

**Part 1**

**Who we are**

## **Introduction: ways of looking at ourselves**

### **a statement, a logo, a banner**

#### **A statement: "surprisingly radical"**

From its inception until the present day, the members of Augustine United Church (AUC) have endeavoured to engage meaningfully with different communities around them, responding flexibly to changing needs and, often, with a 'bias to the marginalised'. Unfettered by expectation or cliché, AUC has evolved into an inclusive, accepting and affirming community, reflected in worship that has become increasingly progressive, challenging and accessible. For these reasons, at a time when perceptions of Church attitudes and priorities can be at best generalised or at worst stereotyped, it has been suggested that Augustine is "surprisingly radical".

#### **A logo: the dandelion**

"Augustine United Church aspires to be an active, inclusive Christian community, growing in depth and numbers."

In recent years, Augustine has adopted the dandelion as its logo. The dandelion is a flower of hope, spreading seeds of new growth and joy even in hard places. Often perceived by adults as a weed and by children as a bouquet, the dandelion has small, determined seeds, very like the mustard seeds with which Jesus compared the Commonwealth of God (Matthew 13: 31-32). We hope the life and work of our community will be like dandelion seeds; carried in the breath of the Spirit to grow justice and joy in our lives and world.

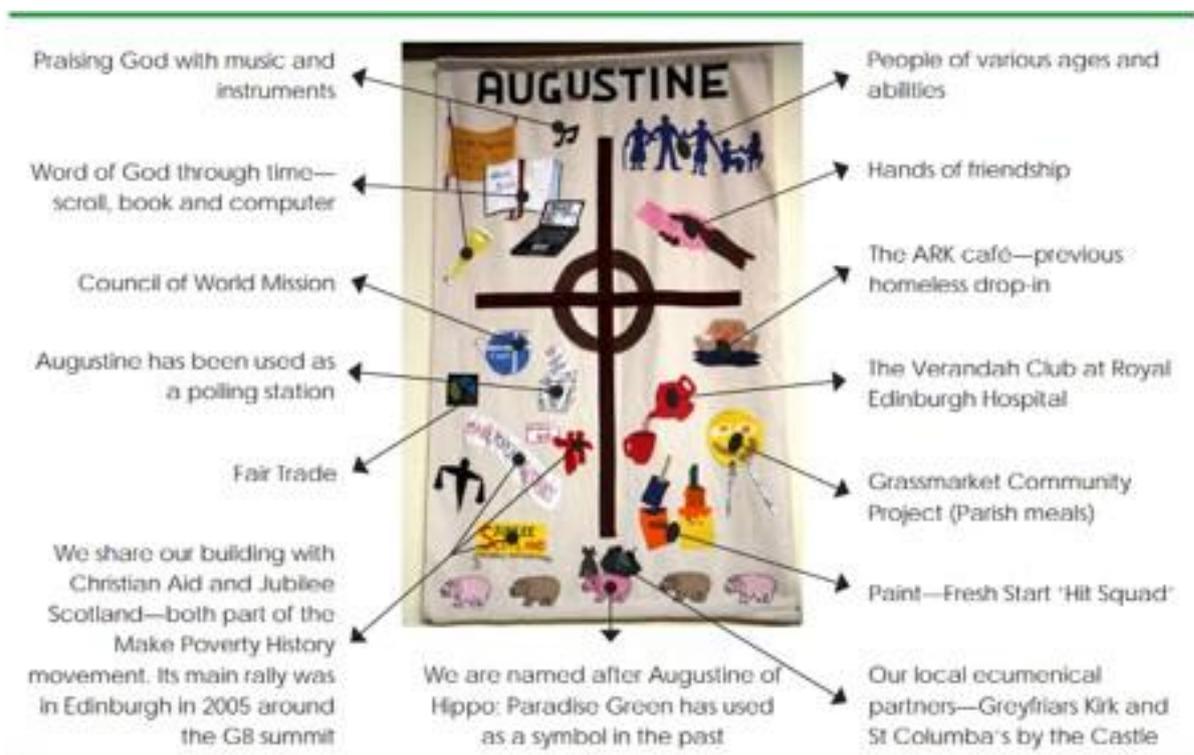


Augustine United Church: The Church on the Bridge  
**Introduction and 'the city centre question'**

**A tapestry: expressing priorities**

One of the banners that hangs in the church sanctuary was created for the 2007 Synod of the URC in Scotland (a gathering of representatives of United Reformed congregations from across Scotland), for which each congregation was asked to provide a display showing how it communicated with, and involved, people 'outside' the church. The AUC tapestry is made up of four quadrants surrounding the cross and expressing:

- (top left) the different forms in which God's message is relayed to us, and the ways in which we share the stories and wisdom of the Bible with our children and others
- (top right) our mission of inclusion and affirmation at Augustine – to all races, genders, sexualities, ages, faiths and abilities
- (bottom right) local projects in which church members participate, engaging with the surrounding community
- (bottom left) some of the campaigns and partnerships that reflect our engagement with the wider world



## The 'city centre question'

The question '**What is our purpose in the city centre and how can we respond to those around us?**' has confronted the congregations of Augustine United Church from the beginning. For much of its history, AUC has not been made up, primarily, from individuals or families that lived nearby. Like the majority of other city centre churches in Edinburgh nowadays, AUC is, and has been for most of its history, a 'gathered congregation'.

One period that might be regarded as an exception, or at least a transition point, followed the 1941 union of Augustine Church and Bristo Place Congregational Church (previously Brighton Street Evangelical Union Church), which served its local community and was surrounded by a far higher density of population than now exists in Bristo Place. For a while, at least, there was more of a 'local parish' feel to the congregation.

By 1958, that 'local' residential population was dwindling. Nearby building initiatives were for non-residential purposes. In May 1958, Heriot Watt College (now University), which had already developed land behind the church, put in an offer for the building. It would have made financial sense to accept the offer and engage with this opportunity. Membership was falling, attendances continuing to decline, and the costs of those travelling in to Sunday worship were rising. Nevertheless, the Congregational Union of Scotland felt that it still required a presence in the centre of Scotland's capital city.

The nature of that presence – the character of Augustine's ministry and mission – has been shaped necessarily by the building and its location 'on the bridge'. When trying to stretch its use beyond Sunday worship and traditional pulpit-based Gospel proclamation (its original *raison d'être*) this has been a limiting building in many ways. Though open to use by outside groups (not least during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe – a development that evolved considerably as the 1950s became the 60s), it wasn't until significant structural changes were implemented in 1968 that the range of partnerships with like-minded organisations that we experience today began to take root.

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The building itself has lasted longer, and in far better shape, than one might have expected, jammed up as it was against the Victorian equivalent of a fly-over. It was built with relatively limited financial resources; was constrained by a narrow site; and jostled for foundation supports with the bridge itself. It has been a structure regarded by turns as exuberant, awkward, confining and inventive. Within it, the AUC congregation has continued not so much to *reinvent* itself as to *evolve*, in line with its independent (many would say 'radical') roots.

AUC has asserted its freedom to express a progressive, increasingly inclusive, faith and adapted itself to the changing needs and expressions of the city centre communities around it. 'Dr Alexander's church' has been, and remains, home to a pilgrim congregation, always on the move. Its people, like the building itself, continues to adapt to community needs. In the words of one contemporary hymn writer, we endeavour to:

journey inward, journey outward,  
stir the spirit, stretch the mind,  
love for God and self and neighbour  
marks the way that Christ defined."

(from 'God has set us on a journey' by Joy Dine © Revd Mervyn Dine)