



# First United Church Community Ministry Society Complaints Policy

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## First United’s Approach

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First United Church Community Ministry Society (First United) is committed to providing high quality, transparent and accessible service to everyone. In order to do this, we need you to tell us when we get things wrong. We want to help resolve your complaint as quickly as possible.

We handle any expression of dissatisfaction with our programs and services which calls for a response as a Service Complaint. We listen to your complaints, treat them seriously, and learn from them so that we can continuously improve our service.

## What is a Service Complaint?

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A Service Complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about the services we offer

### ***Our Service Complaint policy covers complaints about:***

- the standard of service you should expect from us
- the behavior of staff and/or volunteers in delivering that service
- any action, or lack of action, by our staff or others engaged to work with/for First United in relation to our clients or members of the public with whom we engage in providing our services

We refer to these complaints as “service complaints.”

### ***Our Service Complaints policy does not cover:***

- comments about our policies or policy decisions
- dissatisfaction or complaints expressed with our policies or decisions about individual cases, funding, requests for advocacy, tenancing decisions, or any specific matters



which involve First United as a party to a proceeding before the Residential Tenancy Branch, the BC Human Rights Tribunal, or other court or inquiry

- anonymous complaints

We refer to these types of comments or complaints as “**non-service complaints.**” These are handled differently, as set out in the “Comments and non-service complaints” section on page 14.

## Our standards for handling Service Complaints

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- We can receive complaints by letter or email, or by other means if a reasonable accommodation is requested. We treat all complaints seriously.
- You can expect to be treated with courtesy, respect, and fairness at all times. We expect that you will also treat our staff dealing with your complaint with the same courtesy, respect, and fairness.
- We will treat your complaint in confidence within First United to the greatest degree possible.
- We will deal with all service complaints promptly. We will acknowledge receipt of a written complaint within five (5) working days where we have a return address or email address, and you can expect to have a full reply within twenty (20) working days. In a few cases we will not be able to send a full reply within twenty (20) working days of receipt – for example if your complaint is very complex, or if your complaint involves a matter which may require external parties to conduct the investigation. If this happens, we will tell you the reason why and let you know when we will be able to give you a complete reply, keeping you full informed of our progress.
- You can find further information in our Annual Report (beginning with Annual Report 2019) on the number and categories of service complaints, and the percentage of those upheld.
- We will not treat you less favourably than anyone else because of your:
  - gender identity/expression
  - sexual orientation
  - legal marital/partnership status: this includes family status, responsibility for dependents
  - colour, ethnicity or race: this includes ethnic or national origin or nationality
  - disability, mental health, or addiction
  - religious or political beliefs, or trade union affiliation
  - any other unjustifiable factors, for example, language abilities, age, pregnancy or other grounds protected by the *Human Rights Code*

## Third Party Reporting

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Complainants may wish to have a third party act on their behalf. A third party is any person or organization acting on behalf of or making enquiries for the complainant. For example, third parties may include:

- advice or advocacy organizations
- professionals such as social workers, community nurses, doctors, lawyers, or ministers
- family members or friends

Where a third party is helping a complainant with a particular complaint, we need written consent to that effect. Where we have this authority, we will endeavor to keep the third party fully informed of progress on the complaint.

Sometimes a lawyer or other power of attorney is legally empowered in certain circumstances to act on behalf of a complainant, and consent to disclose information is not required.

## Confidentiality

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All complaints received will be dealt with confidentially and in accordance with the requirements of British Columbia's *Personal Information Protection Act*, subject to the need to disclose information as required by statutory authorities, and/or as a result of statutory, legal, or other obligation placed on First United.

## How to complain to us

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If you wish to make a Service Complaint, you can do so by email or letter.

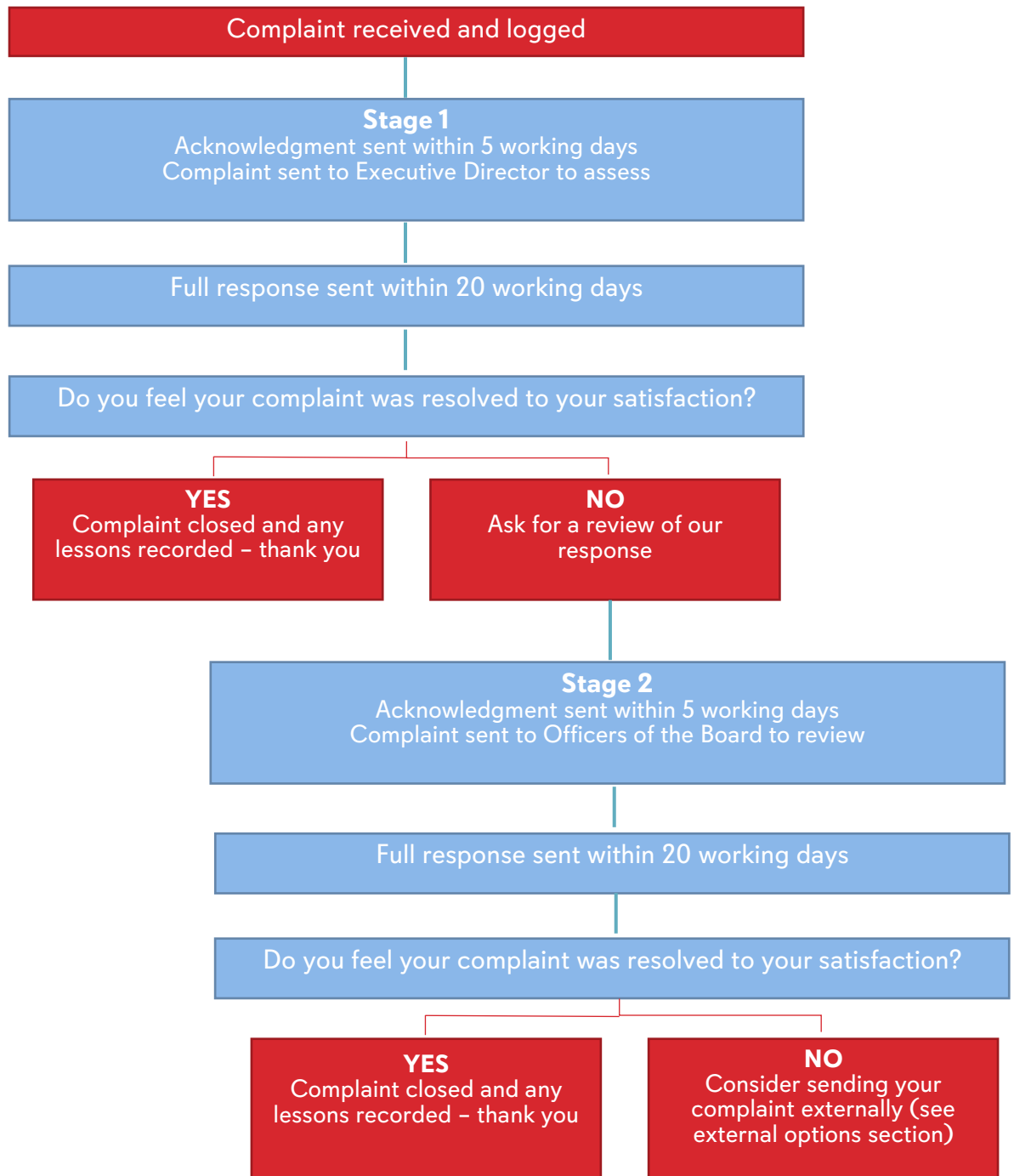
If you have a difficulty or disability, and need a reasonable accommodation to ensure you can register your complaint, you can contact us by:

- telephone (one of our staff will help you by writing out your complaint)
- fax
- asking a member of staff to help you in writing out your complaint in person on our premises

Our contact details are in the **Contacting Us** section below. If you require different accommodations than those listed, let us know and we will try to put those arrangements in place where we can.

## How we will respond to your complaint

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## Service Complaints Procedure

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We have a two-stage service complaints handling procedure, explained above. At each stage it will help us to resolve your complaint quickly if you can give us as much clarity and detail as possible, including providing copies of any documents, witness statements or other evidence you may have regarding your complaint. If we do not have all the details required to deal with the complaint, we may contact you and ask you for further information.

Our Executive Director is responsible for managing the handling of service complaints, and the office of the Executive Director will notify you of the outcome.

### **Stage 1**

This is the first opportunity for us to resolve your complaint. We expect the majority of complaints to be resolved at this stage. On receipt of your complaint we will contact the Executive Director's office and ask them to assign staff resources (up to and including the Executive Director) to respond to your complaint. This includes complaints about historical incidents if/when we still have access to relevant documentation.

### **Stage 2**

If you are dissatisfied with the response at stage 1, you may request a review. This will be carried out by an Officer of the Board of Directors, or another Director on the Board as designated by an Officer. Your request together with all subsequent correspondence relating to it should be sent to the Chair of the Board of Directors, in care of the Pacific Mountain Region of the United Church of Canada (see external contacts section), who will forward your request to the Officers of the Board to be reviewed.

### **If you are still dissatisfied**

If having followed the two internal stages of our service complaints procedure you remain dissatisfied, you can ask to have your complaint reviewed by the Executive Minister of the Pacific Mountain Region of the United Church of Canada (UCC). First United is an Incorporated Ministry of the UCC and the Pacific Mountain Region has oversight responsibility of our organization. The Executive Minister will assess whether there is evidence of service failure or maladministration on our part. You have a maximum of thirty (30) days from the date of the Board of Directors' final response to register a complaint with the Executive Minister of the Region.

If your complaint involves an instance or instances of sexual or physical assault or misconduct, you may also contact the national offices of the United Church of Canada through their complaint response unit, as documented below.



## External options should your complaint not be resolved

### Pacific Mountain Region Office, The United Church of Canada

**Attn: Executive Minister**

4383 Rumble Street Burnaby, BC V5J 2A2

E-mail: [reception@bc.united-church.ca](mailto:reception@bc.united-church.ca)

Phone: (604) 431-0434

Toll-free phone (in BC): 1-800-934-0434

Fax: (604) 431-0439

### The United Church of Canada

For complaints specific to physical or sexual misconduct or harassment:

If you are aware of behaviour that is inappropriate, but you are not in immediate danger, please call **1-800-268-3781 ext. 7788** or e-mail [complaintresponse@united-church.ca](mailto:complaintresponse@united-church.ca) for information about how to bring a complaint.

### BC Housing

For complaints specific to housing and housing support services:

BC Housing takes complaints seriously and is committed to receiving, handling and resolving complaints in a consistent, objective, fair and timely manner.

To send a complaint to BC Housing, email [complaintresolution@bchousing.org](mailto:complaintresolution@bchousing.org).

For more information, see <https://www.bchousing.org/compliments-complaints>

### VictimLinkBC

VictimLinkBC is a toll-free, confidential, multilingual telephone service available across B.C. and the Yukon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at **1-800-563-0808**. It provides information and referral services to all victims of crime and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence, including victims of human trafficking exploited for labour or sexual services.

VictimLinkBC provides service in more than 110 languages, including 17 North American indigenous languages.

VictimLinkBC is TTY accessible. **Call TTY at 604-875-0885**; to call collect, please call the **Telus Relay Service at 711**. **Text to 604-836-6381**. Email [VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca](mailto:VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca)

Victim service workers can provide information and referrals to all victims of crime and crisis support to victims. Even if you're not sure if you have been a victim of crime, you can call VictimLinkBC at **1-800-563-0808** for assistance. Your call will be completely confidential.



All VictimLinkBC staff are trained victim service workers and can connect people to a network of community, social, health, justice and government resources, including victim services, transition houses and counselling resources. They also provide information on the justice system, relevant federal and provincial legislation and programs, crime prevention, safety planning, protection order registry and other resources as needed.

Any time of the day or night, every day of the year, VictimLinkBC is as close as your phone or the Internet and can provide you confidential support and information you can trust.

**If you require assistance, please call VictimLinkBC at 1-800-563-0808.**

## Timelines

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Our timelines for handling a complaint are listed here.

### Stage 1

We will acknowledge complaints within five (5) working days of receiving each complaint.  
We will send a full response within twenty (20) working days of receiving each complaint.

If you make a complaint in person to a member of our staff, we will record your complaint in writing within three (3) working days, and acknowledge it within five (5) working days thereafter. We will then deal with your complaint in accordance with our policy for written complaints.

### Stage 2

We will acknowledge complaints within five (5) working days of receiving each complaint.  
We will send a full response within twenty (20) working days of receiving each complaint.

### Extending time lines

We aim to complete our investigation into all complaints received about our service within the timelines set out above. However, in some cases - for example, if a complaint is very complex or requires further investigation, it may be necessary to extend the time limit to ensure we have all the information necessary to deal with it. If this is the case we will keep you informed of progress with the investigation, the reasons for the delay, and inform you of next steps.

## Remedies

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When we get things wrong we will act to:



- accept responsibility and apologize
- explain what went wrong and why, and
- put things right by making any changes required
- learn lessons from mistakes and change policies and practices where proportionate and sensible to do so

The action we take to put matters right (i.e. redress) in response to a service complaint can include any combination of the remedies set out in the list below. The general principle we follow is that complainants should, so far as possible, be put in the position they would have been in, had things not gone wrong.

The remedy applied needs to be proportionate and appropriate to the failure in service, and take into account what redress people seek when they complain. An apology is often the most appropriate action, but other action may also be necessary in some circumstances.

### **List of Remedies**

- An apology, explaining what happened and/or what went wrong (note that an apology is not an acceptance of liability under the British Columbia *Apology Act*)
- Remedial action, which may include reviewing or changing a decision on the service given to an individual complainant
- Provide the service required in first instance (immediately, if appropriate)
- Putting things right (for example a change of procedure to prevent future difficulties of a similar kind, either for the complainant or others)
- Training or supervising staff; or a combination of both
- Financial compensation

## **Vexatious and repetitive complaints, and unreasonable or abusive behaviour**

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All Service Complaints will be dealt with in accordance with this policy. However, unreasonable or abusive complaint behaviour does happen from time to time, as well as vexatious and repetitive complaints. Difficulties in handling such situations can place strain on time and resources and can be stressful for staff who have to deal with these complex and challenging issues.

First United defines unreasonably persistent complainants as “those who, because of the frequency or nature of their contact with the organization, hinder the organization’s consideration of their or other people’s, complaints.”

We have a policy which sets out how we will respond to these situations.

## **Vexatious Complaints, Unreasonable and Abusive Behaviour**

This policy is integrated with other existing policies at First United. It does not address issues of health and safety directly, which are dealt with elsewhere.

This part of the Service Complaints policy deals with Service Complaints which First United's staff consider vexatious or repetitive, and behaviour which we deem as unreasonable.

Some complaints may relate to our final decisions on matters such as:

- requests for advocacy services;
- residential tenancy issues; or
- requests for changes to our policies.

There are separate procedures addressing such matters. Where those procedures are being pursued and/or have been exhausted, any subsequent or additional complaints about the same matters will be dealt with in accordance with this policy.

### ***Vexatious or repetitive complaints***

We sometimes receive complaints which can be deemed 'vexatious' or 'repetitive.' Some of these complaints can be costly to handle; or responding to them may be a disproportionate use of our staff's time.

Deciding whether a complaint is vexatious requires us in each case to take into account the context and history of the complaint. We will consider whether the complaint is likely to cause unjustified distress, disruption or irritation. In particular, we will consider the following issues:

- Could the complaint fairly be seen as repetitive?
- Is the complaint harassing or causing distress to staff?
- Does the complaint appear to be designed to cause disruption or annoyance or to target one or more staff member(s)?
- Does the complaint lack any serious purpose or value?

The concern we will address is whether a complaint is vexatious in terms of the effect of the request on us and not whether the applicant is personally vexatious.

By its ordinary meaning, the term 'vexatious' refers to activity that "is likely to cause distress or irritation, literally to vex a person to whom it is directed."

For a complaint to be vexatious, we will consider whether there is a proper or justified cause for it. We will not only examine the complaint itself, but also its context and history. That context may include other complaints made by the applicant to us (whether or not found to

be justified), the number and subject matter of the complaints, as well as the history of other dealings between the complainant and ourselves or our staff members. The effect a complaint will have may be determined as much, or indeed more, by that context as by the complaint itself.

We will take into consideration the following factors (which are not an exhaustive list) when determining whether a complaint is vexatious:

- where the complaint requests information which has already been provided;
- where the nature and extent of the complainant's correspondence with us suggests an overly persistent approach to disclosure;
- where the tone adopted in correspondence by the complainant is confrontational and/or haranguing and demonstrates that the purpose is to argue and not really to obtain information;
- where the correspondence could reasonably be expected to have a negative effect on the health and well-being of our staff;
- where the complaint, viewed as a whole, appears to be intended to re-open issues which have been disputed or resolved previously, and is, in effect, the pursuit of a complaint by alternative means;
- where responding to the complaint would likely entail substantial and disproportionate financial and administrative burdens for us;
- where it is not a one-time complaint, but a case of the same complaints having been made repeatedly, or where on repetition, the particulars of the complaints have been varied making it difficult to know exactly what the complainant is seeking and making it less likely that the request can be satisfied.

No single one of the above factors would, by itself, necessarily lead to a finding that a complaint was vexatious. However, based on the strength of the various factors, taken together with the history and context of a complaint, a complaint may be deemed vexatious by First United.

It is important of course that all complaints from a single source should not be deemed vexatious just because some may have been so previously. This is particularly the case if, on the face of it, the complaint seems to be specific, stand alone and straight forward. However, it is entirely appropriate and necessary, when considering whether a complaint is vexatious, to view that complaint in context - if, say, the complaint is part of a wider grievance against First United and is, for example, inextricably linked to an individual's quest to hold First United to account for perceived shortcomings.

Where complaints are deemed vexatious, the complainant will be notified in writing that no further correspondence will be entered into on the matter in question. First United will

initially keep one form of contact open so that there is not a 'blanket ban' on contact for any individual.

### ***Unreasonable Behaviour***

First United understands that people may act out of character in times of distress or due to frustration. We do not view behaviour as unreasonable just because a complainant is forceful or determined. First United's staff make reasonable allowances for complainants' behavior, taking into account the multiple challenges many in our community experience.

However, sometimes the situation between a complaint and First United's staff can escalate and the behaviour of the complainant becomes unacceptable, for example becoming abusive, aggressive or threatening. Such abusive, aggressive or threatening behaviour is in the very small minority but we sometimes find ourselves in the position where we need to restrict or bring to an end communication and access to our premises or staff.

Our staff have the right to undertake their work free from abuse, threats and harassment. We expect our staff to be treated with courtesy and respect. First United has a duty to protect the welfare and safety of staff and considers that violence, threats or abuse towards staff is unacceptable. Staff are also expected to treat complainants with courtesy, respect and fairness.

Complainants who harass, or have been abusive, aggressive or threatening on one or more occasions towards our staff - or their families or associates - directly or indirectly, will be considered unreasonable.

We also consider that inflammatory statements and unfounded allegations can amount to abusive behaviour.

Any threats or acts of violence will cause direct contact with the complainant to be discontinued. Violence includes behaviour or language (written, oral, or in tone or otherwise) that may cause staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused. Examples of unacceptable behaviour includes but not exclusively threats, verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, rudeness, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ablist or other harassment based on personal characteristic or obscene remarks, repeatedly demanding disciplinary action be taken against staff, and where complainants are known to have recorded meetings or telephone conversations without consent.

Further, First United's staff will bring to an end phone calls if the caller is considered aggressive, abusive or threatening. The complainant will first be told that we consider their language offensive or their behaviour unacceptable, and will be asked to stop using such language or behaviour.



If First United staff considers behaviour to be unreasonable they are advised in the first instance to refer it to their manager who may seek advice and guidance before determining future contact with the complainant, be that by telephone, in person, or electronically.

Where unreasonable or abusive behaviour is determined, the complainant will be notified in writing that no further interactions will be undertaken, and this may apply to any or all First United programs and services. A copy of this policy will be included and, if and where appropriate, a no-contact period specified. If further contact is necessary, the complainant will be informed that it will be made through a member of the Leadership Team or the designate(s). A decision to restrict contact will be reconsidered if the complainant subsequently demonstrates more reasonable behaviour.

If you disagree with a decision made by First United to regard your behaviour as unreasonable, you can challenge it. Please refer to our Complaints Policy.

All incidents of harassment or aggression will be documented and referred to senior staff. In appropriate circumstances these matters may be referred to the police and the First United may consider taking appropriate legal action against the complainant, if necessary, without prior warning.

## Tracking Complaints

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Complaint details, outcomes and actions taken are tracked by us and used for service improvement. We track all complaints we receive and collate data from them to help us understand what types of problems are most prevalent, and how well we are doing to resolve them.

We value your feedback and expect to use it to help us to:

- get things right in the future if we have not done so already
- become more customer focused
- be more open and accountable
- act fairly and proportionately
- seek continuous improvement

We will handle your information so that it is only processed and retained appropriately and legally, in line with data and personal privacy protection legislation.

## Comments & Non-service Complaints

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Quality of service is an important measure for us of our effectiveness. Learning from complaints, including non-service complaints (complaints about our policies or programs), is



a powerful way of helping continuous improvement at First United and enable us to better deliver to our values and standards. All non-service complaints will be looked at by a responsible manager from the appropriate team, and a response, if required, sent to you directly within twenty (20) working days where possible. Non-service complaints should be sent to the Executive Director.

As well as learning from your complaints we are also interested in ideas you may have on how we might do things better. We would also like you to tell us when we do things well.

Your comments will be passed on to the relevant team and we will use them to help improve our service and the way we do things. You can make your comments by contacting any members of our staff, or you can e-mail [info@firstunited.ca](mailto:info@firstunited.ca).

## Contacting Us

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All complaints and requests for review under our complaints procedure should be sent as follows:

**In person or by mail:** Executive Director  
First United Church Community Ministry Society  
320 E Hastings St,  
Vancouver BC V6A 1P4

**By email:** [complaints@firstunited.ca](mailto:complaints@firstunited.ca)

If you are unable to contact us in writing as above, and require a reasonable accommodation because of a difficulty or disability, you may contact us as follows:

**Telephone:** 604.681.8365

**Fax:** 604.681.8928

## Reasonable Accommodations & Alternative Formats

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First United is committed to equal opportunities and our aim is to make our corporate complaints policy easy to use and accessible to all. We will take reasonable steps to accommodate any reasonable adjustments you may have to enable you to access this policy or receive responses to complaints in other formats, and provide such assistance as you may reasonably require.

If you would like the policy or a response to a complaint in another format (such as Braille, audio CD, BSL video, large print or Easy Read) please contact [\*\*complaints@firstunited.ca\*\*](mailto:complaints@firstunited.ca).