

SUNDAY October 24, 2010

West Point Grey United Church, VANCOUVER

“Hope Lives Here” – Rev. Bob Burrows.

Three weeks ago I retired (...again) - - this time from 39 months as a part-time retired minister at First United Church. On the final day of September the staff had a surprise retirement lunch during which many nice things were said. One of the comments caused me to reflect on how and why I felt so comfortable being with the homeless and troubled men and women of the Downtown Eastside. In answering my own questions I realized afresh how fortunate I have been.

I grew up in a three generation household. -- Grandfather who needed my help in the gardening and always encouraged me in sports and school. -- Grandmother who was very strict and conservative in life-style but always reminded us that there is “goodness” in every person even when they are very different from us on the outside. -- Parents who believed in my sisters and me and found inexpensive ways of showing their love and support. -- And my father’s handling of an upsetting episode when two of his brothers told me, at age 8, what a terrible thing my father had done by hiring a Japanese-Canadian to be part of his construction crew in Toronto in 1942. -- And all the teachers and coaches and neighbours and relatives who were positive role-models.

I have been asked to provide a brief update on the current life and work of First United Church. The people who asked me to be here today were aware that I have been writing a book – the 125-year history – of First United Church, and it was suggested that I share a bit of that story.

We are thankful for those early mill workers, mostly Scots Presbyterians who worked at the Hastings Mill in the early 1880’s, who kept asking the Presbyterian Church authorities in Ontario to send them a minister. In March, 1885 – one year before the village of Granville became the city of Vancouver – a minister was appointed. Thomas and Mary Thomson arrived in April and church services began in the schoolhouse. Pictures of Gastown taken then show muddy streets and shabby buildings. A far cry from the southern Ontario communities where Mr. Thomson had previously lived and worked. And with horse and cart he made his way each Sunday to Sea Island where there was another new congregation developing.

By 1886 this new Vancouver congregation was ready to build a church. They purchased 3 lots just west of Main Street on Oppenheimer (soon to be called Cordova) and built a church that seated 375 people. It was dedicated May 16th. Four weeks later, on June 13th, the great fire burned the entire city to the ground, including the church and the almost-completed manse. It is hard to believe the spirit of these people, but with money sent by Presbyterian churches in Ontario, the church was rebuilt and dedicated on August 8th, 1886 (a mere 8 weeks after the fire).

Six years later the church was overcrowded and a new church was built on the corner of Hastings and Gore (where First Church is still located). This time they built for expansion; a sanctuary that could accommodate almost 1,000 people.

As the city grew and the people prospered, the more successful business and community leaders began moving to the suburbs; places like Grandview, Mount Pleasant and the West End. As these pioneer downtown residents moved out their homes were quickly filled by new arrivals from all over the world. The Sunday School and mid-week programs grew very quickly. Sunday worship services were still well-attended, but the financial support declined. The congregation was almost bankrupt by the start of the Great War in 1914. Over the next few years the crisis was averted because of the national Home Mission Board. First Presbyterian Church was sustained by the loyal missionary-minded people throughout the rest of Canada.

In 1921 it became an Institutional Church, and the new minister, Rev. J. Richmond Craig, was called the "Superintendent". Looking back now we can acknowledge our huge debt to the faithful members who hung in during the tough years on the edge of bankruptcy, and continued to pave the way for the new programs in the 1920's.

Richmond Craig – Morning and evening services were large. In 1923 both Camp Fircom and the Goodwill Industries (Welfare Industries of First United Church) were established.

The Methodists actually started holding occasional services in the village of Granville in the 1870's but were met with luke-warm response. They did establish a small mission attended mostly by First Nations people from various parts of Burrard Inlet in the mid 1870's but it was 1888 when a congregation was started. This resulted in Princess Street Methodist Church being built in 1889 one block from the Presbyterian Church. It changed its name twice, becoming "Central Methodist" in 1908 and "The Turner Institute" in 1916.

In 1925 – The Methodists and Presbyterians joined forces and became First United Church. J. Richmond Craig was the minister of the new, combined congregation and in 1925 was successful in picking up the radio license that had been established in 1923 by First Congregational Church (Rev. A.E. Cooke), and the radio broadcast services began, morning and evening. People by the hundreds attended their local churches in the morning and then made their way to First United in the evening. (It was a different time!!!!)

The Roddan era - - 1929 – 1948. Andrew Roddan (like Craig, born in Scotland) had a huge impact on the whole city. He was a radio personality. He lashed out at governments (all levels) in defense of the poor. The food response in 1930 (Roy Stobie – detective's wife report – jungles). 50,000 meals were served that winter (1930-31) and 1252 on one day.

The Great depression – For many First United Church was a lifeline for food, clothing, "summer camp", employment. Roddan was dynamic leader for Fircom (new buildings) Jubilee Hall. Followed by Reg Redman (Sat. Nite fellowship) and rescuing the Welfare Industries by getting Harry Murphy as Manager 1951-66.

Rev. H. Russell Ross – Superintendent for fourteen years. New church building in 1965. Strong leadership at both Welfare Industries and Camp Fircom and also the ethnic ministries. (German, Finnish, Japanese, Ukrainian, Dutch).

I worked with Russell for 2 years, then in 1968 we began a new approach to team ministry. (We had already started the Inner-City Service Project in 1967 and the Dugout Drop-In Centre (Dec 9/67). One of the students in the VICSP was Dave Hembling. He was responsible for bringing together Dr. Paul Termansen, Jon Jessiman, Betty Tarrant, Dr. Ben Chud, Rev. Glen Baker etc...to form the Crisis Centre in 1969.

We sought to work as a team ministry where most major decisions were made after discussion at weekly team meetings. We wanted to be able to respond to new challenges, and we did that in our first months when 1400 Czech immigrants arrived in 1968; School Canadiana started in 1969; Strathcona Summer Enrichment Project, 1969; Downtown Community Health Society, 1971-72; the dental project with Dr. Ron Martin, 1972; Glue-sniffing youth, Outreach Project, Outreach School in 1973-74.

Then came the ministries led by Rev. Art Griffin, Rev. John Cashore, Rev. Jim Elliot and Rev. Ruth Wright. You'll have to read the book "Hope Lives Here" to get a glimpse of the highlights of these years. Certainly the founding of the First United Church Social Housing Society in 1981 had a lasting impact on the community and the mission of First United.

The WISH Centre (1987 – 2008) was located at First Church providing brief sanctuary, rest, food and support for sex-trade workers. This project secured its own facilities a few blocks away in October, 2008. Healing Touch was instigated by two staff members in the mid 1990's and continues every Thursday with

faithful volunteers. Foot-Care "Saving Soles" began a dozen years ago and four mornings each week volunteers provide this ministry in the south-east corridor area of the church.

The current situation ? New leadership came in 2007 with the appointment of the Rev. Ric Matthews as Minister of the Mission and Community Life. He is a gift from God and the Methodist Church of South Africa. He believes passionately that we are called not to provide "charity", but to work with the downtown eastside men and women to build an "Inclusive Community".

The Mayor's phone call to Ric Matthews on December 7, 2008 resulted in dramatic changes to the ministry of First United Church. The shelter began providing 24/7 service on December 15th, 2008. Average 250 per night. Support from BC Government began mid-February 2009 and continues to March 2013.

The advocacy program has more than doubled because of exposure of the church to hundreds who were never there before the shelter era. Law Foundation is now sponsoring 4 new advocates.

But there is still a huge gap between expenses and revenue. I have had the privilege of helping with fund-raising. The CD, Duke Ellington, Golf Tournaments, "First Suppers", Jimmy and port wine jelly !!

I am proud of the United Church of Canada for sustaining First United (and other urban missions in other cities) through all the ups and downs of our marginalized men and women and families. I am grateful for the loyal friendship and support for First United Church that has been provided through the years by congregations and individuals throughout the Lower Mainland, British Columbia and Canada.

I am thankful for this congregation and the many people within it who have contributed their skills and resources over the past 40-50 years. Eunice Williams, Ian Housego, Jack Shaver, Art Griffin, Bill Hunter, Angus Mew, Gordon Laird and many others. You and they are part of a large cloud of witnesses, of early Vancouver pioneers, of humble folks who cooked the meals for the homeless in the early 1930's, of people who sang in the choir or served as leaders at Camp Fircom, of people who now volunteer to prepare and serve food for the homeless of 2010.

There are so many people to thank. Especially, let us thank God for the existence of the unique entity called First United Church.