

## **Conclusion**

### **The city centre question**

### **Re-visiting the question**

The Augustine response to that city centre question – **‘What is our purpose in the city centre and how can we respond to those around us?’** – has been, we can say, to look outwards. The congregation has endeavoured to be evangelical in its proclamation of the Christian Gospel; pragmatic in the development and use of its buildings; and, with notable frequency, determinedly compassionate – from the waving of pew rents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the support of community mental health chaplaincy in the twentieth.

Adapting continually to changing circumstances, this has been a task that has taken effort and one not without cost, to individuals as well as to purses. Witness the toll taken on James Tait Black, balancing the demands of family and business with the frustrating complexities of overseeing a major building project. Others since have empathised with that experience. Witness, too, the major developments and restorations beginning in 1968, 1993, 2002 and, again, in 2016. Each one of these has been with a single purpose in mind – as encapsulated following the restoration of the tower in 2005:

It is because we recognise that God is calling us to be *the ‘spiritual heart’* of this Christian Centre that we think it is worthwhile to preserve our heritage and to continue to develop and use it.

### **Being ‘the spiritual heart’**

Over the past decade, the community life of AUC has grown dramatically, connecting the church congregation with the work and activities of many thousands of groups and individuals who step off George IV Bridge and cross the building’s threshold on a daily basis. ‘The building is more used than it has been at any time since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century’, estimates one current church member. Indeed, a recent decision to increase the number of caretakers is evidence of the demanding task facing the congregation to keep its premises open almost 24/7.

There are practical reasons for this growth in the building’s use, for example a reduction in other affordable public spaces in the city. We are able to support groups to meet that would

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struggle to afford anywhere else. Often (but not necessarily) they are groups with which we are partly in sympathy as a congregation.

But the Revd Fiona Bennett believes that there is something more significant, namely the 'flavour of hospitality' that derives from the congregation's sense of mission.

Work has been done, she argues, not just on the building but 'inwardly', to build a community that includes and welcomes new people. The question "Why don't people come to join us?" is not only self-defeating; it has no spiritual heart. Rather, Fiona says, "there has got to be a core of church life in order to have something to share", one which is meaningful to people. And the core, the spiritual heart of AUC, is inclusivity.

Inclusion, as is made clear in the congregation's mission statement, is at the heart of the church's identity and mission. It makes AUC significant not only to Sunday worshippers from as far afield as Dunbar, Livingstone and Penicuik, but also to weekday and evening users as diverse as the Edinburgh International Centre for Spirituality and Peace, the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union, the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and the Edinburgh Trade Union Council.

The deepening relationship between members of the former Edinburgh Metropolitan Community Church and the congregation of AUC, moving towards shared work and worship from 2010, was a pivotal demonstration of the congregation's approach, which may be said to have constituted AUC's process of 'coming out'. As it was put by one octogenarian, a member of AUC for 60 years: "Augustine has always been a welcoming congregation and will continue to be so. That's it!"

### **Embracing change**

Striving to be the spiritual heart of a building opens AUC's congregation to others, and at the same time it changes who we are. AUC is a continually evolving community – which, we believe, helps us to remain healthy. We understand that every new person who makes a connection with the congregation changes who we are as a whole, with their gifts, insights

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and needs; and this goes for the groups and individuals with whom we make contact through the centre, and those we connect with in other ways.

This involves a continual process of discerning the needs of those around us. A 1992 report, compiled immediately following the union of the Augustine and Dalkeith Road congregations, offers just one snapshot of the congregation working to make the most of its city centre location. Care of church members and the latest redevelopment of the building are at the heart of the report, with close attention being paid to tenant-partners, which at the time included Christian Aid, Feed the Minds, and the Scottish Churches Action for World Development (SCAWD). “The intention is to leave a building to the next generation which is capable of accommodating the widest possible range of Christian activities in the centre of Edinburgh.” There was talk, too, of engagement with the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Saughton prison and the Ark hostel for homeless people, just off the Royal Mile. By virtue of the commitment of its members and the use of its building throughout the year, AUC was punching above its weight.

One can suggest with some confidence, that this has always been the case. Even when the church made space for a thousand worshippers on a Sunday, Augustine was nevertheless an independent gathering in a nation dominated by the great Presbyterian institutions of the Church of Scotland and Free Church; yet its impact, from the pulpit (Lindsay Alexander and his successors), through its contribution to overseas mission and, more locally, in Simon Square, was significant.

### **Making an impact**

Today, the task of making an impact in a diverse international city continues. AUC does so theologically, insisting that its ethos of inclusivity is an authentic expression of Christianity. It supports this with a strategic, inclusive approach to pastoral care, social engagement and continuing education.

And it makes an impact practically: maintaining our building enables a wide range of groups to feel welcome and to use the space for work and pleasure, providing activities and resources that meet the needs of the diverse individuals who come into a city searching for

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community.

Augustine United Church is used seven days a week, with some permanent tenants renting offices (currently Christian Aid, Jubilee Scotland and Paradise Green Productions) and many groups hiring rooms for regular and occasional meetings. But it also gives the congregation a base for mission, in the broadest sense of that word. Frequent discussions revolve around options that the members can pursue – from befriending networks to projects with young people; from helping with meals for the homeless across the road at Greyfriars to developing chaplaincy initiatives with the nearby Sheriff Court. With our Church of Scotland and Episcopal partners in the 'The Local Church' grouping around George IV Bridge, we aspire to:

- promote and work for social justice grounded in the challenges, skills, resources and needs of our locality
- build healthy individuals & communities
- promote an inclusive and progressive Christian voice in Edinburgh

Like our partners, the congregation tries not to rest on its laurels but to keep looking outwards, building bridges from its bridge location. Following the loving example of Jesus, its members and friends wish to place the needs of Edinburgh's people at the heart of their activities; and, because of that, they understand that there is still a vital, living space for this church building, and those who call it their spiritual home, in the heart of Edinburgh.



## **Acknowledgements**

Augustine United Church has been fortunate over the years in having members with both the enthusiasm and skills to research and record the history of its people and buildings. Most especially, successive histories and updating of histories of the church's story have been written by:

Abijah Murray  
Mary C. Parnaby  
Meredyth Somerville  
and  
Mary Brockington

It was Mary Brockington who, in 2005, undertook the task of gathering the existing histories into a single volume, *Augustine United Church: the Challenge of our Heritage*.

Mary's volume, together with related source materials, has been drawn upon at some length in the current history. These and other borrowings and quotations have still to be acknowledged in detail; this work will lead to up an updated version of the current document. We are hugely grateful to individuals who gave their time to offer information and documents, and to read and correct what we have written in earlier drafts. Undoubtedly there are still facts and statements included here that might be open to question or, at least, fleshing out in a more nuanced way.

Where perhaps *Augustine United Church: the Church on the Bridge – the story of a city centre congregation* differs a little from the previous histories is in its attempt to place the church's story within a broader social history. The story of our city centre church reflects the story of our city and it has been important to us to try and explore how our heritage has both affected and been affected by changes in Edinburgh's physical and social development.

We have also endeavoured to include in our writing some of the voices of current Augustine members who have their own accounts to share of the way things have been and how the church has changed over the years.

The story we have told is, in many ways, only a beginning. There is much more we would like to know; and many questions that have been raised as we've explored documents and spoken to individuals.

*Augustine United Church: the Church on the Bridge – the story of a city centre congregation* has been written and edited by Laurence Wareing with Nicola Robinson as part of Augustine's Heritage Lottery funded communications project of 2015-16.

**23 November 2016**  
**Laurence Wareing**