through small group gatherings, ongoing pastoral care and memorial services. Our programs are available to all people from all religious backgrounds and people of no faith.

THE CHALLENGE

Responding to the changing needs of the community around it has resulted in what's often described as a "major mission overhaul every decade" at First United.

What has not changed is the physical environment in which staff and volunteers work to serve the many diverse and complex needs of the downtown eastside population.

Built as a church, the aging building at 320 East Hastings is more than just outdated—it hasn't really been suitable to the services it has provided since the congregation closed, and has reached a point where it is both costly and difficult to continue operations that support strategic priorities and a safe environment.

Faced with the reality that even more and better support is needed in the DTES, it's become impossible for First United to meet this need. **The only realistic option is a new building that would preserve First United as a community asset.**



THE PROPOSAL

The proposal under development is to construct a multi-storey building with the first four floors dedicated to the new First United, and upwards of 100 units of affordable rental housing on several floors above.

The First United Component

In a facility designed to truly meet the needs of the community it serves, First United can expand existing programs and develop new, innovative approaches to meeting the diverse needs of a community that continues to be in crisis.

Given the Vancouver housing market, unemployment and the financial impact of Covid-19, I would be shocked if homelessness doesn't double in the next 12 months.

—Carmen Lansdowne [First United]

From the existing 17,000 square feet of program space, the new First United would provide nearly 50,000 square feet – almost triple the existing capacity – for existing programs to be expanded and new programs and volunteer opportunities developed.

Nourishment is essential to life, which is why a new dining hall and commercial kitchen would take up the majority of space on the ground floor. The plan is having the capacity to serve at least 100,000 community meals annually, in addition to providing food services for the hundreds of residents in the housing component above.

The new First United would also have the potential to become a hub for relevant education and research activities focused on various social challenges.

With over 20 practicum students already involved in First United operations this past year, including 14 nursing students, there is great potential for more formal partnerships in education, training and research related to the work that First United is doing.

The Housing Component

In the several stories built above First United programs and services, the vision of the Board is to enable as much 'charitable' housing as possible, with a focus on maximizing affordability. With the moratorium on strata units in this zone of the DTES, the estimated 100 units of housing would all be secured rentals.

Discussions are already taking place with regard to a potential partnership for this component of the development – a partner whose mission not only aligns with First United but also brings the expertise to operate the housing once construction is complete.

The emergency shelter that is part of the existing First United is not part of the new development, as the preference is to focus on more permanent housing solutions. However, the option to continue operating the shelter in another location does remain.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

The work currently being done, which will get the project to the development permit application stage, has been supported by some \$700,000 in grants, the majority of it from a private Foundation along with several other private donations.

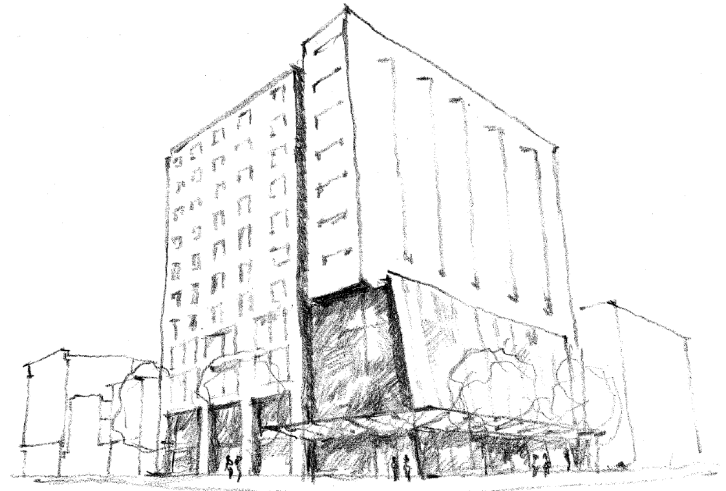
In terms of construction, the preliminary estimate includes \$40 million to construct the housing component, and \$25 million to build the new First United—a total of \$65 million.

Financing the housing component would potentially be the role of the project partner, and likely include support from BC Housing and other public agencies. Maximizing affordability of the rental units is also key to securing grants that would reduce the amount needed to be financed.

The funds needed to construct the First United component need to be secured by First United.

While some funds have already been set aside and the value of the property itself could provide financing collateral, it would still require a major fundraising initiative to secure the funds required to move the project forward.

From an operational perspective, First United currently operates with a \$4 million annual budget, of which some 50% comes from several thousand donors. In undertaking a major campaign to support the proposed new facility, it will be critical for First United to maintain and expand this level of support for operations, separate from a capital campaign.



CURRENT STATUS

An active and engaged committee of Directors from the Board is now working with senior staff and a small team of professional consultants on the redevelopment plan.

Extensive work is also being done with external groups and individuals to determine what is seen as most important to users. Through community engagement events, questions such as *'what*

does indigenous programming look like?' and *'what programs are essential for First United to continue?'* are being asked to ensure the plans will meet the needs of those being served.

At the same time, one of the major challenges currently being addressed is the relocation of existing services once it has been determined that the project is able to move forward.

The Relocation Transition

Relocating as many, if not all existing programs and services is the ultimate objective. Finding adequate spaces in the area is a major challenge, but with the help of BC Housing and the City of Vancouver, there are some options that could be available.

One priority is 'Drop-In' space with commercial kitchen facilities to allow the continuation of the community meals program. Similarly, a new location for the emergency shelter is being investigated already, and a number of the other support programs can be relocated quite easily.

The Future Holds Great Opportunity

The potential of redevelopment and a capital campaign offers a unique opportunity for First United to reach out beyond the traditional United Church base of support, build their profile as a credible agent of social change and engage others in a truly transformative initiative.

With the goal of financial sustainability firmly established, a new building could also create new opportunities to develop enterprise activities that contribute to revenue needs while enhancing overall program offerings, although nothing

specific has been proposed as yet.

Responsive through the many decades of serving the downtown eastside, First United is poised to move forward in response to the new opportunities presented by a changing community, and the challenge presented by the crisis in housing and care for the most vulnerable among us.

The future holds great opportunity for First United to once again change and develop as it continues to serve the needs of this dynamic community.