



**FIRST  
UNITED**

**First Things First  
Summer 2021**

# The Future of First



After multiple attempts over the past decade, our vision for a purpose-built space to provide connection, healing, and care in the Downtown Eastside is finally coming to life! In fall 2021, construction at 320 East Hastings street will begin, and we'll be on our way to building the future the Downtown Eastside deserves.

In a few years' time, our space on the corner of Gore and Hastings will be an 11-storey building. The first four floors will be operated by **FIRST UNITED** and provide safe and inclusive community amenities, with three times more space for services and programming that reflect the needs and interests of the community. The upper seven floors will be operated by Lu'ma Native Housing who will offer safe, secure, and below-market rate homes for Indigenous Peoples in a supportive and caring environment.

While construction will take a few years to complete, we'll continue to provide the services that our neighbours in the DTES rely on. To ensure that community members continue to have access to the low-barrier direct services, we're relocating all of our programs to satellite locations throughout the neighbourhood during the transition. Keeping our programs open and located in the Downtown Eastside has been critical to moving the redevelopment forward.

We're also incredibly excited to be launching an innovative new approach to our meal program serving hot, nutritious meals during our transition years and beyond—the **FIRST UNITED** food truck program!

Our commercial kitchen will move to 620 Clark Drive, where meals will be prepared. They'll then be distributed via our new mobile food truck fleet including a minivan, cargo van, and fully equipped food truck. Our mobile fleet will ensure that the 200+ meals we currently serve each day continue to reach those in need.

Over the coming months we'll be ensuring our staff and new satellite locations are equipped to provide our core services without interruption and keeping you, our broader community of supporters, up to date about our plans as an organization and a community.



**Together, we're embarking  
on a journey towards a  
brighter future for the  
Downtown Eastside.**

# Moving toward reconciliation, healing, and a better future



Dear Friends,

The journey to redeveloping our site at 320 East Hastings has been long. There've been countless conversations about blueprints, funding, permits, and partnerships. But most importantly we've centered conversation with Downtown Eastside residents, Indigenous peoples, and those who will be directly impacted.

**We aren't just building a new building. We're building a place where people can connect and heal. Reconciliation is essential to that.**

We're creating an 11-storey building in which the first four floors will include programs and services, and the upper seven floors will contain 105 below-market housing units for Indigenous people that will be operated by our housing partner Lu'ma Native Housing Society. 30-40% of DTES residents identify as Indigenous, compared with just 2-4% of Vancouver's total population. This tells us of the deep racialization of poverty that's disproportionately impacting Indigenous people. With this new building, we're addressing housing as the critical issue it is. This is reconciliation in action.

The confirmation from the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc community that there were remains of 215 children in an unmarked grave has been followed by confirmations and discoveries at other former Indian Residential School sites. These confirmations have been a harrowing reminder that colonialism is not an issue of the past, that justice still has not been achieved, and that we still have a long way to go on the path to reconciliation. Our building alone can't achieve that, but it's an important step. Revitalizing and connecting rather than isolating and displacing can transform a community. For over 135 years, we've responded to the needs of our community. Moving forward, we will continue to provide connection, care, and healing to those we serve to build a neighbourhood where every person's worth is celebrated, and all people thrive.

Blessings,

The Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne



## Truth and Reconciliation, a Living History

*Written by The Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne (Heiltsuk First Nation) Executive Director; Dr. Cheryl Bear (Nadleh Whut'en First Nation), Director of Community Ministry; and Lauren Sanders (Prairie Band Potawatomi and Kickapoo Nation of Kansas), Indigenous Spiritual Care Chaplain. Published in The Tyee, June 14, 2021*

Reconciliation has been a buzzword since the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015. Everyone wants to know how to "walk in reconciliation" but doesn't often want to hear the answer.

The late May confirmation of the grave of 215 children in Kamloops has shocked us back into a state of realization that Truth and Reconciliation is not just a question of a dead history whose remains have been forgotten. There is important work that needs doing. As Indigenous people, we need all Canadians to witness and participate in that work. Canadians need to engage with Truth and Reconciliation as a living history.

Truth-telling is not an Indigenous-only practice. Truth-telling requires non-Indigenous people to accept the truths being told with respect, to apologize, and to accept responsibility. The bodies of 215 children were unearthed from a dead history and their legacy is the truth that Indigenous grief is telling. The legacy of Kamloops Indian Residential School is the truth that the bodies of these 215 babies are telling.

Now it is the turn of non-Indigenous people. The framework has been given. The protocol from the TRC has to be followed. Acceptance of the truth, apology, and taking ownership of responsibility are the steps.



To read the full op-ed:

Visit [firstunited.ca/latest-news](https://firstunited.ca/latest-news).



## You can't put a price tag on trust

### “This has been life changing for me.”

Most people don't get to hear that at their day jobs, but **FIRST UNITED's** Community Volunteer Income Tax Program Coordinator Amanda Pellerine receives cards and notes like this regularly. For over 10 years, Amanda has been working the frontlines to help low-income individuals and families file their taxes. A task that many of us dread each year has proven to be transformational for thousands in our community.

Since the 1970s, **FIRST UNITED's** tax program has helped people file their taxes and gain access to important benefits for housing, pensions, and other assistance programs. Filing taxes can be daunting. For those who have language barriers, are unable to read, or who face compounding barriers like mental health challenges, addiction, and homelessness, the process can be insurmountable. Yet the benefit tax filing provides can be a lifeline.

When COVID-19 began, accessing government benefits became even more critical, but at the height of the first wave other tax-assistance services were closing. **FIRST UNITED** was one of the only organizations offering tax support that safely remained open. Amanda and her team helped return over \$175,000 to nearly 1,300 people in 2020.

This year, the stakes are even higher. Because of programs like CERB, many clients are finding themselves owing taxes. As Amanda puts it, “we're doing a lot of education right now and connecting with social workers and advocates to help quell fears and anxiety over debts.”

This is what makes **FIRST UNITED's** tax program unique. Because of our long history in the Downtown Eastside, we understand that people have individual needs and we can't just treat them like another piece of paper. An unexpected tax bill can send somebody managing mental health challenges into crisis destabilizing their home, security, work, and emotional wellbeing. Through education and connecting clients with additional supports, we help folks get and stay on their feet so they can thrive.

Amanda attributes the growing success of the tax program to trust. “I have clients that have been coming to us for 10 years. I feel blessed that so many people trust us with their personal information and stories. And they come back because they know there's no judgement here.”





# FIRST UNITED

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## Community Giving Programs

Whether you want to make a personal impact, engage your business, or rally your community of faith, there's a place for you in our new Community Giving Program. Community Donors, Community Partners, and Communities of Faith provide the foundation from which our work can grow. Learn more about finding your place in the Community Giving Program at [firstunited.ca/community-giving](https://firstunited.ca/community-giving).



## Volunteer Update

Volunteers are a valuable part of the **FIRST UNITED** community and we've certainly missed them during the pandemic. As BC's Restart Plan progresses, we anticipate reintroducing volunteer opportunities this fall! Visit [firstunited.ca/volunteer](https://firstunited.ca/volunteer) for information, updates, and to submit your application to volunteer. We look forward to seeing and working alongside our outstanding volunteers again soon!



## More News and Stories

For more news, stories, and updates about the **FIRST UNITED** community visit [firstunited.ca/latest-news](https://firstunited.ca/latest-news). This month, we're excited to profile one of our long-standing supporters: The Rev. Juanita Austin.