

From spare change to bold change

At Cordova and Dunlevy, the junkies still shoot up, prostitutes stake out their territory, spare change is in demand, and nomadic street people hawk objects of dubious legal origin. Things don't change quickly in the Downtown Eastside.

But they do change.

Since the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement next door stopped their sandwich and clothing service earlier this month, the adjacent Door is Open has become the Catholic presence on the block. Volunteers inside the drop-in centre are making hundreds of sandwiches for the noontime rush.

Within hours, hundreds of street people will descend on the Door is Open operated by Catholic Charities. Some will take their lunch in hand and head back out to the sidewalk to eat it. Others will sit a few minutes at one of the centre's tables and eat with neighbours.

A few will collect non-perishable groceries from the centre's food bank, while others might need to pick up some fresh clothes from the centre's clothing room.

The Door is Open has experienced some impact from the Sisters' departure, especially mid-afternoon, when the Sisters traditionally handed out sandwiches mid-afternoon. By that time the Door is Open has stopped serving lunch and visitors have to make do with pastries and other snacks with their coffee.

But the Door is Open has been able to accommodate its new guests who are grateful to have a place to eat just metres away from where the Sisters distributed sandwiches.

At a farewell Mass and celebration at Holy Rosary Cathedral Sunday, Aug. 28, the Archdiocese of Vancouver bid the Sisters of Atonement adieu for 85 years of unparalleled service.

The Sisters, in return, thanked the many donors and volunteers who have supported them more than eight decades and also expressed their appreciation to the Archdiocese of Vancouver for committing to continue service to the Downtown Eastside.

As the Sisters retire from decades of serving the Downtown Eastside with everything from sandwiches to clothing to counselling and schooling, some people are disappointed that the Archdiocese of Vancouver didn't take over the Sisters' service.

The Archdiocese, however, wants to use the opportunity to get a fresh perspective on the neighbourhood. As Catholic Charities continues to operate the adjacent Door is Open, it is talking with other churches and charities in the Downtown Eastside to see where the areas of greatest need are.

The Archdiocese has committed to building on the Sisters' legacy. The exact form that service will take isn't known yet. But as the Sisters of Atonement leave an appreciative Church and neighbourhood behind, Catholic Charities gets set to roll up its sleeves to see how it can best remain a critical partner in the neighbourhood.

It's following the example of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa's nuns who are moving into the convent left behind by the Sisters and being purchased by the Archdiocese. The Missionaries will

relocate to the community and get to know it before determining how they can best serve their new neighbours.

The Archdiocese of Vancouver and the Missionaries of Charity are among more than 100 organizations serving the Downtown Eastside. The Catholic Church wants not only to be a partner, but to make sure it's providing a service every bit as valuable as what the Sisters were doing.

That's the way to ensure a legacy as valuable as the Sisters of Atonement's isn't lost.

-- Paul Schratz