

**First United Church Mission**

320 East Hastings Street  
Vancouver , BC  
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Spring 2008

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# First Things First

## Newsletter

### Building on our Legacy: A new chapter in our ongoing story

First United Church has embarked on exciting new initiatives that are to be built on all that has been achieved in the past. This includes the possibility of building a new facility on the corner of Gore and Hastings streets. More importantly, it is about expanding and enriching our ministries as the United Church so that we can be and become a “*New Kind of Community in Old Town Vancouver*”. As once Jesus invited Peter to step out of the boat in the context of a frightening storm, you are invited to join the Spirit’s prompting and to be a vital part of the development of this intentional community.

For 123 years First United Church Mission has been a platform for living the Christian Faith within a context of extreme need and marginalisation. In recent times this has included courageous support for Insite, providing shelter in our pews for about a hundred people a day and an extensive ministry of advocacy, hospitality, healing and meeting practical personal needs. *(continued on page 2)*

### FIRST UNITED MISSION

Help us “ ”, save trees, save our Volunteers’ time and save postage too!

Please call us at 604-681-8365 or email us at [mission.office@firstunited.ca](mailto:mission.office@firstunited.ca) and we will email you our next First Things First Newsletter.



# First Things First - June 2008

*Continued from page 1*

The recent press coverage of the Downtown Eastside has reflected the massive challenges faced by the area and the choices it faces between being gentrified or continuing to be a refuge for the marginalised. The twin pressures of *Olympic Games needs* and *Profitable Development opportunity* are receiving dramatic and urgent attention. Critical choices are being made and direction-setting positions are being adopted. Either First United is a passive recipient of the outcomes, or it is a key shaper of the future. What we do and don't do in the next few months will significantly determine our own tomorrows and those of the community around us.

Who we are and what we do, was recently described by the Board as:

*"We are an inner-city mission of the United Church of Canada that has been called to be a part of the Vancouver Downtown Eastside. As such, we seek to be and become a faithful and authentic "Gospel Community" which, rooted in our Christian faith, is*

- *inclusive of all people (being "one in Christ") regardless of their place of residence, religious or political beliefs, economic or social circumstances*
- *grounded in the call to both be Christ for others and to recognize Christ in others – valuing diversity and individual difference and living out a relationship of mutuality*
- *intentional in its primary commitment to be with, stand with and to sit at table with those who otherwise live on the margins of society*
- *inspirational in celebrating Life, in proactively fostering peace and justice, and in consciously and actively embracing responsibility for the environment*

*The community of faith, which is this First United Church mission, will strive to include people of various economic means, youth and children while always remaining rooted in standing with those who are exiled in their own land."*

In keeping with the Biblical image that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, (Galatians 3), we have embraced the truth that the best way to address the needs of the marginalized is to be a community with no margins – powerfully expressed in the metaphor of the patchwork quilt.

While we do not know exactly how all this will play out, we do know that we are committed to being a Church, not an agency. We are committed to Community, not charity. We are committed to Growth and Change, not support that enables ongoing stuckness. We are committed to being an Inclusive Community, not an arithmetic sum of parts. We will actively oppose efforts

to gentrify the Downtown Eastside. We will equally passionately oppose efforts to maintain a marginalized sub-strata of society that measures success as "escape from the ghetto and return to mainstream society".

We know that we want to model this new kind of community – this Gospel Community of the inner city. We dream of a building that will house a community that includes people in subsidized accommodation, in single room occupancy, in market housing, and in supportive housing that meets the needs of those whose mental illness and/or addictions make them 'hard to house'. We embrace an "impossible dream" in which this community reflects young and old; couples, singles and families; members of the Christian and other Faiths; people intentionally committed to each other, to a lived enquiry about the meaning of our lives, to social justice, to the inspiration of the Spirit and to encountering the Christ within us all.

We dream of a building that will be an irresistible invitation to participate in hospitality that meets immediate basic needs; provides company over a meal for people from all walks of life; child-friendly space and family-oriented services; programmes for self discovery, learning and skills development; formal and informal post graduate study; services and agencies that offer counselling, advocacy, and healing; and opportunities for a transformational encounter with God. It is a dream of a community life that builds on what we already are and already do; that continues and extends 123 years of witness and caring.

We dream of a community set free by a building that sings of a deep commitment to eco responsibility, sustainable living, social justice and personal faith – a community whose composition is a symphony of hope.

That is our dream. We hope you share it. We hope you are going to help shape it. And we hope that together we can make it all happen! For now, we have the melody, some of the score and the basic instrumentation. We are exploring options for purchasing land adjacent to the present building. We are exploring possible partnerships with other agencies – for shared commitment to capital and operational costs, and for viability of ongoing provision of services and infrastructure. We are inviting your prayers, your suggestions, your support and your involvement. As you have in the past, so may you continue to be part of this "New Community" – one that is as old as the Gospel and that has been present in the Downtown Eastside for 123 years.

*Ric Matthews (Minister of the Mission and Community Life – [rmatthews@firstunited.ca](mailto:rmatthews@firstunited.ca))*

## Insite is a moral issue

On the First United Church billboard we have written “Keep Insite Open”. On Tuesday May 27<sup>th</sup> B.C. Supreme Court judge Ian Pitfield helped make that happen. In his ruling he struck down the constitutionality of federal laws making possession of illegal drugs an offence, if they are applied to an addict seeking a safe environment to inject. He gave the government one year to rewrite the laws making it clear that the supervised injection facility in the Downtown Eastside, known as Insite, should be exempt from prosecution. The centre faced closure on June 30 when its exemption from the purview of federal drug laws runs out.

Now, Judge Pitfield has cleared Insite to continue operating, saying that its policy of harm reduction trumps the illegal possession of heroin and cocaine by its clients. Judge Pitfield declared that Insite is a place where health care takes place, and drug addiction is a health care issue, making it immune from federal drug prosecution. He said federal drug laws “prohibit the management of addiction and its associated risks at Insite. [They] are inconsistent with the state’s interest in fostering individual and community health, and preventing death and disease.”

The judgement is consistent with my own view that the supervised injection site is not in essence a political, social or economic issue. It is fundamentally a moral issue. It is a deeply human and personal challenge. It is not about fiscal options but about compassion. It is not about statistics but about people. It is not about other people but about us (you and me).

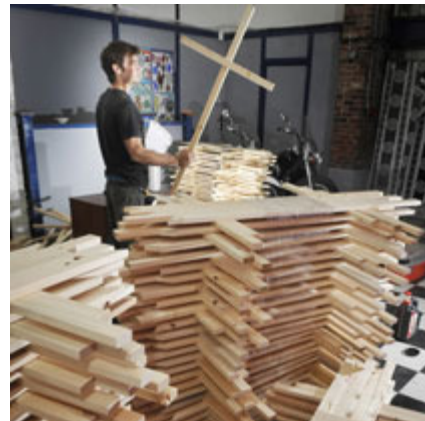
In one of the wealthiest countries in the world, against a backdrop of millions of dollars being spent in preparation for the Winter Olympics, it is certainly not about triage: trying desperately to allocate limited funds to an overwhelming financial challenge. Our dollars are limited by choice and prioritization. And those choices are in *our* hands – informed by our personal moral compass and our basic humanity.

In the spirit of Sydney Carter’s wonderful hymn, we will need to answer the Christ who asks: *“When I needed you to stand beside me, were you there, were you there? I was scared, I was lost, I was risking my life, were you there?”*

The loving parent of a troubled young adult determined to shoot up, can do all they can to persuade that person to get help to overcome the addiction. But while that addiction dictates the events of the next 24 hours,

that parent ultimately has two obvious choices: Leave the child you love to inject him/ or herself in an alley using dirty needles and running the risk of a lethal overdose; or find ways for this to be done with clean needles and in the presence of someone who can intervene in the event of an overdose.

Insite recently placed just under a thousand crosses on the lawns at Crab Park. One cross for every instance when someone overdosed at Insite – and when a life was saved by supervised intervention. The point would have been made by just one cross. Especially if that cross was for *your* daughter, father or sister. To care enough to want to prevent death and reduce harm, is at the core of being human. If we lose that, we lose everything.



Curtis Ashmead packs one of the almost a thousand crosses put together by advocates for Insite. (Photo by Ian Lindsay for Vancouver Sun)

Of course we do need to do more than harm reduction! The official policy outlines four pillars: Prevention, Treatment, Harm Reduction and Enforcement. It is very encouraging that so many people have stressed the need for Treatment (and the other pillars of Prevention and Enforcement). But in this wealthy country, it is not an “either-or” choice. It is a “both-and” challenge. We need to ensure we provide the best possible Harm Reduction facilities AND that we implement the other three pillars. There is no doubt that we have not done enough to effect the three pillars of Treatment, Prevention and Enforcement. They need urgent attention. However, a tremendous amount of energy has been spent (and likely will continue to be spent by some) on opposing the continuation of Insite. If we had invested all that energy (and resources) on implementing the other three pillars, we could already be much further in our collective effort!

*by Ric Matthews*

## FIRST UNITED MISSION

**First Things First - June 2008**

**Great Fun, Generous Response**

On Sunday, May 4<sup>th</sup> the third annual "Miles for Mission" was held as part of the Vancouver Marathon. First had 20 participants walking or running. They had over 160 sponsors and raised over \$11,000 .Thanks to Shelley Peters and the First Staff for making this event a success.

The Monday following, May 5<sup>th</sup> "Golf Fore the Homeless" took place at the University Golf Club. Bob Burrows did an incredible job organizing this fun event. We had 82 golfers and raised very nearly \$50,000 to support the work at First. Thanks Bob for a great day!

**Would you like to participate in shaping a new kind of Gospel Community?**

*Would you be open to sitting with and being a community with a variety of friends from the DTES? This is a new creation at First. A light meal is served, there is music and a good word spoken by Ric Matthews. The time is 6:00- 7:30 and the dates are every Wednesday night. Would you consider being part of a new kind of community in old town Vancouver? Come along, any Wednesday evening. Limited parking is available at the church but a parking lot is open south of the church. Arrive if you can by 5:45.....doors close at 6:15*

Five congregations help us to provide an " meal on Friday evenings at First. Each Group provides the meal and shares it with community members (and cleans up afterwards!). We hope eventually to provide meals each evening of the week.

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A Law student is presently doing a field placement at First. Three Nursing students from BCIT recently completed fieldwork at First.

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We are in conversation with the Vancouver School of Theology to explore the possibilities for training ministers at the Mission.

**The Fund Development team** is a great group of people who have interests and skills in raising funds and we have a very good time making sure the work of First is financially supported. If you are interested in joining the team, contact Don Robertson, [sdrobertson@shaw.ca](mailto:sdrobertson@shaw.ca) 604-986-0159

Working in the Downtown Eastside we often get calls from concerned and frustrated people who know there are grave individual problems and social issues that need addressing and cannot seem to find meaningful ways to get involved. One of our key challenges is to open up ways for people to engage with this community. In our advocacy program for instance, we have one volunteer notary whom we call on from time to time to assist clients who need to swear an oath or an affidavit and cannot afford to pay for the service. We also call on a volunteer social worker who serves as the assessor on provincial disability applications for individuals having difficulty finding a professional practitioner to do this. Several volunteers do our filing and reception during advocacy intake hours, one of whom keeps our filing system up to date. They are a welcoming and calming presence for people who are often at the end of their rope dealing with unresponsive systems. And we are thankful to the two dedicated volunteers who have organized the Housing Society waiting list over the last few months so we can now efficiently manage it and give quick, accurate responses on their status to people desperate to be housed. Often potential volunteers are initially motivated by a general concern around poverty or homelessness. None of us can take on these issues in their entirety, but each of us can play an important role in the ongoing work of the Mission that addresses them. Part of our task is to find places for people to live out their passion for justice and mercy. We alone cannot imagine all of the possibilities, but with the help of the wider community we are coming closer.

*Stephen Gray, Community Worker/Advocate*

**To all those who make a difference!**  
For those who donate their time,  
For those who share their talents and their wealth,  
For those who join with us to worship,  
And for those who pray for our Community and the work of the Mission...