

The Story of FIRST UNITED is a Story about People

In May 1885, a small group of people gathered at the Hastings Mill schoolhouse for a church service. That small congregation started a history that would extend over a century—that was the start of FIRST UNITED. “Vancouver” wasn’t even the name for the city yet. The Canadian Pacific Railway didn’t yet extend to the town of Granville. Powell Street had Canada’s largest Japanese community. The Canadian government made residential schools official policy that year.

So much in the city, our culture, and our organization has changed since 1885. But what hasn’t changed is our pursuit of dignity, belonging, and justice. Through the turn of the centuries, wars, social movements, political changes, pandemics, times of abundance and periods of struggle, FIRST has and continues to be the church of the open door, standing shoulder to shoulder with the community to foster a neighbourhood where every person’s worth is celebrated and all people can thrive.

And so, on the first Sunday of May 2025 we threw ourselves a birthday party to mark the occasion. Gathering at 312 Main Street, we were joined by familiar faces from over the years: current and former staff members and their families, volunteers, funders and donors, board members old and new. Outside, we distributed juice and specially-made FIRST UNITED cookies to community members. We celebrated with everyone who made us what and who we are today.



We had birthday cake and sang ourselves happy birthday, and Amanda Burrows, and Heather Clarke (Board Chair) shared reflections on our history. Long-time supporter Bob Burrows also shared remarks:

“FIRST UNITED has never been a fancy place. It’s been a real, authentic place. A place where you met people as they were, and where kindness went a long way. The staff and volunteers didn’t have all the answers—but they listened and helped out as they were able. Day after day. Year after year.

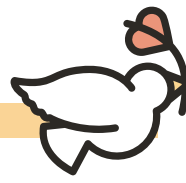
The story of FIRST UNITED is about the people. The guests and the staff. The volunteers. The community. The people who gave what they could, and those who received more than they expected. It’s about a church that didn’t just talk about hope—it lived it. Still does.”



A special thank you to Blair Galston, Regional Archivist for the Pacific Mountain Regional Council, for his help compiling images and information used for our anniversary celebrations.



Love Your Enemies



Greetings,

Back in February, I attended Crossroads Church and co-preached on the theme of “love your enemies” just a few days before I was scheduled to speak at City Council against a harmful housing motion. The timing was tough. “Love your enemies” was a challenging theme to reflect on when the City of Vancouver has been putting forward policy directives that will harm our neighbours in the Downtown Eastside and the broader community.



For starters, Council voted to stop building new supportive housing units across the city. Then, they proposed changes to the Downtown Eastside local area plan that will displace long-time residents and gentrify the neighbourhood. Now, we hear

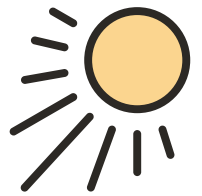
that the City has withdrawn its support of the Kitsilano supportive housing development during a homelessness crisis.

With all these actions, it's easy to fall into an adversarial frame. But as I reflect on that sermon

and the call to love our enemies, I'm reminded: The City isn't our enemy, they are our partner, even if they are harder to love these days. We need to work together and find alignment and I know that the City agrees with us that homelessness is increasing and that it's not ok. And where we disagree, we will continue to speak truth to power, advocate for this community and hold Vancouver accountable for its recent promise that housing is a human right. And we'll do it with love, not because it's easy, but because we believe dignity, belonging and justice are the pathways to a neighbourhood where the worth of every person is celebrated and all people thrive.

Amanda Burrows,
Executive Director

Tenant's Rights are Heating Up



Ever since the deadly heat dome that scorched the Pacific Northwest in 2021, the impacts of climate change on housing policy have been an area of concern. In 2023, we advocated directly to the Minister of Housing to change the Residential Tenancy Act to disallow landlords from prohibiting tenants to install and use air conditioners. In 2024, our law reform platform took this a step further and provided specific language for the Act and detailed information about the dire health consequences—especially to vulnerable populations like seniors—that tenants face when they can't appropriately cool their homes. With summer in full swing, our work becomes urgent once again.

As it currently stands, landlords can still prohibit tenants from using an air conditioner, and the provincial government's free portable air conditioning program has been scaled back: now, only tenants who

are part of official Home Care or Mental Health and Substance Use Programs are eligible. These policy choices have dire consequences for tenants across BC.

We've already written to the Ministers of Health, Housing and Municipal Affairs, and Energy and Climate Solutions about these issues, arguing once again that landlords should not be able to prohibit renters from utilizing air conditioners, and asking that the free air conditioner program be made available again to low-income renters. Climate change isn't stopping. What was once considered unseasonably hot is becoming the norm and government must respond. That's where we come in. We will continue to advocate for the rights, health, and wellbeing of tenants as part of our commitment to justice.

Reconciliation in Action



Redevelopment and Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Artwork



Our new building is starting to come alive—construction is progressing smoothly and the exterior artistic elements are beginning to take shape. Public art shares culture, stories, and narratives about a place. It creates a sense of purpose, identity, and pride. Who is included and who is excluded from these public narratives matters—and that’s why we’re honoured to partner with Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh (MST) artists in the exterior art and architectural aspects of our building.

In addition to the brickwork pattern designed by **Debra Sparrow**, we’re proud to highlight two other artists who will be contributing to art and architectural elements of our new building:



kw̓elasəltən—Mack Paul is from X̣ẉməθḳẉəỵəm (Musqueam) and is a two-spirited queer, disabled, self-taught artist focused on traditional and modern X̣ẉməθḳẉəỵəm (Musqueam) design. Mack is designing the art panels located on the Hastings Street façade and the entrance to the residential tower on Gore Avenue. “It’s important to me to share our stories and language to the settlers and visitors on our territory. For this collaboration, it is important that part of my art is centered around welcoming to not only provide a sense of place but also to create a safe, comfortable place for the Indigenous residents. It’s been a long time coming for our people to be recognized on our own territory for our unique design.”



ts;simtelot—Ocean Hyland is a sə́lilwə́təł (Tsleil-Waututh) artist designing the vertical sunscreens on the western elevation of the building. These sunscreens will have custom fabricated panels featuring Ocean’s laser-cut images. “My work as an artist is to help cement my peoples’ history into these lands. Over the centuries, landscapes have shifted and changed: swamps turned to parking lots, forests transformed from towering cedars into steel and concrete. When we’re offered opportunities to share some of our wealth through the creation of art, it allows us to remember who we are and how we belong to this land. When people see our art strewn through the city, they can be reminded of who we are and how we belong to these lands.”



**FIRST
UNITED**

320 E Hastings St.
Vancouver BC Canada V6A 1P4

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



Thanks to our Frontline Monthly Donors

Our Frontline Monthly Donors are the heroes who keep our programs going year-round. So far in 2025, 388 monthly donors have given an astounding \$115,835! During the summer months, fewer people tend to donate—it's the consistent care of monthly donors that enable us to keep meeting the needs of the DTES community all year round. Thank you!



Your Values, Your Legacy

You can make FIRST UNITED and caring for the Downtown Eastside part of your legacy. Our Friends of First are those who have left a gift to FIRST in their will. As a Friend of First, your bequest will carry on your values beyond your lifetime, and ensure that we can continue to provide dignity, belonging, and justice for generations. Get in touch with us at **604.336.3047** or donations@firstunited.ca to learn more.



Volunteer Updates

We'll be launching a new volunteer program when our building opens in 2026! With three times the square footage, restarting beloved volunteer-run programs like footcare, and the launch of new program spaces, we'll need all the help we can get. Sign up now and we'll be in touch in the coming months with more information! Visit firstunited.ca/volunteer to sign up.



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