

Still a Sanctuary in the Heart of the Downtown Eastside

There is something notably different about East Hastings these days. The corner at Gore is missing a recognizable landmark—FIRST UNITED’s old church building. That’s because we’re currently undergoing a redevelopment, demolishing the old building to make way for a new purpose-built facility that will better serve the current and growing needs of the Downtown Eastside.

While we’ve outgrown the former building, it still holds a significant place in the history of the DTES. The nearly 60-year-old church building was a symbol of refuge and hope, a temporary home, and sanctuary for folks who have lived in and come through the DTES over the decades. Much of our legacy was born out of that building.

Known as the “church of the open door,” community members could access our low-barrier programs right in the heart of the DTES. The building’s central location, paired with our long-standing reputation as a reliable service provider in the community, meant that churches and agencies often approached FIRST for the use of our space and resources. Because of our willingness to take risks in the name of justice, some of the most progressive programs in the DTES were developed in that building and are still around today.

When St. Michael’s Anglican Church lost government funding for its drop-in centre for sex workers, St. Michael’s turned to us for help. In the 80s, we opened our doors to what is now known as WISH Drop-In Centre. Space in the church provided a safe retreat for women in sex work to take showers, use washrooms, receive warm and nutritious meals, as well as establish friendships and receive support from staff and volunteers.

The old building also served as an incubator for Insite, the first legalized safe injection facility in North America. Committed to operating from a harm reduction

perspective, we worked with other agencies to ask the government to back a supervised safe injection site. To help move the process forward, we agreed to open a pilot site. By the fall of 2002, a room of the church was transformed into a mock safe injection site for a week. This project ultimately moved governments to provide support and since then, Insite has been credited with saving countless lives, having never had a fatal overdose within their facility, and acting as a model for other safe injection sites across the country.



Left: The old church building as it was being constructed in 1964 (photo by David J. Martin; part of the Major Matthews Collection from the City of Vancouver Archives).

Right: A photo of our building as it stood in 2021, two years before demolition.

Over the years, we did our best to adapt our space to accommodate the needs of the community—like removing pews in the sanctuary to install bunk beds for comfortable shelter. But there was only so much we could do in a building that was originally designed to serve a congregation.

While we prepare for the construction of our new building, we continue to remember all that took place in our former building and the role it has played in the DTES. No matter what building we’re in, FIRST UNITED will always be a sanctuary in the heart of the city.

Honouring the History of our Old Building

Dear Friends,

When I joined FIRST UNITED three years ago, I worked out of our former church building at 320 East Hastings. Today, the building no longer stands but what will remain is its legacy—the programs that were started within those walls, the memories created, and everything we've learned.

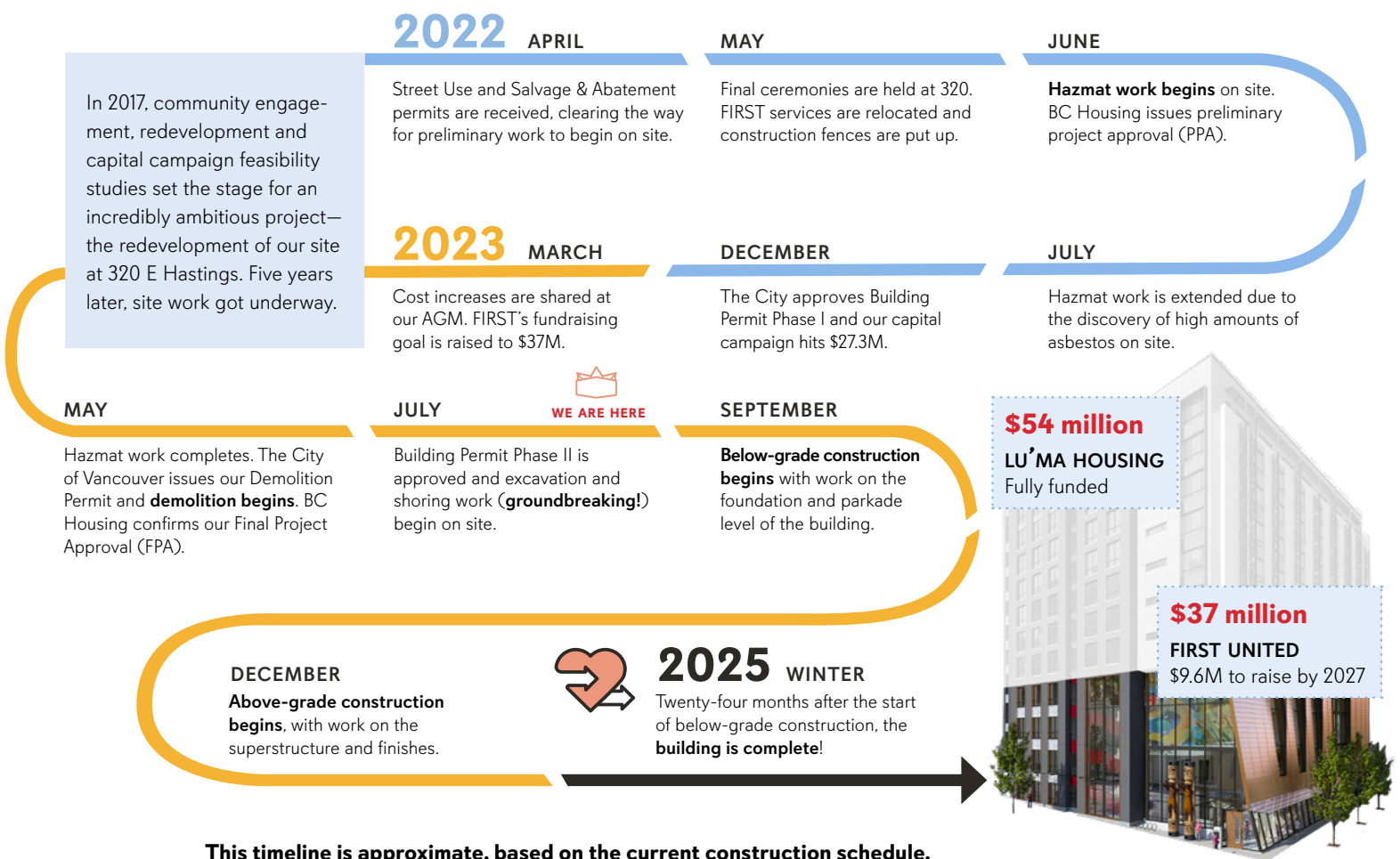
It moves me to think that in its almost six decades, it had seen countless individuals come through its doors for refuge and support. It witnessed marriages being officiated, communities being established, and long-lasting friendships formed. It was a place where so many experienced moments of respite, felt a sense of dignity, and received the support to get back on their feet. I believe the impact that the building has had on the community is immeasurable.

As we reflect on all that started and ended in our beloved building, we know that what won't change is our commitment to the community. The demolition marks the end of an era, but also the beginning of a new one. The future of FIRST UNITED will live in our new community-informed building, continuing our legacy of being a safe and inclusive space for all. Our programs and services will continue to grow as we take everything we've learned from the past and bring it forward.

Amanda Burrows
Interim Executive Director



The Road to Redevelopment



Sole Comfort

Over 20 years ago, Bruce Cowburn, former FIRST UNITED staff member, was brought to tears when he witnessed our Foot Care Program in action for the first time.

Bruce described the sight, as quoted in *Hope Lives Here: A History of Vancouver's First United Church* by Bob Burrows, saying:

"There was a [community member] playing classical guitar on the inside Gore Avenue stairs; [a staff member] on bended knee, adjusting the water temperature; [and] an elderly gent with his feet in the soothing water. I had to stop and catch my breath and wipe the water from my eyes. This powerful vision clearly reinforced in me the mission of [FIRST UNITED]. Love and care in action."

When our Foot Care Program started in the late 90s, it wasn't just staff members like Bruce who were moved by this program—community members were deeply appreciative of the opportunity to relax and receive some care. Many folks who are experiencing homelessness have sore feet from standing and walking all day—usually in unreliable or worn-out footwear. In Vancouver's often rainy weather, it can mean soaked and blistered feet, which can be uncomfortable at best and painful at worst.

A warm and soothing foot bath, paired with clean and comfortable socks can go a long way for folks in



FIRST UNITED's Foot Care Program in action in 2012.

need of some relief. It also provides an opportunity for community members to engage in meaningful conversations with staff and volunteers.

The inspiration for the program started one evening with a volunteer. At the time, WISH was still operating its drop-in centre out of our old building. The volunteer came in with a large bowl of water, some towels and essential oils, ready to offer foot care to women who were dropping in at WISH.

This humbling act of kindness was enough to motivate FIRST to turn it into a program, knowing that many in the community would need and enjoy this service. With advice and encouragement from the Main Street Health Clinic nurses, FIRST's Foot Care Program was initiated.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, we had to pause foot care for the safety of community members and staff. This year, we welcomed the return of the Foot Care Program, which now operates out of Spiritual Care's temporary location at 360 Jackson.

Left: Simple foot care can go a long way for community members with sore feet, offering a sense of dignity and an opportunity to engage in conversations with staff and volunteers.





FIRST UNITED

320 E Hastings St.
Vancouver BC Canada V6A 1P4

*Located on unceded Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm
(Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish),
& Səlíl̓wətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) lands.*

Join us for Toast Talks



Our second Toast Talks of the year is happening on July 13th at 4:30pm! Join us over Zoom as we honour and celebrate the history and legacy of our old church building. You'll hear all the latest updates on our programs and the redevelopment. Register now at [**firstunited.ca/events**](https://firstunited.ca/events).

Email updates



We have a lot of news, updates, and events coming up that you won't want to miss! Subscribe to our emails to stay in touch and to help us save paper! You can sign up at [**firstunited.ca**](https://firstunited.ca).

Friends of FIRST



Friends of FIRST are important supporters of our work who desire to leave the Downtown Eastside in a better place, not just for now but for future generations. To learn more about Friends of FIRST and how to become one, visit [**firstunited.ca**](https://firstunited.ca).



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