

Augustine United Church

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Sunday Worship and Junior Church 11.00am

Augustine United Church is part of
the United Reformed Church

We are committed to preserving our heritage and to continuing to develop and use it.

Our Church Centre provides office space for Christian Aid, Jubilee Scotland and the Edinburgh Community Mental Health Chaplaincy, and we make our premises available for hire by a wide range of community groups and other congregations.

We continue to maintain a place of worship, welcome, prayer and friendship at the heart of our city, in active engagement with people around us and across the world.

All are welcome at our services.



We take our name from the fourth-century North African bishop and scholar, Augustine of Hippo.

The Church was founded in 1802 by John Aikman, and in 1861 moved from its 'dark, dingy, comfortless' first home (sold to make way for the Museum in Chambers Street) into the present building, expressing by its architecture the imaginative, forward-looking, unconventional spirit well suited to the congregation's Independent principles. John Hay's modernistic design caused consternation throughout Edinburgh, and the tower was famously ridiculed as a 'bridescake'. A series of cast iron columns, connecting with massive internal cross walls in the lower floors, was designed to take the weight of the hammer-beam roof, so that the 4-storey walls could be built unbuttressed on the narrow site. Even so they buckled when the slater began work, until David Bryce averted disaster with modifications tying the walls to the columns. Some of the columns are now hidden within the structure, but others are still visible in the Sanctuary and in the Studio on our lower floor.

It is hard for us now to understand the strength of feeling aroused by a suggestion leaked prematurely to the press that the new building should contain an organ, but eventually, in 1863, the first organ to be installed in an Edinburgh church (other than Roman Catholic or Episcopal) was inaugurated. It was the gift of a London newspaper proprietor, and stood in the gallery, a tribute to twenty years of patient, gentle persuasion by the minister. It was replaced in 1929 by an instrument by A.E. Ingham, placed at the front.

The Church has changed with the times. Unions with a number of congregations have led to several changes of name and to a constantly revitalised congregation. Alterations have been made to the building, most recently in 1994/95 when the entrance was restored to its original central position and the doors glazed, opening up the Church to the life of the City. At the same time the foyer was extended, the pulpit was removed and the pews were replaced by chairs, allowing us to create a flexible, open area suitable alike for worship, for public meetings and for concerts (its acoustics are admired); the Ingham wind organ was replaced by a modern electronic instrument, installed within the earlier wooden case and using the pipes as a sounding box.

The opportunity was also taken to display to advantage two stained-glass windows that could hardly be seen in their original position in the gallery. They had been placed there in 1903 as memorials to the famed preacher, William Lindsay Alexander, minister of the church 1835–77, and to his wife Mary, a touching tribute to their mother from their children, and a perhaps not wholly serious reference to their father's powers of oratory, with its reference to Paul preaching so long that a young member of his congregation fell asleep with nearly disastrous results; Alexander was blessed with such a sense of humour that he frequently had difficulty in maintaining an appropriately severe demeanour in the pulpit, and no doubt he would have enjoyed the joke. The windows are thought to be the work of the noted glass painter R. Burns. A window in St Giles also commemorates Dr and Mrs Alexander.

Church members who made a significant contribution to public affairs and commerce through much of the 19th century include: Lord Provost and publisher Adam Black MP and his sons, head of the Royal Bank James Wright, and Town Clerk James Marwick.

Signs of our commitment to modern artistic life can be seen in a painting of Augustine of Hippo in the gallery, and a textile hanging in the sanctuary, both the work and gifts of the contemporary Russian artist Maria Rud. Every summer, our worship space and two other rooms are transformed to accommodate Fringe performances.

As time went on, the architectural idiosyncrasies of the Augustine tower, with its bold mixture of Romanesque, Renaissance and late Classical motifs and its unique 3-tier octagonal spire, came to be recognised as a valuable part of the Edinburgh skyline, but this recognition coincided with a progressive deterioration in its fabric. Some of the more vulnerable ornamentation became lost, and in 1984 the top tier of the spire had to be removed, leaving the rest of the structure in a potentially unstable condition which eventually threatened the safety of the whole building. Palliative measures were tried over several years, but they proved ineffective and increasingly costly, so in 2002 the congregation chose to mark the 10th anniversary of the coming together of Augustine Congregational Church and Dalkeith Road United Reformed Church by deciding to restore the exterior of the building and to make the Centre more accessible to everyone. The top of the tower was rebuilt and the whole of the rest of the external fabric made safe, as befits a building within the conservation area of the central Edinburgh World Heritage Site. The project was funded by generous grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland and the Scottish Churches Architectural Heritage Trust, with the remainder being raised from within the congregation. At the same time we installed a lift platform to allow access to the lower level of the Church Centre, where further work to bring rooms there up to an acceptable modern standard has now been completed.