

Unions and partnerships: the making of a city congregation

The earliest of AUC's congregations met from 1802 at North College Street Chapel, renamed Argyle Square Chapel after 1840. The congregation of Argyle Square moved to George IV Bridge in November 1861 into the building named Augustine Church.

Augustine-Bristo: a different kind of congregation

On 1 January **1941** Augustine Church united with Bristo Place Church and was renamed **Augustine Bristo Congregational Church**. Bristo brought to the George IV Bridge building a more 'local' congregation and a different social-economic grouping. Isa Morey, a former member born nearby in Buccleuch Street, recalls friends living in Bristo Port, where the modern extension to the National Museum of Scotland now stands (and which, in the 1940s, boasted Edinburgh's first Chinese Restaurant). They and their families brought to the church union a far wider mix of backgrounds than had previously existed. Isa's own grandfather had been the town's knife grinder.

Until this point, Augustine had been dominantly, thou not uniformly, middle class professional in its make-up:

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Table 5:8 Augustine Congregational Church: Social Status of Members 1853-1905

class

Status Group	Male		Female	
	1853-1878	1878-1905	1853-1878	1878-1905
A (professional group, generally university graduates))	18	23	14	25
B (commercial group:- bank officials, accountants, insurance agents)	11	3	6	11
C (large merchant-manufacturers)	25	12	19	28
D (retired, annuitants, landlords, farmers)	23	28	60	69
E (public servants (I) druggists, local government officials, architects, surveyors, civil engineers, customs officers)	6	6	2	8
F (public servants (II) teachers, divinity students/city missionaries, other students, clerks, book-keepers)	20 (students) 18 (other)	13 (students) 9 (other)	8 (students)** 14 (other)	1 (student teacher) 7 (other)
G (small manufacturers and tradesmen, shopkeepers, lodginghouse keepers, dressmakers with separate business premises)	28	32	30	32
H (skilled and semi-skilled trades, nurses, cooks, shop assistants, dressmakers, milliners)	30	11	29	25
I (unskilled labourers, chimney sweeps, janitors, domestic servants)	8	3	80 (servants) 3 (other)	35 (servants) 8 other
Total in sample	372	254	533	400
Occupations traced	187 (50%)	140 (55%)	265 (50%)	249 (62%)
High Status (A-D) *percentage of occupations traced	77 (41%)*	66 (47%)*	99 (37%)*	133 (53%)*
Low Status (E-G)	72 (39%)*	60 (43%)*	54 (20%)*	48 (19%)*
Working-class (H-I)	38 (20%)*	14 (10%)*	112 (43%)*	68 (28%)*

Table: Augustine United Church: Social status of members 1853-1905

A range of professions are listed in the table above. An 1870 Trust Deed also names a boot and shoe maker and a retired ironmonger amongst the church trustees. However, the congregation does appear to have been dominated by merchants, company secretaries, politicians and, at that time, the Rector of the High School (Dr James Donaldson) and the President of the Royal Scottish Academy (Sir George Harvey). It was a tradition that continued and gave Augustine an 'up-market' reputation. Isa Morey's first impression was that the Augustine members were "a bit snobby" and "just weren't used to our way of life".

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On the other hand, Jo Barclay, an RAF-trained engineer, appreciated Augustine for the fact that professional people and 'workers' sat easily side by side.

What is clear is that, over time, the Augustine and Bristo congregations found a new way of being together, with compromise on either side (including the not-insignificant introduction of Bristo's preferred hymnbook, *The Church Hymnary*). In addition, the limitations that came with war had unexpected equalising effects. Lack of fabric meant that women stopped wearing hats during the war, and that unconscious 'Sunday best' social marker never made a come-back in quite the same way after the war (presumably to the relief of the Revd C.T. Rae who once observed that the smell on a Sunday morning was "overwhelming with mothballs").

Meanwhile, down in the basement, Mr Virtue, who at Bristo had had the task of winding up the organ each Sunday, became Church Officer, feeding the basement furnace that fuelled the church's gaslight and heating and, for the duration of the war, sleeping downstairs as the church's fire prevention officer.

Hope comes to George IV Bridge

In **1979** Augustine-Bristo united with Hope Park and Buccleuch Congregational Church to become **Augustine Congregational Church**. Like Augustine, Hope Park had had to address the validity of its city centre location on several occasions. In the 1930s and 40s it had flourished, with a lively youth fellowship out of which a number of young ministers were to emerge. But lack of finance and the problems of maintaining a large building on Hope Park Terrace led to serious consideration being given to moving the congregation out to one of the new post-war housing estates on the south side of Edinburgh. The decision was made to stay put, however, with a notable growth in community-focussed initiatives over the succeeding decades, often in collaboration with other congregations: a five-days-a-week lunch club for older or infirm men and women; a guidance centre for those receiving social security payments; and a door-to-door campaign guided by the Scottish evangelist D.P. Thomson.

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Augustine United Church is formed

In **1992**, Dalkeith Road Church of Christ, with whom Augustine already had a close relationship, made a similar decision to sell its building, and the two congregations united to form a new congregation with the name **Augustine United Church (Congregational and United Reformed)**.

The wider significance of this union derived from the fact that, eleven years previously, the Churches of Christ in Britain had chosen to become part of the United Reformed Church (URC). South of the border, the United Reformed Church had been formed on 5 October 1972 by a union of English Presbyterians and English Congregationalists; in 1981, discussions with the Churches of Christ resulted in the formation of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, of which Dalkeith Road was a member. Because of this, the newly created Augustine United Church was now a member of both the Scottish Congregational Church *and* the United Reformed Church, thus anticipating the union of congregationalism in Scotland and the URC by eight years.

The Churches of Christ

The Churches of Christ in Britain held a significant number of beliefs in common with the other denominations that made up the URC, particularly those beliefs rooted in congregationalism due to the shared influence of the Haldane brothers. Firstly, both denominations supported the idea of being a return to the New Testament or 'primitive' church and recognised the importance of being Sunday School education as well as overseas and home mission.

Secondly, the URC and Churches of Christ strongly promoted Christian unity. Writing in a booklet entitled *The Churches of Christ: their place in the Christian world* about the Churches of Christ, William Robinson states emphatically that the Churches of Christ have a passion for Christian unity - to see an end of factions, divisions and rivalries in the Christian world. Denominational rivalry has always been abhorrent to these churches.

Thirdly, neither denomination ascribe to a set of creeds and doctrines and readily assert the importance of individual conscience as well as key decision-making through the participation of all members of the church. Certain differences in theology included the Churches of Christ's support for weekly communion and believers, not infant, baptism. When Augustine united with Dalkeith Road, these differences were thoroughly discussed at a number of church meetings, drawing upon the World Council of Churches 1982 publication, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. These discussions resulted in a fortnightly celebration of communion and the acceptance of both forms of baptism.

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With Dalkeith Road members, and long-standing friends, Eric Nisbet and Jackie Glen in charge, a good deal was achieved on the sale of the Dalkeith Road Church of Christ building and the two of them oversaw the use of those proceeds for the subsequent refurbishment at AUC.

Dalry comes 'full circle'

In **2005**, members from the congregation of Dalry URC joined with Augustine. This represented a kind of 'full circle' return for the Dalry members. The establishment of a Congregational Church in Dalry in 1872 had arisen out of Augustine Church's acknowledgement that this part of Edinburgh, to the west of the city centre, was becoming more and more densely populated and needed additional places of worship. Two thousand pounds was offered from the sale of Aikman's original Argyle Square chapel to build a church in this area.

The newly merged congregation was now a member of the United Reformed Church in Scotland, formed by the union of the Scottish Congregational Church (which itself had evolved from the Congregational Union of Scotland) with the United Reformed Church in 2000. With Charles Somerville, the Revd Brian Bailey (minister, 1984 – 96, and a former president of the Congregational Union of Scotland) was one of those who played a leading role in guiding the Congregational Church through the negotiations that led to this union and he found himself debating its pros and cons with several members of his congregation. There were those who, though welcoming the union, remained critical of some of the URC's stances (for example on baptism) and its conciliar structure, which they considered too authoritarian.

Progressive and inclusive: the LGBTQI voice is heard at Augustine

The arrival of members of Edinburgh's Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) at Augustine has provided the clearest demonstration yet of the congregation's ethos of inclusivity.

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MCC was founded in 1968 in the United States by the Revd Elder Troy Perry Jr. as a denomination offering a home to LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer and intersex) folk. (See Progressive Theology below p.64)

MCC Edinburgh had been worshipping in the city since 1995, first at the LGBT Centre in Broughton Street, then the Edinburgh University Chaplaincy and the Quaker Meeting House before becoming tenants at Augustine in 2003. The first MCC Edinburgh service was held here on the Sunday following that year's Pride march.

For the next six years, the two congregations shared AUC's worship and meeting spaces. Then, in the summer of 2009, representatives of AUC joined with MCC members from across the UK at a church growth weekend held in Newcastle, focussing on the question, 'What is central to mission?' A 'spark' was lit, and a growing attention to shared values instilled. Both congregations valued their 'congregationalism' and both used a model of consensus decision making during their church meetings. But there was also much learning to be done, for example by existing AUC members around unfamiliar terms such as 'transgender', and a need for commitment and real sharing on the part of both of the merging congregations. Longstanding AUC members recall a far greater openness to a merger than may have been anticipated in a more traditional congregation with an older demographic.

Following conversations, MCC took the initiative to fold as an independent entity in Edinburgh and, with AUC, to merge into a new community that provided a welcome to LGBTQI folk. Many MCC members embraced this opportunity and, in April 2010, a joint service was held, on the theme of 'People, Poetry and Planting'.

There has been real change as a result of this coming together. Former MCC members brought with them a strong tradition of lay participation in worship and pastoral care, which fitted well with the model of Church Life Ministry Teams that AUC had been developing. This helped encourage a higher proportion of individuals to become involved in the congregation's ministry. The Revd Maxwell Reay, a minister in MCC and the NHS Community Health Chaplain in Edinburgh, has been recognised by AUC as an 'associated

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minister' at AUC. In 2014, AUC became an aligned organisation within the international MCC organisation. This has meant that AUC is now connected to the international denomination and has a voice (though not voting rights) at MCC's General Conference. Members from other Congregational and URC congregations have joined with Augustine over the years, including from Saughton Mains Congregational Church. In addition, at different times, the Scottish Congregational Church (and later the URC), considered unions with a number of other congregations including the Church of Scotland and United Free Church. The over-riding factor preventing organic union on these occasions has been a concern that the integrity and autonomy of each individual church, vested in the local church meeting, would be compromised.

However, the URC prides itself on seeking to work with Christians of all denominations, and individual churches are part of more than 400 Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Following the collapse of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union (SCIFU) in 2003, the Scottish Episcopal Church, Methodist Synod in Scotland and United Reformed Churches in Scotland worked towards the signing of a partnership agreement, which took place on 23 January 2010. Known as the EMU Group, the member churches are seeking ways to move forward together in unity, cooperating with one another in order to discover ways of sharing resources, ministry and mission.

The Local Church (TLC)

The Local Church (TLC) is an ecumenical partnership of churches located in the vicinity of George IV Bridge. It came into being at Pentecost 2002 when AUC, St Columba's by the Castle Scottish Episcopal Church and Greyfriars Church of Scotland entered into a local ecumenical covenant as a way of committing themselves to worship and study together 'as we work to establish a united, positive, progressive Christian presence in the centre of Edinburgh'.

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The Local Church covenant

We are united in Christian faith. We believe in one God in whose love we pray, celebrate and worship together.

We are all special. We rejoice in our individual strengths and seek to learn positively from our respective traditions.

Focusing on the love which binds us together, we pledge to continue to develop our worship, study and work together.

We serve the same community and encounter the same problems. We commit ourselves to working together to establish a united and positive Christian presence in the centre of Edinburgh. We will respond to the challenges of the future with determination.

We look forward, with enthusiasm, to this journey together. We pray that others will join us in this vision. We will praise God, our guide, in all our life's work together.

May God grant us grace, Jesus Christ insight and the Holy Spirit strength to grow in this shared covenant.

Amen.

As well as a steering group, made up of members from the three churches, that plans activities and organises yearly trips, there are also joint services four times a year and during Holy Week.

Also known as a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP), this collaboration came into existence following many years of engaging with St Columba's by the Castle, particularly through Lenten Study Groups, and Greyfriars, particularly through the Grassmarket Community Project (GCP). This project is a partnership of Greyfriars Kirk and the Grassmarket Mission. The latter was founded in 1890 in order to provide a number of services to homeless people in the Grassmarket area of Edinburgh, including a soup kitchen. Nowadays, the aim of the GCP is 'creating community and providing sanctuary and support to participants, many of whom are amongst the most vulnerable of our citizens.' For a number of years, Augustine has been involved with the weekly drop-in free meal and companionship service. There is also a Trussell Trust Food Bank based in the building.

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Historically, during the 1970s there was further local ecumenical collaboration with other neighbouring churches through the development of a united youth group: 'Saints and Sinners'. During the same period, St Columba's and Augustine shared their buildings when both churches underwent successive renovations. Although separate services were held, congregations shared coffee and the opportunity to get to know each other better.

Wider examples of ecumenical activity and a commitment to healing divisions among Christian denominations are demonstrated in the URC's membership of Edinburgh Churches Together, Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and the World Council of Churches.