

Dundee – city of transformation

“Something new is happening on planet earth big enough to be seen from space.”¹ The population of the world is increasing by 3 million every week (more than twice the rate in the 1990s). More than 400 cities have one million and more than twenty mega-cities are more than ten million. Over 75% of people in Europe now live in urban areas but Paul Hildreth shows most people on this urban planet live in small cities of between 150,000 and 300,000. One of these is Dundee which we pray will be a city of spiritual and socio-economic transformation on the North Sea coastline. Cruise-ships can be seen on the river Tay and in 2014 Dundee was chosen as the first city in the U.K. to receive the UNESCO City of Design award. The Dundee Waterfront project will reconnect the city with its river and create new boulevards around the new Victoria and Albert museum.

Welcome to the city of ‘jute, jam and journalism’ ... or (if you prefer) of ‘Desperate Dan, Oor Wullie and penguins’! What is the ‘spirit’ of Dundee? The city’s two universities have led the field in biomedical and technological industries (life sciences and the digital-entertainment industry). What is less obvious is that the two Universities’ Christian Unions have provided local church leaders in the present day. Where would you take visitors to show them that the Spirit of God is present here? Would you show them its churches, the developing waterfront or Ninewells hospital? Would you show off the Nethergate in its different guises, go to the top of the Law at dawn or visit somewhere else? Let me take you on a personal tour of Dundee through three significant eras in its history.

(1) **The Medieval period** was when the church was at the centre of society and cathedral spires in Europe’s old cities proved it. The Gothic architecture of St. Mary’s and the Steeple tower in the Nethergate was the religious heart of the city. George Wishart preached from the city gate to masses suffering from the plague at a time when Dundee was known as ‘the Geneva of the North’. John Knox had returned from working as associate to John Calvin who saw the Swiss city transformed by their church of French-speaking refugees. In only ten days Knox wrote the Scots Confession, a fine statement of Christian beliefs! Moreover, James McEwen² has shown that the fellowship groups set up by Knox and others along the North Sea coast continued to influence society for over two hundred years. In Dundee the East side of the City church (St. Mary’s) was used for worship for many years. Sadly the church complex suffered from fires and other damage. General Monk, who changed sides to join the cause of Oliver Cromwell, stabled his horses on the South side and held up in the Steeple Tower. The West side (the Steeple) was rebuilt after a fire in 1765 with donations from trade guilds in London, Rotterdam and from a certain John Wesley. It appears that across Europe people were praying for Dundee. The city with its ‘gates’ and ‘wynds’ was soon to experience an economic upturn.

¹ Andrew Marr in his TV series on “Mega-Cities.”

² “The Faith of John Knox”.

(2) **The Victorian period** was when industry influenced Dundee's development after the growth of trade routes from the end of the 17th century. It was a time when cities across Europe exchanged 'God for gold' and the 'church era' gave way to the 'factory era'. Jute mills made factory owners into rich philanthropists. They employed women and children to work the looms and Dundee became a matriarchal society which began to attract economic migrants. In the mid-19th Century almost 20% of the city's population was Irish. Challenged by the poor housing around the textile mills by three prominent streams, James Thomson created new housing projects in the west (Logie), in the east (Craigiebank) and a by-pass in the north. They were still poor relations to the large mansions built by the factory oligarchs. But God likes to bless ordinary people to achieve extra ordinary outcomes. The story of Mary Slessor reminds us what can happen when ordinary people with faith in Jesus put themselves in the hands of God. This humble Dundee girl wanted to serve the Lord and she was soon teaching Sunday School. As a missionary her influence upon social customs in Nigeria and on Victorian Christian mission was astonishing. Other influential Christian figures at that time were Robert Murray McCheyne and Robert Annan. McCheyne's zeal for mission led to missions overseas and a few years ago I found myself walking in his footsteps in Iasi, the former capital of Romania. The evangelist Robert Annan became known for rescuing twelve persons from drowning in the river. I think of how the people of Dundee honoured the rough boy from the Hilltown after his untimely death following another rescue. He is buried in the city's Eastern cemetery while his 'eternity stone' is at St. Peter's in the west... so his memory still embraces Dundee. Sadly greater tragedies were to follow. The river was responsible for terrible loss in the Tay Rail Bridge disaster in 1879 when seventy-five people perished. Dundee gave an astonishing 63% of its eligible men (more than 30,000) to the armed forces in the First World War. Over 4,000 were killed and many more returned with terrible physical and mental injuries. Few streets, houses or tenements in the city were unaffected. "The fourth battalion (of the Black Watch) represented a city at war and captured the imagination and hearts of the people of Dundee."³ The disastrous loss to Dundee in the battle of Loos on 25 September 1915 is remembered every year by a beacon of light shining from the Law over the Tay.

(3) **The modern period** followed the global financial downturn and a time of great poverty in Dundee in the 1930s. During that time my own father was an assistant minister on the Perth Road where he also led the 'mission' to the poor in the West Wynd. It was then that a new minister to the city reported how one day he had visited a house with eighteen rooms with two residents and another house that had two rooms and eighteen residents. There was a chronic shortage of decent housing. The Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid's harsh opinion of the city in 1934 was: "Dundee is a great industrial cul-de-sac – a grim monument to Man's inhumanity to man. There is nothing in Dundee

³ Dundee's 'Ain', as it was known, consisted of fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, friends, employers and employees from Dundee and its environs. It touched nearly every family in the city." "The Dundee Book", Billy, Kay, ed., 163. "A whole generation perished. The youngest, the fittest, the brightest died. Dundee's future was lost on that day, for those who would have taken the city forward into its next stage of development were annihilated in one blow." "The Dundee Book", Billy, Kay, ed., 168

to mask its utter degradation.”⁴ Dundee’s began building its new housing estates from 1950s but the ‘high rise’ blocks constructed in the 1960s have since been demolished. The modern era brought the Tay Road Bridge in 1966 and the Overgate and Wellgate shopping centres. I came to study at Dundee University in 1974 but stayed on for two of years afterwards to work in a jute mill and children’s home. It was a time that gave me insight into Dundee’s youth and also Dundee’s churches.... In the 1970s churches in Dundee split down the middle over spiritual gifts and in the 2010s the same has happened over same-sex partnerships in its leaders. The first division came from within the church but the second arose from within society. The witness and unity of Dundee churches was compromised. I grieve over the damage to the ‘body of Christ’ where we become preoccupied with ourselves and stopped listening to cries of city people. Dundee is crying out for change. In the Scottish referendum in 2014, out of a high 78% turnout as many as 57% voted ‘Yes’, more than any other Scottish constituency. I see the poor mental health of the city’s population and the open doors for chaplaincy ministry in clubs, pubs, schools and universities as major challenges for the churches.

I hope someone will research Dundee and write a sacred history of this city. We need pointers from the past if we are to take risks in the future. This is a personal reflection but you may find greater significance in other events. During this North Sea Cities’ Consultation, we listen to what our partners in other European cities are saying to us. What kind of leaders bring about change? What kind of transformation are we praying for? No one church can reach everybody. Different churches bring different gifts to transform the city. We may not always agree on the way forward but we should not be afraid to take risks and work together where our agendas coincide. During the consultation we shall dream what transformed cities look like... even as we pray: “May your will done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Robert Calvert, April 2016

⁴ “Dundee is the most appalling example in Scotland of the result of the Manchester School of Economics, the policy of *laissez-faire*... In Glasgow the horrible slums are masked by the multifarious activities and bustle of a great city, and Glasgow, moreover, badly hit though it has been, had never ‘had all its eggs in one basket’ to the extent that Dundee had.”