

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none,³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions,³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

The appointed time has grown short. Friends we're in the season of epiphany – the season of startling revelations; the season of stars, and journeys, and strangers, who show us what we could not see before. And we're reading a passage in which the apostle Paul believes Christ's second coming is imminent. Paul believes he'll see fulfilled in his own lifetime, the promise Jesus made to his disciples that he would return. Jesus reign of justice and peace, healing and grace, accompanied by his own return, is that hope Paul believes is just around the corner. It's why he encouraged the faithful at Corinth to live as if it was upon them now.

Live as if, he says. Forget your distractions. Focus. Center. Get grounded in the idea that individually we are to be equipped to usher in this new kingdom for the present form of the world is passing away. Live in exactly the opposite way to the way you are living now....at least in your attitude and mind set.

This morning I want to talk briefly about my perspective about the one organization that in my mind has been helping people to live "as if" things were different for the past 126 years. The mission at First United Church in the downtown eastside has been in the news a lot lately, and I know there's lots of good gossip floating around the church – not just here, but the wider church about what we think is going on there. And like me, each of us will see what has seemed like a train wreck from different corners. Each of us has a perspective.

For those of you who don't know, there has been a lot of controversy in the past few months that reached fever pitch before Christmas over the number of people staying overnight that has exceeded capacity, and the need to house those in that community who are the hardest to like and the most troublesome. Where do the hardest of the hard go, when no one else will help them?

Even to some in the downtown eastside there was the perception that First United Church mission, became unsafe.

I'm not able to spin all the details here. And it is my opinion that the structures of the United Church of Canada, created at a time when the church was robust, and the risks not quite so high, have not served the mission in the downtown eastside. I'm part of those structures, so I confess my own role in not being as helpful as I could have been in the courts of the church where I have power to influence decision making. One of the biggest problems is that each of us has a different perspective on what "mission accomplished" looks like there. And there has been no process for presbytery to engage that question. I've been focused here at LVUC and not the work of Presbytery. I'm not alone in that confession. That's again, part of the problem with the structure of the higher church.

So decisions have been made; people have been affected; leadership has been lost. And yet, a vision of Paul's encouragement – to live as if justice and peace were realized – continues at First. Let me read an excerpt from a letter I received from the acting Executive Directors just this week. There is lots of information floating around...some of it is even moderately accurate. I'd encourage us to hold on to these words....and nothing more.

Dear Blair:

First United Church continues to provide shelter, meals, a wide range of programs and a needed sense of community in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In spite of what has been reported in the media, the shelter continues to operate each night and we serve 800-1,000 nutritious meals daily. We also offer cart & belonging storage; advocacy; healthcare including addiction support, bathing and toiletries, harm reduction services, foot care, mental health programs; education and recreational activities; mail, tax and outreach services; spiritual resources and more.

During the winter season, First United is home to many, supported by numerous United Church congregations who contribute socks, other clothing, toiletries and financial resources. Many also volunteer their time in the office, at meals and other services such as foot care and healing touch. We are very grateful for the United Church family's on-going support.

One of the matters recently raised in the media is the number of people staying in the church and the concern for everyone's safety. First United remains an inclusive community committed to ensuring that people are both welcome and

safe. On January 5, a process was introduced to better understand and help those who stay at First United and to provide insights about those who have multiple barriers to housing, employment and fuller inclusion in society.

There have been reports in the media that the overnight shelter will close on March 31. We are working hard to determine what the future role will be for First United in this regard, and we will advise you as the need and resources for an overnight shelter become clearer. Daytime shelter and all other programs and services are expected to continue.

At this time of Epiphany, First United Church deeply appreciates the many and varied gifts individuals and congregations bring to help realize this justice-seeking ministry. We welcome your prayers and continuing support of this ministry among the most vulnerable and marginalized people in our society.

For our more detailed statement about current activities, visit our website at www.firstunited.ca.

Warm regards,

Don Evans, Stephen Gray, Co-Executive Directors

I will forward this letter to the social justice team here at LVUC that they might plan for a visit from First United. Friends there is no other truth that these words. There are things that have to change in the structures of the church – of that I'm certain. But for those people who call the downtown eastside home, no matter where they sleep, the mission at First United Church is the only safe place they know.

The season of Epiphany is upon us. Live surprised by Christ's coming. It's upon us and it's yours to usher in. Amen.