

A CHURCH TO 'CONNECT' PEOPLE TO THE GOD WHO LOVES THEM

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MEMBER AT CONNECT@ TIVIOT DALE, AMANDA MARTIN, SHARES THE VISION AND IMPACT OF THIS CHURCH PLANT IN STOCKPORT, GREATER MANCHESTER.

HOW DID CONNECT COME TO BE?

Connect@Tiviot Dale began as a seed that was sown in Panama - I know that sounds a bit unlikely, but it's the truth! The Revd Luiz Cardoso, now Pastor at Connect, met the Mission Enabler from the Manchester and Stockport District, the Revd Rod Hill, at an International Conference in Panama in 2017 and as a result of their conversations there, it became apparent that the vision that they would share for planting a church, would be realised in Stockport.

After much prayer and consideration, the congregation, who had been faithful witnesses at Tiviot Dale for many years, gifted their building to a small, multinational group of church planters, who had until that time been working in Oldham. Since then the amazing journey has continued to unfold, and Connect has been the means of sharing God's blessing with many people.

Planting a church is a huge challenge! There has to be vision, and that vision has to be rooted in God's purpose and plan. There has to be a determination to share the gospel, fully and unashamedly,

with those who have not yet heard it. In addition to this, there has to be commitment from everyone involved, to try things without being afraid of failure, to build on things that work and to let go of things that don't seem right. Throughout the journey there has to be faithful witness and service, and a willingness to walk by faith, because so often the future is unclear and what seems to be impossible has to become reality for the plant to thrive. In short, Jesus has to be at the centre and not on the fringes of every move that the planting team makes.

Of course, there are many other challenges that come along with being a planted church and there is always a need for discipline and an interrogation of what we do to make sure that we are continuing to trust in God. Pastor Luiz is always reminding us that we are not a place for perfect people, but for those who are broken, struggling with sin and wanting to grow - no church can be perfect and we don't try to pretend that we are.

We try to be honest about our personal failings and when we find it difficult to deal with or agree with each other, we ask God to help us to remember that it is his will, not what we like or want that matters - we are not a club, we are a church who is trying to meet the challenges that face us with the wisdom and word of God - sometimes that brings us into conflict with each other and with the wider church.

WHAT IS THE VISION OF THE CHURCH AT CONNECT?

At Connect we say that we 'Belong, Believe, Become' and this condensed 'mission statement' is an important signpost for those who may have very little, or very traumatic experience of 'church'. I have, from the first time I heard it, loved the name 'Connect' because it says everything that needs to be said about what the purpose of the church is. It exists to help people to 'Connect' to God, through Jesus, so that they can come to know the transforming power of his love. It exists to 'Connect' people to each other, to learn what it is to work for the Kingdom together; it exists to work with people as they discover their identity in Christ, to support them as they answer the individual callings that God makes on their lives. Wrapped up in all of this, is the urgency of the gospel, the urgency of the work of sharing that gospel and a belief that we are the people that God is equipping in this time and place to do that work.

A PLACE OF TESTIMONY TO BEING TRANSFORMED THROUGH KNOWING JESUS CHRIST

I was not part of the church from its earliest days. Before I came to Connect I had been part of the same church family all my life, but I felt that God was asking me to leave what was comfortable and familiar and the church to which he sent me was Connect. Since the first time I felt called to be part of the church family there, I believe that God has been opening my eyes and



waking me up! It has been a challenging time that has led me away from the heart of Circuit Leadership to the edge of the church, where the focus is on people who are only just coming to Jesus. There is so much to learn, and to be truthful so much to 'unlearn' about what it is to be church. I often feel out of my depth, but I know that in these moments I am getting closer to the true grittiness of the gospel and I believe that this helps me to keep relying on God, and to keep moving ever closer to him.

Of course, I am one very small part of this story - the impact of what God is doing in, at and through Connect is a narrative that is being written every day through the people who God sends to us; often, these people have found themselves to be struggling with addiction, relationship difficulties, homelessness and poverty and are searching for something to bring real meaning to life. Some people come and stay, some are with us for a short time, but this is not for us to be concerned about, it is for the Spirit to direct each life; the job of the church is simply to seek ways to share the message, to worship and respond to God's blessings and to support people as they take their first steps with Christ.

FINDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Since we began in April 2018, we have been witness to thirty Baptisms and in the early summer of 2019, the church began to offer two times of worship on a Sunday instead of just the one. Our dedicated worship team and the preachers who have served us have been amazing in this time, helping us to offer the best that we can to God, in worship every Sunday.

The worship atmosphere is lively and joyful, the emphasis is on the certain hope which comes with accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour and accepting the freely given grace and mercy of God. Every message given aims to help people relate to God and to respond. Our multinational nature is a great



blessing, and each service is conducted and/or translated in both English and Brazilian Portuguese.

We take the practise of hospitality very seriously with opportunities to share a meal together, and a ministry dedicated to welcome being just two ways in which we seek to show people that they are loved and welcome in God's house.

Teaching and learning for people of all ages is an important part of the life that we share at Connect - each week we have the opportunity to meet for cell groups to study and pray together; we have just begun to use 'Zoom' - a conferencing platform which allows those people who are unable to be at the group in person, to join in on-line. The Youth and Children have their own meetings which aim to help them to walk with Jesus and we have the 'ConnectBelieve' website where people can learn about the fundamental truths that Connect is built upon. In January we held our first 'Encountering God' Day. This was a full day of learning, listening to God and sharing, that truly touched the lives of those who came. It was amazing to see what God can do in just a few hours, when we give him our full attention!

Other opportunities to learn and explore have come through the 'Her' and 'Shine' Conferences. These were times of holy conversation, encouragement and learning about our own identity in God and the mission that he calls us to carry out in his name. Sessions called 'Taking off' are offered for those who are ready to explore more deeply either some aspect of the Bible or of serving God as a member of the church.

We aim to bless those who are in social need - at the Bridge Project we aim to 'Bridge the gap' for people who find themselves in need. This ministry is very important to us and we are always looking for ways to develop it. We provide a hearty free breakfast and a listening ear to those who God brings to

us each week. There is a simple message at each of these sessions and always an opportunity to talk with the Bridge worker and volunteers for support through Acts, the Foodbank or Christians against Poverty. We have recently completed the CAP Life Skills Course with our CAP trained Bridge worker - this group was a blessing to all those who participated.

God is giving us a heart for helping the homeless with some of our members offering support and prayer on the streets; we also have food and clothing donated by Tesco through 'Fareshare' to bless those in need. We do not have the answers to all the problems that people may find themselves experiencing but we are determined to reflect God's love as much as possible. We never hide the reason for what we do - it is to share Jesus, and all the glory goes to him.

I think it is because of this approach to being church that I would want to conclude by saying that when I put the last full stop on this article, it won't be long before it is out of date, because things change all the time! I think that this is what we need to aspire to more often as churches; not happy to keep the status quo, not resting in what has been good so far; not clinging to what has always happened even when it is no longer relevant, but always looking for what God is doing next and joining in with it.

It seems to me that being part of the church family at Connect means taking this verse from Isaiah 43:19 seriously, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

Amanda Martin (right) is a member of Connect Church in Stockport which was planted twenty months ago.

