



DIAKONIA  
PROJECT

*Case Studies in Faith-based Social Service*

# Union Gospel Mission

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## About Union Gospel Mission

Union Gospel Mission (UGM) ministers to people experiencing homelessness, poverty, and addiction throughout Metro Vancouver and Mission, British Columbia. The organization meets immediate needs in the region with emergency shelter, chaplaincy services, and meals. Union Gospel Mission also works to restore lives through longer-term programs such as affordable housing, stabilization for moms and babies, education, addiction recovery, job preparation, and more.

## Union Gospel Mission's Faith Community

Throughout its eighty-year history, Union Gospel Mission's work has been rooted in and motivated by its Christian faith. Union Gospel Mission is not a church itself, nor is it led by a church group, but partnerships with local churches are an important part of its mission. The organization has always

"We believe that the love of Christ is beautiful, transformative, dignifying, and life-giving, and that when we fully demonstrate the love of Christ, it brings wholeness, joy, healing, and incredible and wonderful progress in human lives. . . . God's creative, amazing, and transformative love works through us and amid us to reach people who have been dealt a really difficult hand in life and who want and desire that care."<sup>3</sup>

been intentionally inter-denominational: "We aim to reach out to and connect with as many church communities in the greater Vancouver area as we can," says Nicole Mucci, UGM's media communications officer. While this commitment to broad engagement has meant navigating some inter-denominational differences, it has also brought a renewed appreciation of pluralism and dedication to common goals based on the Bible's greatest commandments—love of God and love of neighbour (Matthew 22:36–40).<sup>1</sup>

Though UGM is clear that its foundation and motivation are based on its Christian faith, the organization aims to walk alongside others with similar mandates—including those of different faiths and those with no religious belief—to accomplish its goals. "We work with everybody who wants to help people who are struggling," explains UGM communications manager Jeremy Hunka. The organization knows that demonstrating the love of Christ requires serving without discrimination, and so it ministers to any of its neighbours in need.

## Theological Motivation

Union Gospel Mission emphasizes that the driving force behind all of its work is a commitment to live out the love of Christ. The organization believes that all Christians have a responsibility to respond to God's call to care for their neighbours, and in particular for those who are experiencing poverty. Union Gospel Mission holds itself accountable to God in its response to this call, and



as such it insists that all its work be carried out with excellence and integrity.<sup>2</sup> Its mission is also motivated by its commitment to the foundational Christian doctrine of human dignity: “Every person is created in the image of God, and every person has inherent worth and value.”<sup>3</sup> Since UGM believes that each person was created to flourish in relationship with others, it focuses not just on transforming individual lives but also on bringing restoration and renewal to whole communities.<sup>2</sup>

All of UGM’s work is grounded in hope—not a vague optimism, but a deep assurance established in the conviction that Christ is making all things new (Revelation 21:5), a hope that “suggests that things not only *can* be different but also *will be different*.”<sup>1</sup> This faith sustains both the organization and those it serves as they confront injustice and barriers to recovery. “The reality is not every person who comes through our programs gets it right the

first time. And the beauty of UGM is that we do believe in second chances and we believe in moving forward. . . . There’s always hope for recovery. There’s always hope for transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

## History and Goals

Union Gospel Mission was created in 1940 by a Vancouver resident named Bob Stacey. The city was struggling with widespread unemployment and alcoholism as it moved from one crisis, the Great Depression, to another, World War II. Stacey was moved by the suffering he saw, and he felt God calling him to act. Though he was just twenty-one years old at the time, Stacey answered this call by founding UGM. Supported by donations and volunteers from local churches, he rented the upper floor of 10 Powell Street, Vancouver, and began offering hot meals and a chapel service every evening.<sup>5</sup>

Eighty years later, UGM continues to advance Stacey’s vision of bringing restoration to Vancouver: “Demonstrating the love of Christ, Union Gospel Mission is determined to transform communities by overcoming poverty, homelessness, and addiction one life at a time.”<sup>2</sup> The organization aims to provide a complete continuum of care—from meeting immediate material needs to addressing structural barriers that hinder long-term personal development—for those experiencing poverty, homelessness, and addiction. Union Gospel Mission seeks to provide guidance and practical help through street-level outreach to Vancouver and the Fraser Valley’s

most marginalized residents. The organization works to restore the dignity of those it serves by meeting urgent needs for meals, shelter, and clothing. Through these services, UGM aims to connect guests who struggle with alcohol and drug addiction to its recovery programs, helping them to experience freedom from addiction.

Another of UGM's goals is to bring stability into the lives of the individuals and families it serves: offering educational and career development programs to equip participants for fulfilling work, creating affordable housing units where lower-income families can have a secure home, and strengthening family relationships with preventative programs.<sup>6</sup>

## Activities and Impact

At its first location, at 10 Powell Street, Union Gospel Mission had enough space to provide a hot meal to 60 people and to shelter 6 men overnight. More than 100 people attended its first community Christmas dinner.<sup>5</sup> Today, UGM has 7 locations across Metro Vancouver and the city of Mission and serves more than 3,500 people at the annual Christmas dinner.

Union Gospel Mission's main outreach location is at 601 East Hastings Street in Vancouver. The building hosts a range of drop-in services through which UGM outreach workers can build relationships with guests from the community.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, the organization served 295,664 hot meals, the starting point for its outreach to the



"Each meal is a time to build community, share home-cooked food, and develop connections that can offer a way off the street, out of addiction, and into a brighter future."<sup>7</sup>

community, and provided 28,976 nights of safe shelter. Union Gospel Mission also brings meals and encouragement to those experiencing homelessness in other areas of the city with vehicles called Mobile Missions, which made 1,794 connections in Metro Vancouver and the wider Fraser Valley area over the course of 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Another of UGM's most well-established services is its emergency shelter for men. The shelter, which is currently located at 601 East Hastings Street, is open 365 days a year and has the capacity to shelter up to 72 men every night.<sup>9</sup> Union Gospel Mission offers guests the opportunity to participate in Scripture devotions, if they choose, and to receive one-on-one care from an experienced case manager. Case managers help shelter guests move toward their goals, which may include finding housing or jobs, addiction recovery, or other supports.

Union Gospel Mission offers a number of alcohol and drug recovery programs to help men and women through every stage of their journey toward recovery. Everyone who enrolls in a recovery program participates in one-on-one sessions with a professional counsellor. The programs offered include the pre-recovery program Gateway. Gateway hosted almost 200 men in 2019, of whom 149 transitioned into a longer-term recovery program.<sup>8</sup> Union Gospel Mission encourages graduates of this program to take advantage of the community support, ongoing counselling, and employment assistance offered in the Second Stage

Recovery Program, designed to help them thrive in their newly sober lives.

Women who are considering taking steps toward recovery but are unsure how to get started can

"[One man I interviewed] has been sober for nearly ten years now. . . . He went through our program—he's an alumnus of the men's alcohol and drug recovery program—and is now one of the managers for [UGM's] custodial and janitorial team. So not only did he come through the program, but now he's spending his life giving and helping save other lives. And he's one of the people I work with who's become like family. . . . When I think of incredible positive change, I just think about [him] and the fact that he's maintained sobriety for a decade; he's helped transform and mentor countless other men who have come through the program, and then he's hired them to be his staff; he's saved their lives, he's been there for them, he's walked the steps with them—he does it every day."<sup>4</sup>



check into the Sanctuary, a temporary home where they receive compassionate counselling and support—one of the few places in Metro Vancouver where new mothers can keep their children with them while they work toward recovery. Union Gospel Mission also offers a recovery program at Lydia Home, in the city of Mission, where women work to transform their lives with the help and encouragement of professional staff.<sup>10</sup> Last year, 10 women completed the alcohol and drug recovery program at Lydia Home, and 37 women—6 with babies—were able to transition from the Sanctuary to the next stage of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

Union Gospel Mission recognizes that the struggle to find meaningful and fulfilling work can pose a real threat to its clients' recovery. For this reason, it offers employment, education, and career-development services to recovery program graduates as well as to members of the wider community. Through classroom lessons, workshops, and counselling sessions, people seeking to enter the workforce learn practical life skills and get support in finding work.

The Metro Vancouver area has become infamous for skyrocketing housing costs in recent years, which has exacerbated the problem of homelessness: the shortage of affordable housing “severely limits people’s ability to get into housing in the first place, and then causes people to fall out of housing and to fall into homelessness.”<sup>3</sup> Union Gospel Mission has partnered with the provincial government to meet the demand for affordable housing. The organization has 276 units of

“These women—regardless of their trouble, regardless of their trauma and addiction—they recognize that they want to be the best mom possible for their babies. And often a mom who is struggling with addiction and openly admits that she needs help may end up having her child removed from her and taken into care while she’s trying to recover. But when that happens, women are actually more likely to relapse; they don’t stay sober for as long. So the women who come through our Sanctuary program . . . get to keep their babies with them and are more likely five years down the road to still have their kids in their care and to still be in a recovery-centred life.”<sup>4</sup>

social and affordable housing in a variety of layouts, suitable for the needs of men or women living independently or of families.<sup>9</sup>

Union Gospel Mission has a number of supports for children. Eastsiders Homework Club, which runs every weekday, offers kids help with their schoolwork and stable mentorship throughout their school years. Union Gospel Mission also partners with donors to send kids to camp for a week every summer. By providing at-risk children with holistic support and encouragement, UGM aims to serve whole families.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, sponsorships made a summer camp vacation possible for 622 children and parents.

Two of UGM’s locations are retail shops: a thrift store in Vancouver and a social-enterprise boutique

in New Westminster. The thrift store, located just a few steps down the street from UGM’s main outreach location, is supplied by donations of gently used clothing, books, household goods, sporting equipment, and small furniture. All items are sold to the community at low cost or distributed to UGM clients for free through its other programs.<sup>11</sup> Union Gospel Mission’s other shop, the Found boutique in New Westminster, sells both new and used items, focusing on supporting local businesses and designers. Found is branded as a fashion collective but also sells home décor, gifts, and skin-care products alongside its collection of clothing and accessories. All proceeds from the boutique support UGM’s work.<sup>12</sup>

## Support and Budget

Union Gospel Mission is a large and growing ministry. In the 2016–17 fiscal year, the organization reported \$18.3 million in revenue; last year, UGM’s total revenue was just under

\$27.5 million—an increase of 52 percent in three years. A large majority of this revenue—\$23.8 million, or 87 percent of total income in 2018–19—came from private donations. Most of the other 13 percent of UGM’s revenue came from social-housing funding, which amounted to \$2.5 million. The remaining \$1.1 million (4 percent) in revenue included: store sales (\$0.5 million), investments (\$0.2 million), and other miscellaneous sources of income.<sup>13–15</sup>

Union Gospel Mission reported \$19.5 million in expenses for the 2018–19 fiscal year. Most of this money was spent on programs, which took up just over half of expenditures (\$10.6 million, 54 percent). Another quarter was spent on public education and fundraising (\$4.6 million, 24 percent). The rest of UGM’s expenses paid for properties and infrastructure costs (\$2.6 million, 14 percent) and general administration (\$1.6 million, 8 percent). Union Gospel Mission donated the year’s surplus of revenue over expenses (\$8.5 million) to the Union Gospel Mission Foundation, which has net assets of \$35.4 million, to support its long-term work.<sup>13–16</sup>

Since the people UGM serves are vulnerable adults and children, most of its frontline work is carried out by professional staff. However, many of the organization’s programs are also supported by a team of dedicated volunteers: “We’ve got this huge network of volunteers that spans from young adults all the way to people who are in their eighties, and each of them is vital.”<sup>14</sup> Some provide customer service at the thrift store and Found



boutique. Others participate in outreach, lend a hand in the kitchen, or travel with the Mobile Mission. Some volunteers offer their support for a one-time shift, while many others serve regularly or as part of a tailored student placement.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

In spite of the challenges—many of which have been exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—the organization’s foundation of hope remains unshaken: “There are hard days at work. There are hard weeks. There are hard months. Sometimes we lose people we care about. But at the end of the day, all signs point to God: he’s there with us and he’s helping provide light at the end of the tunnel for everybody.”<sup>4</sup> It is this Christian hope for recovery and transformation that sustains Union Gospel Mission in the face of deeply entrenched injustices. The organization insists that removing the structural barriers to financial security, stable housing, and long-term sobriety will require sustained effort from all members of society—not just charities or governments but community leaders, institutions, and individuals as well. But UGM also emphasizes that every action taken to help someone in need makes a difference, even if it seems small. Indeed, Bob Stacey’s legacy is a powerful example of how one person, determined to demonstrate his Christian faith to his neighbours, can spark a powerful movement of transformation. “We all can do something. And when people do, things change.”<sup>3</sup>

“Some people see somebody homeless on the streets, and they tend to just think that moment represents the person’s life. But we need to realize that that moment in the person’s life does not define them for life. They have a past—which often involves trauma or grief or mental anguish of some sort or mental health—and they have a present, which you’re seeing now. But they also have a future. And if only we could see . . . their past and their future, not just where they are in that moment. I think this would be a way less judgemental place and a more hopeful place, because there are often incredible, incredible transformations that are coming that we just don’t see.”<sup>3</sup>

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## DIAKONIA PROJECT

The Greek word ‘diakonia’ expresses the act of being called to serve. The Cardus Religious Freedom Institute’s Diakonia Project presents a series of eight different initiatives in which Canadians of faith serve their community. This highlights a core aspect of religious freedom: the freedom to live out one’s deepest held beliefs through concrete actions that serve the common good.

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