



2019  
Annual Report



## Thanks to *you*, our work changes lives. Read on to learn more:

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## Message From Leadership

Dear Friends,

Since the close of our 2019 financial year in December, the world has shifted in uncountable ways.

The foundations we worked so hard to lay in 2019 – refining our mission and vision, expanding supports to staff, building toward our capital campaign, and explicitly naming our commitment to systems change and reconciliation – all contributed to where we are today, holding steady through the storms COVID-19 wrought. Your support has enabled us to respond to needs in our Downtown Eastside community and continue moving forward, with our eyes on the just and inclusive future we all believe is possible.

Our refreshed mission and vision provided clarity and focus for First United to experience a turnaround year. The board, management, staff, and volunteers were enthusiastic paddlers, all pulling in the same direction.

We sought to live our values in our relationship with our staff and began collective bargaining, moving toward Living Wage certification in 2020. We increased staff health benefits, with an emphasis on the supports necessary for high-stress workplaces. We sought additions to our board of directors who could bring new perspectives and complement existing skills. We deepened our commitment to advocacy and reconciliation, articulating the need to not only offer immediate relief from suffering, but to engage in systems change.

Our 2019 work has positioned First United during COVID-19 and the overdose crisis to stay focused on our long-term vision of a just and inclusive community where everyone's worth is celebrated and all people thrive. First United continues to adapt to serve the Downtown Eastside community during these unusual times.

We would like to thank our outgoing board members for their stewardship, governance, and support. We acknowledge Stan Lanyon in particular for his decade of committed and engaged

service as both a director and chair. We are deeply grateful for his commitment to a better world.

To all our past, current, and future supporters: thank you for believing in the work of First United and our ability to address these challenging times. We remain committed, focused, and full of hope for the future we can build together.

Blessings,



The Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne  
*Executive Director*



Dr. Heather F. Clarke  
*Chair, Board of Directors*





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



## About Us

First United seeks a just society by nurturing each person's spirit through ministry, housing, advocacy, and community services in the face of the often-intersecting challenges of extreme poverty, historical and personal trauma, mental illness, and oppression in the Downtown Eastside (DTES).

We have operated in the DTES for more than 130 years. We are proud to be a faith-based service provider operating from a harm-reduction perspective where all are welcomed. At our core is the mission, ministry, and call to social justice of the United Church of Canada.



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## First United Board of Directors 2019:

Stan Lanyon, *Chair*

The Rev. Dr. Brian Thorpe, *Vice-chair*

Jacob Black-Lock, *Secretary*

Jean Budden, *Treasurer*

Scott Griffin

Judy Graves

Jeremy Hermanson

Elizabeth Kerklaan

David Jiles

Karen Joseph

The Rev. Daniel Bogert-O'Brien

The Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser

The Rev. Dr. Debra Bowman

Dr. Heather F. Clarke

### Non-Voting Board Member

Treena Duncan, *Executive Minister, Pacific Mountain*

*Region, The United Church of Canada*



## Programs at a Glance



### Shelter

It is virtually impossible to improve your life without a safe place to call home. To support our community's well-being, First United operates a 60-bed emergency shelter, including women-only space. Our low-barrier, trans-inclusive shelter serves as a foundation to stabilize, connect with services, and work toward change. We support some of the most vulnerable people in our city, welcoming those who may have nowhere else to turn because they have pets, actively use substances, or are unable to access support from other providers.

21,024 Nights of Safe Refuge



### Taxes

Literacy challenges, information gaps, and trauma associated with government systems are just a few of the barriers standing in the way of a tax return for many people experiencing poverty. Each year, through First United's Tax Program, thousands of people get connected with vital benefits around housing, pensions, and other assistance programs. That support translates into hundreds of thousands of dollars directly into the pockets of those who need it most.

\$202,844 Returned in 2019  
Through 2,240 Tax Returns



### Legal Advocacy

First United's Legal Advocacy Program supports low-income Downtown Eastside residents to assert their rights while raising our voices to create systemic change. Our advocates offer a lifeline to community members as they navigate life-altering challenges around tenancy, income security, immigration, income stabilization, and human rights issues. They also offer referrals for family and criminal law. For those with nowhere else to turn for help, our advocacy team can offer a path forward.

1,621 Advocacy Cases





## Community Help Desk

If you need help in the Downtown Eastside, odds are you'll find it at the Community Help Desk. Every day at the help desk, community members access everything from crisis support to wrap-around care. Whether it's overdose response supplies, community information, a hot shower, housing and legal referrals, mail service, socks and band aids, or a friendly hello - the Community Help Desk is there to support the wellness and dignity of our community.



## Meals

For decades, First United has offered nutritious meals to those who need them most. But we offer more than just a meal. These daily rituals offer the opportunity to meet with staff, friends and neighbours, and access our support services. Food is key to our well-being – and not just to meet our basic nutritional needs. A delicious meal prepared with care and love, and shared amongst community is a step toward healing.



## Spirit

At First United, we believe Jesus would welcome all people without exception. Here, we affirm and celebrate all people just as they are, without judgement or expectation. Our community ministry includes pastoral care, a listening ministry, opportunities to gather in spirit circle, and ceremonies around significant life passages. In a community grappling with so much that is heavy – trauma, grief, and oppression – the space to connect with our faith and with each other is an opportunity for hope and healing.



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1,500+ Monthly Visits  
to the Help Desk

123,438 Delicious  
Meals Enjoyed

695 Volunteer Hours Dedicated  
to the Listening Ministry



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## A Note on our Storage Program

In 2019, First United closed the Storage Program. While it served an important community need, the facility posed significant challenges, making its continued operation both unsafe and cost-prohibitive. We are grateful for your support for this program, and hopeful that with investment from the City of Vancouver, this community asset can be restored.





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## Upstream Solutions

When you're struggling, it can feel like no one is on your side. The desperation of feeling alone and powerless against a faceless system is deeply familiar to many in our Downtown Eastside community. That's where our Legal Advocacy Program can help.

Last year, Ruth walked through our doors with nowhere else to turn. She was a senior with zero income, after a bureaucratic error left her without a pension for months. She was on the verge of losing her home and unable to buy groceries for a basic meal. Ruth was in serious trouble.

With our advocates' help, Ruth made it through. Your support for our programs secured the disability and pension income she needed to survive, negotiated rent re-payment with her landlord so she could keep her home, and connected her with supports to get life back on track.

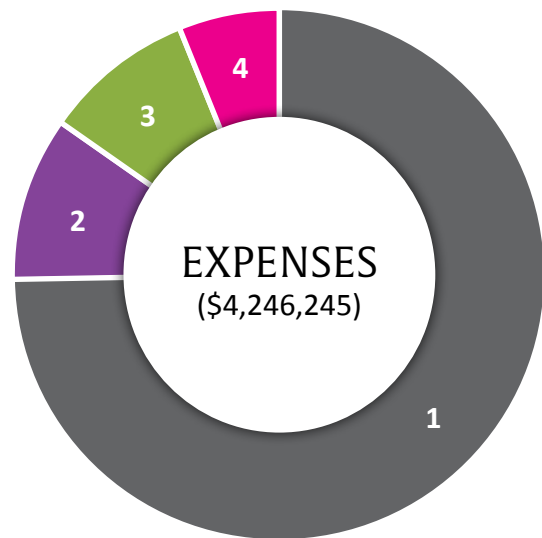
Ruth's story could have ended differently. We hear those heartbreaking stories every day: one domino falls, and the cascading impacts derail someone's entire life. But with the help of a compassionate and determined advocate, it doesn't have to be that way.

With ongoing support from the Law Foundation of BC and our generous donors, our Legal Advocacy Program takes on more than 1,600 cases like Ruth's each year. But emergency relief is not enough. That's why we also work toward upstream policy solutions, to change the conditions that create poverty. This spring, that meant playing an instrumental role in the push to ensure the \$300 COVID-19 supplement for people on social assistance was exempt from government clawbacks. That victory put thousands of dollars in the pockets of people who need it most.

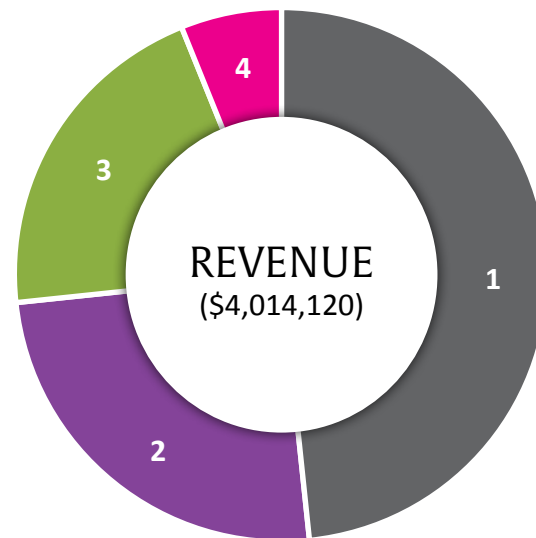
Your support for First United catches people like Ruth who are left to fall through the holes in our social safety net. It also works to patch those holes, to prevent others from suffering. In answering the call to seek justice, our Legal Advocacy Program concretely improves our clients' lives, while changing the system to prevent future suffering.

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## Financials



- 1 Charitable Activities - 75%
- 2 Fundraising & Communications - 10%
- 3 Administration & Facilities - 9%
- 4 Other - 6%



- 1 Government - 47%
- 2 Grants - 27%
- 3 Donations & Sponsors - 20%
- 4 Other - 6%



## Looking to the Future

With your support, First United is focused on both providing survival supports for our Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbours, as well as advocating for the big-picture structural changes needed to make those supports less necessary. As we look to the future, here's what's on our mind.

Built as a church, our aging building at 320 East Hastings is ill-suited to the services we currently offer. It is now both costly and difficult to continue operations here. The only realistic option is a new building to preserve First United as a community asset. We are hard at work on redevelopment, with the aim to replace our aging facility and serve our community's needs well into the future. After years of thoughtful consultation and feasibility work, we are on track to submit a development permit application this fall. Barring unforeseen delays, we will temporarily relocate our services and demolish our existing building in 2021.

In the coming months, you'll meet new members of our team who will help make this project a reality. We also hope to welcome back many of our dedicated volunteers, dearly missed since we implemented necessary COVID-19 restrictions in the spring.

Alongside this work, we continue to deepen our practice of reconciliation. First United operates on the unceded Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Sálilwata7/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) lands, and our ministry team estimates as many as 60 percent of those who seek out spiritual care identify as Indigenous. So many of the harms our community experiences are intertwined: the housing and homelessness crisis, health inequities, white supremacy, and the drug poisoning crisis. In working toward right relationship, we've created a new Indigenous chaplain role to offer culturally safe spiritual care in our community. We're also committed through our Social Justice Partnership Circles Program and advocacy work to continue seeking justice and uplifting the voices of our allies to create positive systemic change.

Together, we maintain a fierce hope, energized by the possibility to build a better future where we can all thrive. Your commitment to justice and healing in the Downtown Eastside fuels that hope.

*Thank you for being part of our future.*



## Thank You to Our Frontline Monthly Donors

Our Frontline Monthly Donor Program is a convenient and secure way to support First United on an ongoing basis. Your monthly gifts provide sustainable support to help us plan and bring financial stability to our programming. Please consider making a commitment to this important giving program! **Sign up online at [firstunited.ca/frontline](https://firstunited.ca/frontline)**

**338** TOTAL FRONTLINE DONORS

**\$40** AVERAGE GIFT



## Thank You to Our Meal Sponsors

- Archos Engineering Consultants
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- Strait Land Surveying Inc.
- KPMG
- Vancouver Odd Fellows Lodge No. 90
- + 23 anonymous group & individual sponsors

## Donor Statistics

**1,503**  
DONORS

**2,005**  
FINANCIAL GIFTS

**288**  
GIFTS  
OF GOODS

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Friends of First are those who have chosen to leave a gift to First in their will. **To inquire about leaving a legacy contact: [fundraising@firstunited.ca](mailto:fundraising@firstunited.ca)**

## Thank you to Our Friends of First Supporters

Florence & Robert Brownridge  
Bob Burrows  
Dr. Heather F. Clarke  
Jan & Joan Drabek  
Colleen Dunn  
Don Evans  
Ken & Joan Fowler  
Doreen Gardner Brown

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Tom Hutchinson & Bill Booth  
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Rae Rennie  
Brian & Heather Smith  
Daphne & Gordon Squire  
Gordon H. Tolman  
Floyd C. Wartnow  
& 27 anonymous Friends

*We are so very grateful for these extraordinary gestures of generosity.*



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## Organizations Contributing \$10k+

- Charles Johnson Charitable Fund
- City of Vancouver
- Connor, Clark & Lunn Foundation
- Face the World Foundation
- Government of Canada
- The Greater Vancouver Food Bank
- Lotte & John Hecht Memorial Foundation
- Hockey Helps the Homeless
- The Law Foundation of British Columbia
- MakeWay Foundation (formerly Tides Canada Foundation) through the The Ellis Foundation
- Barbara Small & Leonard Schein
- Seedlings Foundation
- streetohome
- United Church of Canada
- Alma VanDusen Fund, Lightburn Family Fund, & The McGrane-Pearson Endowment Fund, held at Vancouver Foundation
- Whole Foods Market (in-kind)



We couldn't do this  
important work  
without you. Thank you!

Almost 50% of our revenue comes  
from the generosity our donors and  
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or email us at

[fundraising@firstunited.ca](mailto:fundraising@firstunited.ca)

*If we have made a mistake in our donor recognition,  
please contact us at 604.681.8365 ext 121*

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