



# The Church on the Bridge

*The story of a city centre congregation*

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# Augustine United Church



*The dandelion has small, determined seeds, very like the mustard seed with which Jesus compared the Commonwealth of God. We hope that the life and work of our community here at Augustine will be like dandelion seeds; carried in the breath of God's Spirit to grow justice and joy in our lives and world.*

We have a motto at Augustine: 'Growing seeds of justice and joy'. It mirrors our dandelion logo. Every day we strive to develop in line with our radical and independent roots, an ever-changing community growing in depth and numbers. Our congregation is made up of people who have either moved here or belonged to other churches that have merged with Augustine. So people have experienced change and, as a result, are *open to change*.

Unfettered by expectation or cliché, Augustine has evolved into an inclusive and affirming community, and endeavours to reflect this in worship that is progressive, challenging and accessible. There is a flavour of hospitality that derives from a sense of mission and an emphasis on inclusion for all, no matter their age, race, gender identity or sexual orientation.

For these reasons, at a time when perceptions of Church attitudes and priorities can become at best generalised or at worst stereotyped, it has been suggested that Augustine is 'surprisingly radical'.

# Our History I

## The early years

From its inception in 1802 until the present day, the congregations of Augustine United Church have endeavoured to engage meaningfully with the communities around them, responding flexibly to changing needs and, often, with a bias to the marginalised.

Our origins, as of all the older Congregational churches in Scotland, are traceable to the religious revival that extended across Scotland in the closing years of the 18th century, led by James and Robert Haldane. Their supporters included John Aikman, the founder and first minister of Augustine. Congregationalism was successful often in areas, both rural and urban, where the Friends of the People movement was campaigning for political reform, which would include the extension of the franchise to middle class men. Political and religious independent thought moved hand in hand.

As the Haldanes' first congregation in Edinburgh expanded (first at The Circus on King Street, now Little King Street at the head of Leith Walk; and, subsequently, at the Tabernacle on the site now occupied by the Playhouse Theatre), Aikman conceived the idea of establishing an offshoot congregation, which he did in an unprepossessing and awkwardly shaped street on the city's south side. The chapel in North College Street, next to the as yet incomplete University College, was built at Aikman's own expense and opened for worship on 'the Lord's Day the 30th May', 1802. This was the forerunner of present-day Augustine.

Aikman ministered at the chapel (later renamed Argyle Square) until his death on 6 February 1834, aged 64. He was buried under the church's communion table and when the building was later demolished his remains were reinterred in Greyfriars Kirkyard, where an obelisk stands to his memory.

He was succeeded by the Revd Lindsay Alexander, described by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as 'perhaps the best-known non-Presbyterian minister in Scotland' of his time. The son of a Leith wine merchant, Alexander's notable academic skills, oratorical gifts and commitment to religious



Original architect's drawing of the church



Augustine United Church today



independence became channelled into ministry. Following Aikman's death he was drawn by persistent entreaties to Edinburgh where his new congregation was already attracting some of the city's most prominent citizens.

These included the publisher and influential politician Adam Black, whose views on political reform Alexander shared; Sir James Marwick, the Orcadian historian and lawyer; Sir George Harvey, a figure and landscape painter; Sir James Donaldson; and James Tait Black, who would later oversee construction of the new church building on George IV Bridge.

Alexander's erudite and expressive preaching proved highly attractive; he was a prolific author; and his skills as a scholar were sought after. He was an 'evangelical', strongly opposed to any state interference with the work of proclaiming the Gospel, and he supported his old university professor, Dr Thomas Chalmers, during the seismic ecclesiastical Disruption of 1843. He was also 'progressive', particularly with regards to worship. Though his congregation enjoyed a reputation as 'the best sung congregation' in Edinburgh, it was not widely considered proper in Presbyterian and independent circles for congregations to stand to sing or form a choir – both of which Alexander permitted. Moreover (and controversially), in 1863 Augustine became one of the earliest churches in Edinburgh (other than Episcopalian or Roman Catholic, where they were more usual) to install an organ.

Times had changed considerably when Dr Erik Routley became the church's minister in 1959. A brilliant scholar and musician, he was a catalyst for the Dunblane Consultations that are credited with stimulating the 'hymn explosion' witnessed in Britain in the 1970s. On his death in 1982 he was described as 'undoubtedly one of the most brilliant hymnologists and theologians of this century'.

The legacy of Alexander's successors often reflected their times. During the First World War, the sermons of the Revd A.D. Martin supported the conviction that Britain was engaged in a holy war against the forces of evil represented by the Kaiser and Germany. Seventeen years later, in contrast, the committed pacifism of the Revd Gordon Hawes created tension with some church leaders and may have led to his ministry in Edinburgh drawing to a premature end. Or was it because, as one unsubstantiated suggestion has it, he was sheltering escaping German Jews in the basement of his manse on Mayfield Terrace?



*Four Augustine ministers (from top left): John Aikman (1802-34); Dr Lindsay Alexander (1835-77); Gordon Hawes (1935-40); Dr Erik Routley (1959-67)*

## ‘Augustine’: the name

Mr. Sloan was proud to tell that ‘Ae Sabbath, when I took in the Doctor’s lunch, we were haein’ a crack, and he telt me that they couldna hit on a richt name for the new kirk. I said, “Doctor, there’s a man ye spoke o’ in your sermon the day, and ye often quote him, and ye aye approve o’ him, Augustine. Would His name dae?” The Doctor lookit at me, and then he lifted up his haund, and when he brocht it doon a’ the dishes dirled, and says he, “Mr. Sloan, Augustine it will be.”’

*Lindsay Alexander was inspired to name his new church ‘Augustine’ by a conversation with his church officer, Gilbert Sloan.*

*Augustine of Hippo, a Christian theologian who lived from 354 to 430 AD, was one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity.*

# Our History II

## A change of buildings

The North College Street chapel was built by a member of Aikman’s congregation, Charles Black, father of Adam. His instructions were ‘that not one penny was to be spent on ornamentation of any kind’. Lindsay Alexander described it as a ‘dark, dingy, comfortless place’.

So when, in 1854, the Government decided to build a major showpiece museum in Edinburgh and offered to buy the chapel, situated at what is now the north east corner of the National Museum in Chambers Street, Adam Black jumped at the chance. He struck a sale price of £2,000 and an elaborate replacement building was planned for George IV Bridge

The bridge, opened in 1832 as a thoroughfare to the attractive suburbs to the south of the Meadows, straddled Edinburgh’s unequal worlds. The professional classes had moved out of the Old Town, leaving behind decaying buildings and stark deprivation. The new four-storey church, penned between bridge and breweries, rose up from Merchant Street in the Cowgate: unsanitary, dark, a place of poverty and disease. At the same time, at either end of the bridge, shops and trade flourished in the Lawnmarket and Brown Square, while Augustine’s striking appearance more than held its own alongside nearby public buildings: the County Hall, the Highland and Agriculture Institute, and the grand Bank of Scotland on the Mound.

The church’s modernistic design by Messrs Hay of Liverpool assumed that a series of cast iron columns, connecting with massive internal cross walls in the lower floors, would take the weight of the hammer-beam roof – allowing the walls to be built without any external buttresses on what was a narrow site. But when the slater piled several tons of slates on the roof in order to facilitate his work, the walls began to bulge out and only emergency modifications saved the day.





The design appears to have reflected the aspirations of an innovative, independent congregation. At the same time the project offered John Hay an opportunity to explore his interest in classical, European models of architecture. The upper part of the tower and spire bears some resemblance to the Giralda tower of Seville Cathedral. Lindsay Alexander's friend Professor John Stuart Blackie likened the tiered and elaborately decorated results to a 'bridescake'.

Opened on 8 November 1861, and known in its early days as 'Dr Alexander's church', Augustine has undergone many internal changes over the years.

In 1968, seating was reduced from an original design intended for around 1,000 worshippers, allowing the opportunity to create office space under the galleries for new tenants. Further changes in 1993-4 established something closer to Augustine's present-day arrangement, reflecting new priorities and changing styles of worship. The high pulpit was removed, as were the pews, and a replacement electronic organ was cleverly housed within the existing console and pipe case.

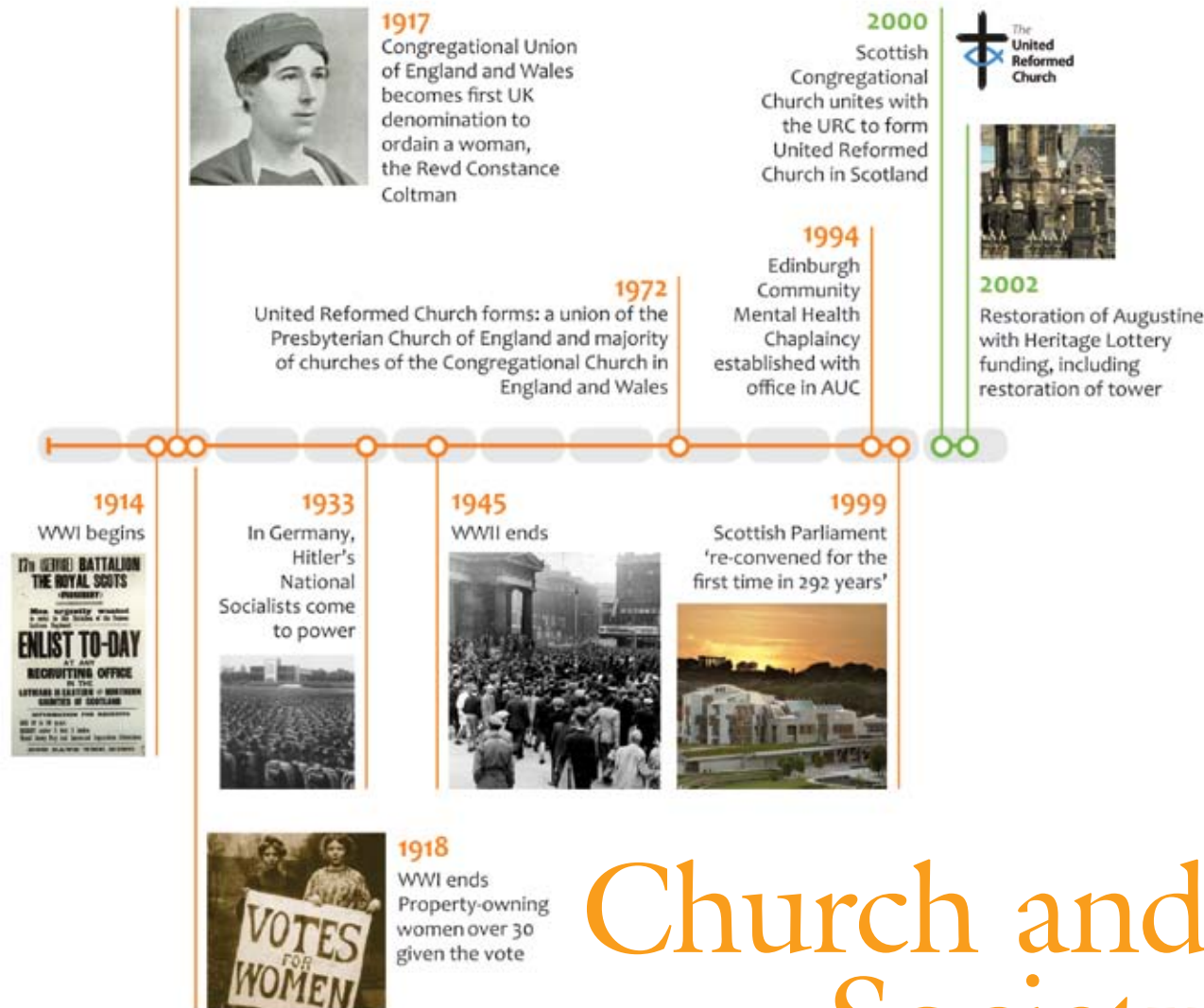
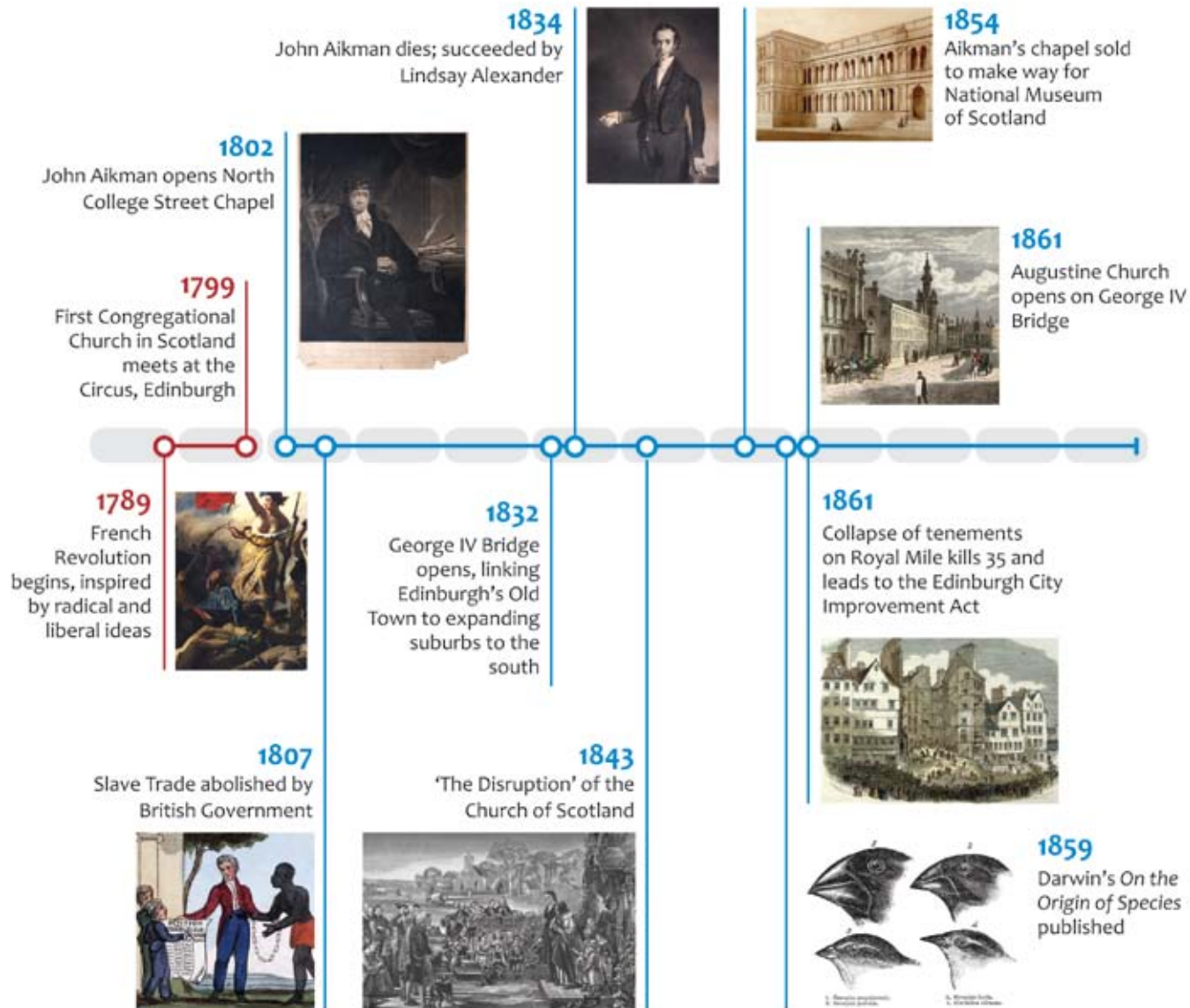
In 1970 the church was designated a Category B listed building by Historic Scotland. However, in 1982, following the fall of some small stones from the tower, the top tier of the spire was taken down and the hole covered over with a loose paving slab.

By removing the spire's internal support, though, what remained of the tower became increasingly unstable, threatening the safety of the whole building. So, in 2002, following twenty years of temporary fixes, the congregation embarked upon a major restoration and repair programme, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund together with Historic Scotland and others. Architects Tod and Taylor were able to reconstruct details of the original design and the spire was rebuilt, bringing the 'bridescake' back to something like its former glory. This was followed, in 2016, by a complete re-roofing of the church, again with Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic Environment Scotland support

Augustine is home to two stained glass windows in memory of Lindsay Alexander and his wife, Mary. They were presented in 1903 by their eldest son. In 2002 they were established as being the work of the noted glass designer Robert Burns. They depict St Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20: 36-8) and the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31: 10-31. Vividly coloured, an attractive feature of the windows is the use of moulded glass in order to depict the sea.







# Church and Society

two journeys through time





# Who We Are

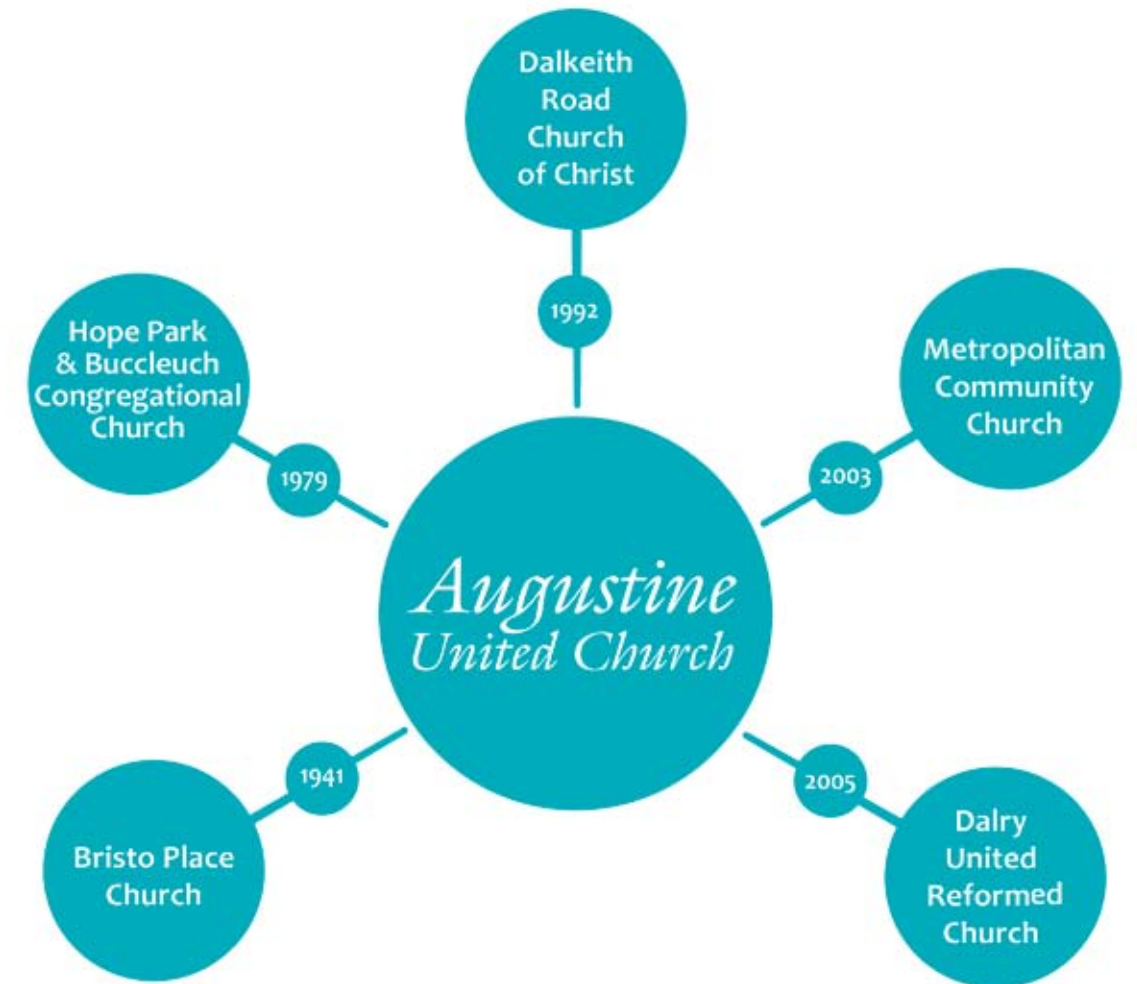
We understand that every new person and group that makes a connection with the congregation changes who we are as a whole, with their gifts, insights and needs.

# The making of a city congregation

Augustine has evolved out of a succession of unions and partnerships with congregations from across Edinburgh.

On 1 January 1941 Augustine united with nearby Bristo Place Church and was renamed Augustine Bristo Congregational Church. Bristo, surrounded at that time by a far higher density of housing, brought to the George IV Bridge building a more ‘local’ congregation than at other times in its history. It also increased the social diversity of the membership. Augustine had been dominated by merchants, company secretaries and other professionals, and had acquired an upmarket reputation; Bristo members reflected a far wider range of trades. But compromise and the social changes brought about during wartime allowed the two congregations to find a new way of being together. In 1979 ‘Augustine-Bristo’ then united with Hope Park and Buccleuch Congregational Church to become Augustine Congregational Church.

In 1992 the members of Dalkeith Road Church of Christ sold their building and joined with Augustine Congregational. Because the Churches of Christ was one of the denominations that had merged to form the United Reformed Church in England, the renamed ‘Augustine United Church (Congregational and United Reformed)’ was now a member of both the Scottish Congregational Church and the United Reformed Church, thus anticipating the union of congregationalism in Scotland with the URC by eight years. In 2005 Augustine was also joined by members from the congregation of Dalry URC (which had opened with the support of Augustine funds in 1872) to create Augustine United Church.



In 2003 the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Edinburgh closed and many of its members chose to join Augustine. MCC, founded in the USA in 1968, is a denomination that offers a home to LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) folk. Augustine is now recognised as an aligned organisation within MCC and has a voice at MCC’s General Conference. In this sense, it is sometimes said that Augustine has ‘come out’.





# LGBTQI ministry and Our Tribe

MCC has brought to the life of Augustine its tradition of lay leadership, its commitment to inclusive and affirming language in worship and, above all, the diverse experiences of LGBTQI folk who, in turn, have found within Augustine a safe space to be themselves and to express their many gifts and talents.

In partnership with MCC, Augustine now hosts Our Tribe gatherings – an LGBTQI welcoming and affirming ministry that meets monthly. The programme of activities is diverse and it always contains an element of worship, including communion, within it. We take part in Edinburgh's annual Pride march and are the only congregation in Scotland to hold an annual Transgender Remembrance Service. In September 2015, Our Tribe hosted Scotland's first ever LGBTQI Friendly Church Fair at Augustine.





# Women

Augustine contains in its heritage the first two denominations in the UK to ordain women as ministers: the Congregational Union of England and Wales (Constance Coltman in 1917) and the Congregational Union of Scotland. In April 1929, the Congregational Union of Scotland amended its constitution to allow the designation 'minister' to apply equally to women as well as men. However, in the previous year Vera Kenmure had been called to Partick Congregational Church, becoming Scotland's first woman minister. Augustine's own first female minister, the Revd Fiona Bennett, was inducted in 2009.

Over the years, Augustine's female members – though often less visible to modern eyes than the church's elder statesmen – have been of real significance in the lives of those around them: women such as Elizabeth 'Betsy' Fraser who dedicated her life to helping young women break the cycle of imprisonment through the Dean Bank Institution. More recently, former Augustine members such as Mabel Small, Ina Durrant, Carolyn Smyth and Jean Campbell have made their mark in diverse areas of mission and ministry.





[illegible]

At different times, Christian Aid has been joined by, amongst others, SCAWD (Scottish Churches Action for World Development), set up in response to the world debt crisis and later renamed 'Commonweal'; Feed the Minds; a local community race relations group; and Jubilee Scotland. It is no coincidence that members of Augustine were fully involved in the Make Poverty History campaign of 2000; and that in February 1997 the National Launch of the first Fairtrade fortnight was held in the church.

In all this, over the years Augustine has reflected the ecumenical imperative inherent in its United Reformed traditions to work with congregations from other denominations, not least in the development of its youth work. Today, we work closely through The Local Church covenant with our neighbours, Greyfriars Church of Scotland and St Columba's by the Castle Scottish Episcopal Church.

Augustine has provided a home to a wide variety of groups and businesses over the years, each one reflecting changing tastes and requirements within the community: from Miss Brandon's dancing school and The Recorder Society of Edinburgh to a joinery shop. Community, music, political and religious groups fill the church's sanctuary and other rooms throughout the week and every summer thousands of people experience our building transformed into a major Fringe venue.

*One of the banners that hang in the church sanctuary, expressing the congregation's priorities (from top left clockwise): sharing Christian Scripture; mission of inclusion; local, community-focused projects; wider partnerships and campaigns. The little procession of hippos honours Augustine of Hippo for whom the church is named.*

# Working out our values

*If we are going to be in the city centre it's not just for an hour on a Sunday... it's because we need to make the building accessible to promote health and wellbeing, to promote justice and creativity. These are the deep aspirations....*

Augustine's tradition of active community service started with its missionary work in Edinburgh's Victorian slums. On 24 November 1861, just over a fortnight after Augustine's celebratory opening service, the 250 year-old tenement apartments at 99 and 103 High Street collapsed, killing 35 of the occupants. The tragedy, so close by, highlighted the overcrowding of the time and led to the appointment of Edinburgh's first Medical Officer of Health, Sir Henry Littlejohn, whose seminal *Report of the Sanitary Condition of Edinburgh* inspired the Old Town clearances authorised by Lord Provost William Chambers' 1867 Improvement Act.

One of the areas to which people moved was Simon Square, where the original North College Street congregation had already been ministering through its 'Christian Instruction Society'. Following the move to George IV Bridge, this commitment was maintained. In 1869, the first of a line of highly committed 'Bible women' was appointed and their work contributed significantly to what now became known as The Mission.





hope  
love  
spirit  
faith  
welcome  
community  
transcendence  
lesbian, gay, bisexual  
transgender & heterosexual  
belonging  
accepting  
diversity  
peace  
justice  
journey  
liberation  
identity  
inclusion



# The Mission

From 1890, previously rented premises near Simon Square were purchased, becoming home to week-night services, Sunday Schools (250 children; 50 teachers), a packed girls' sewing class, a men's club and billiard room, a penny bank and temperance meetings.

Engagement with the temperance movement had arisen out of genuine social concerns – the association of alcohol with poverty – and is reflected in a continuing commitment to using non-alcoholic wine during the celebration of communion in worship. This is not just a symbolic gesture but a practical act of welcome to all.

As slum-dwelling dwindled in Simon Square and around the church itself, different community needs became apparent. The 1940s and 50s saw parcels being made up for distribution to homeless or needy callers – setting a precedent for the congregation's present-day support for the charities Fresh Start and Scottish Churches Housing Action, both of which address homelessness in the city. In more recent times, church members have also volunteered with the Ark hostel on New Street and the Grassmarket Project now based at the foot of Greyfriars Kirkyard.



# Engagement with the world

Augustine has long supported the overseas mission work that is part and parcel of the Congregational and United Reformed traditions. The London Missionary Society (now the Council for World Mission) was formed in England in 1795 by evangelical Anglicans and nonconformists, largely Congregationalist in outlook, and is famous for sending David Livingstone to Africa.

Other LMS missionaries included Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, and John Philip, a Scottish Congregationalist minister from Kirkcaldy who became a supporter of the rights of black South Africans and is remembered in the town of Philippolis, founded by the LMS in 1823 for the local Khoi people.

For women, in particular, this has been an area of Christian work that offered considerable possibility at a time when ordination to ministry in local churches was not yet available to them

# Mental wellbeing

The challenges of those struggling with their mental wellbeing have never been ‘out of sight’. A stone’s throw away, in what is now Forrest Hill, once stood the Edinburgh City Workhouse; and alongside it an asylum for the mentally ill, ‘Bedlam’. In 1844, residents of the Bedlam were transferred to the asylum in Morningside, now the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. Here, since 1982, Augustine volunteers have helped to operate a canteen – the Verandah Club.

A more formal connection exists also through the provision of the Edinburgh Community Mental Health Chaplaincy, established in 1994. Run by the chaplains of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, supported by volunteers, the service features a weekly drop-in at Augustine. This offers an opportunity for an informal chat with a chaplain and with other mental health service users, over a cup of tea or coffee.



# A progressive Christian voice

*I'm not sure if the world hears loudly enough the Christian message as proclaimed as inclusive and hopeful and not at all exclusive...'*  
(Rev'd Fiona Bennett)

As a Progressive Christian Community, we embrace people of all faiths (and none), of all ages, races and abilities. The clearest demonstration yet of our ethos of inclusivity was the welcoming of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members of Metropolitan Community Church into Augustine's community. In 2016, Augustine welcomed the decision of the wider United Reformed Church to freely permit local churches to celebrate and register marriages of same-sex couples.

As a congregation in the Reformed tradition, our life is rooted in Christian Scripture, and primarily in the love and life of Jesus as revealed in the New Testament gospels. Our theological emphases reach back to the 'Radical' Scottish Reformation and derive from broad theological diversity within the Congregational tradition.

The twin ideas of being reformed and always reforming and of working towards Christian unity are two key elements within the identity of the United Reformed Church – still the only UK denomination formed by a union of denominations rather than a schism. As such, the United Reformed Church can be described as a 'broad church', positively allowing a breadth of theological opinion to be held together.

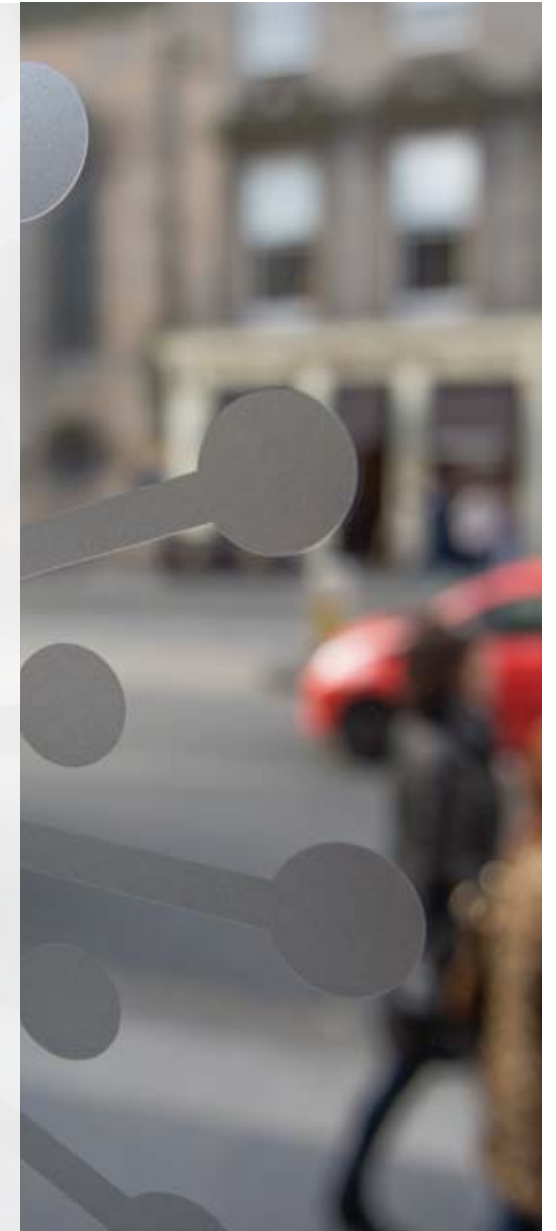
At Augustine we value the process of respectful enquiry that directly informs our contextual Bible studies and book groups. This is reflected, too, in our tradition of imaginative Junior Church and youth work. Our services are characterised by inclusion and provide a space where the community comes together to hear how the Christian story resonates in our lives today, to encounter the Living God and share in times of challenge and celebration.

How we understand faith and action is not based on a set of rules but evolves. Our life is not about having a destination; it's about realising that the journey is key. It's not about having answers; it's about travelling with faith, and doing it together, placing the needs of Edinburgh's people at the heart of our activities.

Together with our ecumenical Church of Scotland and Episcopal partners in 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 and communities
- promote an inclusive and progressive Christian voice in Edinburgh

In this spirit, we continue to look outwards, building bridges of love and justice from our bridge location.

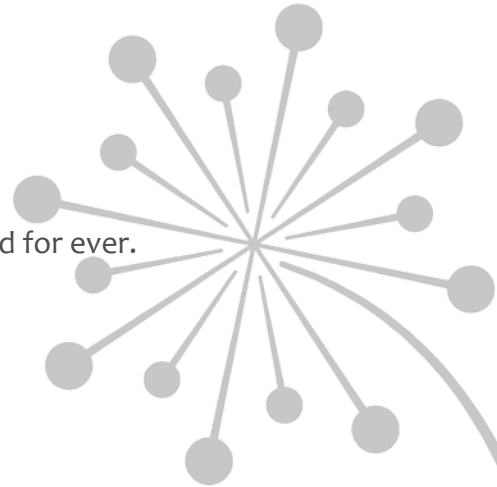


# The Jesus Prayer

Eternal Spirit: Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,  
Source of all that is and that shall be,  
Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God, in whom is heaven:  
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!  
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!  
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!  
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.  
With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trials too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.  
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.

Amen

A version of the 'Lord's Prayer' taken from Jim Cotter, *Prayer at Night* © Jim Cotter, 1991.  
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***‘Act justly, love mercy, and walk  
humbly with your God’  
(Micah 6:8)***



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**£2.50 Recommended donation**



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