

Three's Company

A document to stimulate discussion at Connects AGM

Several years ago, I preached a sermon series called “The Journey”.

In that series, we looked at the different journeys people take on their road to God. The bible is clear that there is only one WAY to God, and that is Jesus Christ. But scripture also shows us many different ways that people encountered Jesus.

Our mission statement at Connect is to “Connect People with Jesus Daily”, and we want to make sure that we are building pathways that meet people where they are, but bring people to the One who can meet their deepest needs. One of the greatest joys of my time at Connect has been leading people to Jesus who have not previously felt that God was accessible to them. When I look at the ministry of Jesus, this appeared to be His greatest priority as well, so I believe it is a worthy goal for us to continue pursuing.



Charles Hewlett calls it Gospel Renewal, or “restoring everything that sin has marred”. We don’t have to look far to see the toll that sin has on our world, even in our own lives we see the temptation and destructive powers of sin. But we have Good News – Jesus Christ is victorious over sin!

These things: restoring what sin has marred, sharing the good news, connecting people with Jesus daily, is what it means to be intentionally engaged with mission. Over the years, we have been continually shifting to position ourselves for this mission, that we might better reach our People and Place as Arotahi calls them.

Consider some of these changes in the last five years, and how they have positioned us for greater impact in our community:

- **Changing our name and branding to Connect** – Something that captured our mission, and that our community could identify with.
- **Changing our governance to the council model** – Shifting our systems to serve our people instead of people serving our systems.
- **Establishing the Connect Marlborough Trust** – Accessing untapped resources and reaching into new spaces in our community.

Each of these projects has taken time, sacrifice, and change of mindset, but the fruit of each has been lives touched and transformed for the Kingdom of God.

There is a wonderful synergy between the Church and Trust that I think will flourish for many years to come. There is still one area that I think could be better positioned for gospel renewal, and that is the use of our assets and equity. The buildings themselves are being well utilised by Church, Trust, and Community throughout the year, with seven counsellors currently working across our facilities, the Ministry of Education, the Marlborough Multicultural Centre and other community groups using our spaces for physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. But as an asset base, I think our buildings could be used in another way.

Good Stewardship?

When God called Moses, he asked him the question: “What do you have in your hand” and used what Moses had to perform signs and wonders. In the feeding of the five thousand, a boy presented his five loaves and two fish to Jesus, who was able to miraculously provide, and in the parable of the talents, we see the image of Jesus presented as someone who expects us to multiply what we have been given – indeed this was the first commission of God to Adam and Eve, to be fruitful *and* multiply.

And so I think God asks us the question, “What do you have in your hand?” And what could happen if we chose to put it in *His*.

As I talk with members of our finance team, our leadership teams, and the wider regional and national leadership – there is an encouraging consensus that our next step in positioning ourselves for gospel renewal is to address this area.

We currently have an asset base of 2.19M according to the latest council revaluation. We have a mortgage of less than \$260,000. Historically at AGMs there has been a focus on reducing our debt, but there has been little conversation before now about how we might better use our equity to grow our asset base while also meeting important needs in our community.

Connect’s rental income has increased to \$35k in 2023. This is a return of approximately 1.5% (at its most optimistic).

Vision Sunday 2024 we introduced the idea of Connect starting a charitable company to work alongside our existing Church and Trust structures. This would be an intentional move to manage and steward our assets for gospel renewal.

There is a compelling case for Connect to set up a separate legal entity in the form of a charitable company whose purpose it is to maximise the use of the assets of Connect making possible a significant impact for Kingdom purposes.

The key objective of the charitable company would be to partner with the Senior Leadership of Connect and Trustees of Connect Marlborough Trust (CMT) to produce a greater return on the assets in a way that supports the Kingdom work of these two entities.

A charitable company can get its charitable status from being set up to provide income to other specific charitable organisations such as Connect and CMT or get its charitable status from carrying out charitable works in its own right. The best approach would need to be considered with further legal advice and consideration of the business opportunities it would likely be pursuing.

Directors would be appointed by the Senior Leadership of Connect to ensure continued alignment with missional objectives. The appointment of a suitably qualified Director who is also a member of the Senior Leadership team and potentially a Trustee of CMT should be considered when writing the constitution to ensure mission alignment. Shares of the company would be held in trust by the Baptist Union of NZ in the same manner in which the ownership of the land and buildings are currently held.

I believe this is our next opportunity to position ourselves for gospel renewal, and I believe that God will bless our community through this, and bless us through our obedience.

Purpose – an overview of Connect Ltd*

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is far harder to meet the "deeper" needs of a person without first reaching the foundational needs. In a way, we all understand this on some level. As the economy gets tight, it can be hard to focus on things like our calling, our gifts, our purpose, when we are worrying about affording the rent or the mortgage or keeping food on the table.

Many of us are fortunate enough that we have never had to worry about these things as much as others. Some of us have never known what it means to not know where we will sleep, or what we will eat, or how our children will afford the basic things they need for a better future.



As I look at this diagram, I can see the many things that we offer through Connect Blenheim and Connect Marlborough Trust that meet the needs in the upper tiers of the pyramid. However, I reflect that there is more we could be doing at a foundational level, and that our gaps in these could be affecting how effectively we might reach out community and connect them with Jesus.

I proposed at our most recent Vision Sunday, that if the job of the Church is to *Connect People with Jesus Daily*, and it is the trust that connects this mission with the community, there is still potentially a *disconnect* for many in our region. How many people in our *geographical* community are disconnected from our *societal* community, through significant lack or hardship in these foundational areas. Think of it as simply as someone who doesn't have a defined home, does not even belong to a neighbourhood. Someone who doesn't have stable income is further isolated from the ability to participate in a thriving community that shares through the reciprocal nature of giving and receiving.

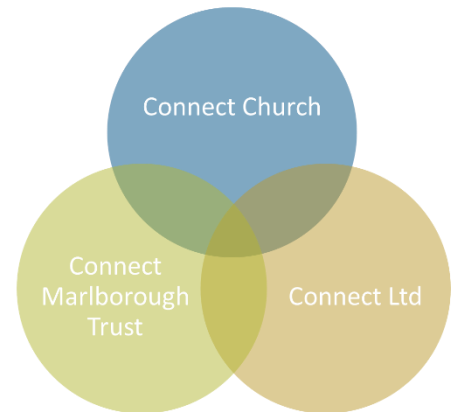
A church that wants to authentically connect with its community holistically, must be engaged with these foundation levels of human need. And I believe we can position ourselves to better engage with these needs.

I would like to see us establish a charitable company, which would be responsible for stewarding our assets for gospel renewal, supporting the wider community work of Connect and Connect Marlborough Trust. But particularly in the foundational areas of housing, employment and education, I do not think that the answer to these problems will come from government, but that God will use His church to meet these needs, so that our community will meet with Him.

Why start a charitable company – a third entity to manage?

There are several practical reasons why starting a charitable company would be beneficial for the church:

- **Response time to opportunities**
- **Professional and Expertise Management**
- **Limited Liability**
- **Empowering and Protecting Intentional Focus**
- **A more familiar structure for outside entities to engage with**



The Practicalities

The land and buildings and related mortgage with CSB would be transferred into the company. The company would then receive the current rental income and Connect would pay a market rental for office use during week and weekend services. All costs and compliance associated with the land and buildings would then be the responsibility of the company.

The finer details of this would need to be worked through to ensure that Connect is still viable during this phase as it will lose its rental income, which could be entirely offset by reducing in facility costs and potentially rental. There is potential for some wage costs to be moved to the company, but this would need to be considered in the light of who is the best person for the role initially required at the company.

Income Opportunities

Business opportunities will be considered in the light of not just financial return but alignment with the community based spiritual values of Connect and CMT. Possibilities include but are not limited to:

- Social housing partnering with a government funder.
- Small businesses that can also provide employment and training opportunities for attendees of CMT's social programs.
- Government tenders for social services.
- Income from business operations can be either reinvested into the company to build future income or paid out to CMT or Connect as donations to charitable organisations.

Way Forward

If the church indicates that this is a direction we are interested in heading, there will need to be a formal council vote in the future, once the important questions of our people are answered. We would then continue to consult with experts for advice and input to ensure good processes and sustainable practices. We are already engaged in several preliminary conversations with the following:

- Wayne Schache - Operations and Finance Director at the Baptist Union
- Steven Moe - Partner at Parry Field Lawyers in Christchurch
- Dan Mazengarb - Lawyer at Christian Savings Bank

Conclusion:

There has been much discussion and discernment that has gone into this opportunity already to make sure it was a cause worthy of bringing to the church. We are now excited to commend this idea to you, and to hand it over for a larger discussion at this year's AGM. We are sure there will be questions that still need to be answered, so encourage you to bring these as we seek to answer them over the coming months and make a final decision on the matter later in 2024.

Sincerely,

Shanan Barnett and Sue Avery – On Behalf of the Connect Senior Leadership Team