

Help us build a house

My Lord Provost, Bishop Hugh, guests:

I begin by adding my voice to others who have expressed gratitude this evening for your honouring of our cathedral, recognizing, as you have, the work of hospitality and relationship building that is being done there.

As you know we greatly value the partnership we have with the civic authorities, and look to a future where we might continue to build on this for the good of all.

The story of God and humanity in the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city.

As God remakes all things, a holy city descends from heaven. It is beautiful. It is made of precious stones, and granite.

Well no, not granite actually, but maybe if the writer of the book had been to Aberdeen on a sunny day, that might have been the description.

There in the city, tears are wiped from every eye, there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

It is a place where every living thing thrives. Surely this is the aim for every civic administration, to create a city where the well being of all is the first priority.

This too is desired by every faith community - together we hope to build such a city.

So what is the role of a cathedral in this?

Well, Aberdeen has many fine churches and places of worship, and it has two cathedrals (as well as another church that still carries that designation).

What does a cathedral bring to a city? What can St Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral contribute to our common life?

I want to mention three things.

Firstly, it is a 'flagship of the Spirit' .

We can imagine a flotilla, or maybe an armada, coming into the port of Aberdeen. One ship is in the lead, sometimes bringing many little boats home, at other times leading them out from what feels like a safe harbour to take risks in choppy and unfamiliar seas.

This is one image for a cathedral – it is the 'flagship' for a diocese, it is the mother church.

It should epitomize the ethos and values of a diocese, it is the place from which the ministry of churches across a region is resourced, from which new ministers are sent out.

So here in Aberdeen it connects city to shire, northern isles to the mainland.

As the flagship, it should be a centre of excellence – in music, in the arts, in intellectual

engagement, in care of the poor.

St Andrews has begun in these things, and we wish to deepen and extend our life of service and creativity.

Secondly, the cathedral is a ‘House of Prayer’.

It is a place where people of all faiths and none can come and find peace, and, if they wish, pray.

In this it really helps if the cathedral is open as much as possible, is physically warm, welcoming and comfortable. People should be able to hear what is going on and travel around the building no matter how physically able. The aesthetics of the place should lift heart, mind and spirit to heaven.

Today this also means that it should have good facilities like toilets, and that refreshments are easily available.

St Andrew’s seeks to be such a house, but there is yet some way to go for us.

We note as well that many who might cross the threshold are not looking for a place to pray, although the space might prompt them to do so. They might come, now and into the future, as part of some heritage trail, for example related to the Jacobite ceiling in the south aisle, or from the USA because of Scottish heritage as reflected in the ceiling of the north aisle. Whatever brings a person in, our hope is that they might encounter more than was expected.

Being a ‘House of prayer’ draws the cathedral into the love of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. In particular it connects our diocese to our partners in the Anglican Communion, as seen for example in the recent visit of the Most Revd Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church – (present in the UK again this week to preach at the Royal Wedding.) Our connections with Connecticut and South Africa should inform and enrich what we do. So, a cathedral is a place to make spiritual connections – to God, to others, and to the world.

Thirdly, cathedrals should be places of hospitality and inclusion.

St Andrew’s makes this a priority, although we know that there is still considerable work to do.

Our deep commitment to hospitality and inclusion means that we seek to establish a place where all are welcome, where you are welcome:

whatever your physical and intellectual abilities

whatever your sexuality and gender

whatever your ethnicity and race

whether you have a faith or not

A cathedral is a place for all of God’s children.

There is an American Lutheran hymn that we Episcopalians sing:

Let us build a house where love can dwell

I imagine that many of you also sing it were you worship.

It speaks of the commitment to hospitality and inclusion that we believe is at the heart of Christianity. It reminds us that when we are concerned to restore and repair a building, have excellence in music, and pray proper attention to our civic relationships, all of this is for a purpose.

In one verse we sing:

**Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:
 All are welcome, all are welcome,
 all are welcome in this place.**

We thank you for your recognition of all that has been done at St Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral, and as we look forward we ask for your help and support as we together strive to build such a house.

Thank you