

Spotlight on the Diocese of Edinburgh
This article first appeared in Inspires magazine June 2016

‘Do not hold on to me’: In his most recent Easter sermon, John Armes, the Bishop of Edinburgh, reflected on those strange words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the Garden on the first Easter morning. At their heart they urge Mary, and us, to recognise and respond to the resurrection as the new thing God is doing. And so, said the Bishop, Jesus asks us not to ‘cling to the expectation that I shall be the same old Jesus, available to you now, familiar and safe. Be ready for the new. Be ready to be challenged. Let go of me.’

That is a good place to start in a profile of the Diocese of Edinburgh. A Diocese, like much of the rest of the Scottish Episcopal Church, being asked to recognize and respond to the new thing God is doing in our midst. A Diocese in which much is familiar and safe, but which knows that that is not enough. A cursory glance at the statistics about the charges in Edinburgh Diocese, or a knowledge of some of the large congregations that can dominate any profile, might suggest reasons for confidence in a strategy of ‘steady as she goes,’ but the truth is much more complex and diverse.

Less than half the charges of the Diocese are within the City of Edinburgh, for the Diocese takes in also the varied historical and industrial towns of West Lothian, the ancient towns of the Borders, the farmlands and towns of East Lothian, and much more. In diverse ways, the Episcopal Church witnesses to God’s love, and seeks to respond to the new things God is doing, in this variety of contexts. Any article that seeks to describe the Diocese can never do justice to that variety. And yet, like elsewhere in the SEC, the desire to respond to God’s mission, God’s new thing, increasingly provides a unifying thread and focus.

When asked what ‘mission’ means, a little girl in one Edinburgh congregation answered, ‘It means going on an adventure!’ That delightful description now prefaces the working document, *Mission and the Local Church*, prepared last year by Kenneth Fleming, the Mission Officer employed by the Diocese on a year’s part time contract. That document begins in the knowledge that mission is always context based, about the local responses to the new things God is doing in each and every location. And so it seeks to help each of our charges delve a little deeper into the new things they might be called into, and the resources of people, time, money and buildings that might be brought to bear in responding. The Diocese is currently actively recruiting for a full time Bishop’s Enabler of Mission to support the implementation of that programme. A concern to deepen the collegiality between our congregations and between our clergy, through the sharing of wisdom, resources and friendship, lies at the heart of the process that *Mission and the Local Church* recommends, and that the Mission Enabler, alongside the Bishop, will oversee. The desire is that we grow in congregations who move beyond the familiar and safe to explore new, challenging and unpredictable ways of being church, and share the adventure with others as they do so.

That local mission-shaped response in charges and in sector ministry needs all the support that central Diocesan resources can offer. This has seen a number of initiatives in recent years. A Youth and Children Officer on a 25-hour per week contract now nurtures and supports youth and children’s work across the Diocese – offering resources, sharing wisdom and good practice, and inspiring many to try new things. The

latest initiative of this Officer focuses on the creation of a beautiful and exciting new resource – Play Church. This is due to be launched later this year, and will offer a child-sized altar, packed full of resources to help children explore, through play, Eucharistic liturgy and the sacraments in the worshipping life of the church. The Officer also contributes to Province-wide youth work at the Glenalmond Youth Week and at follow-up youth events for Glen delegates across the SEC. In 2015, four Edinburgh clergy (including the Convenor of the Provincial Youth Committee) were leaders at Glenalmond and 50% of Glen delegates came from Edinburgh Diocese, a clear indication of the work of the Officer bearing fruit.

Similarly, the Diocese now employs a part time Adventures in Faith Co-ordinator, who is resourcing, developing and connecting up the learning opportunities offered across the Diocese to deepen our discipleship. This includes a quarterly newsletter of events, sharing good practice and the enabling of local initiatives.

Following the closure of St Hilda's Church in Edinburgh, the Diocese decided to invest the money obtained from the disposal of the assets in a mission fund. This fund both supports the stipend of those in training for ministry, and offers local congregations grants of up to £5000 for mission projects. So, for example, in 2015 the fund supported three projects including a paid worker to create a new Sunday School within the small, ageing congregation of St Margaret's Easter Road. Why? Because the church has developed a thriving parent and toddler group which serves the local multicultural community in one of the more deprived areas of Edinburgh, and the families who come to play on Mondays and Wednesdays began asking whether there was anything for them in church on Sundays. Now the new Sunday School is up and running and small children are making their voices heard in this traditional church. St Margaret's Easter Road is both developing its mission to families in the local community and growing a new church from the bottom up. In previous years the Fund has helped in the creation of community resources in the buildings of St David's, Pilton and St Martin's, Tynecastle; it has nurtured the musical participation and reaching out of the congregation of St James', Goldenacre; helped build a living link between St James', Leith, and its local Primary School; and help fund a multi-media project that explored the connections of present day residents of Dunbar to the experience of 1st World War soldiers from the town - a resource based in St Anne's, Dunbar.

These projects bear witness to the dynamism and mission focus of congregations across the Diocese, to lay alongside the worship and ministry of our Cathedral, with its choir offering the richness of daily choral services, and the flourishing City Centre churches offering distinctive ministry rooted in diverse church traditions. There are undoubted challenges ahead, not least to ensure that we retain and develop a presence in the diversity of locations that make up the Diocese, including our rural outlying towns and areas of urban deprivation. There are challenges to be faced in building up structures of collegiality and meaningful support to enable that continued presence, dynamism and mission. The ongoing encouraging number of ordinands and lay reader candidates that discover a calling within our charges, and then exercise that calling within the Diocese and beyond is, however, further witness to the mission-shaped life the Diocese is learning to embody. Like Mary in the garden, everything flows from an encounter with the Risen Christ – an encounter that both names us as we are, and invites us into that unimagined future life that is the resurrection. The Diocese of Edinburgh, in all its

fragility, and splendour; and in its diversity and common desire to follow, remains rooted in that encounter that has shaped it throughout history, and into the future that we are only beginning to imagine.

John Conway, Convener of the Diocesan Mission and Ministry Committee