

Dramatic Reinvention at Connection Community: An 'Emerging Missional Church' Case Study

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Abstract

Connection Community is a reinvented Church of Christ congregation in Croydon and an example of an emerging missional church. Wayne and Paula Nebauer came and breathed fresh life to bring a 'spark from the ashes' of a small, tired group. Through innovative thinking and empowering leadership they led the group to develop Sunday gatherings as 'shop windows' to entice people to join in, including bistro 'Life Connection' meetings for coffee and conversation. They also gave priority to mission as community service and inspired their people to start schools' programs, a soup kitchen, playgroups and whatever people dreamed up. Their mission statement was originally 'Connecting with God, each another and our community' but was changed as an early part of their theological rethinking to the more inclusive 'Connecting with God and people'.

The 'Shaping of Things Now' research

Emerging churches are exploring new ways of being church which engage missionally with their communities and exercise innovation in their expression. Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost in their influential book, *The Shaping of Things to Come* argue for the need of multiplying new missional structures, offer a theological paradigm for emerging churches, and share stories from around the world of imaginative new ways of 'doing church'.¹ They founded Forge Mission Training Network² to help birth and nurture the emerging missional church movement in Australia. They contend churches need to experiment wildly, be free to fail, cultivate a climate of radical change and develop church on the margins. Forge has played a key networking and training role in helping many (but not all) of the new emerging churches get

¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).

² <http://www.forge.org.au/>

started. One of the churches they have influenced is Connection Community, a dramatically reinvented congregation in Croydon, Melbourne.

There is a great deal to learn from observing what is actually happening in emerging churches like Connection. The emerging church literature contends that new models are the way to reach people in a 'postmodern' society, but do the results match the rhetoric? Instead of looking at the theory and ideals, I am interested in examining the present and local-day perspective of what is happening in particular congregations. What innovation is happening and where is it taking churches in their mission? What can we learn from emerging churches that are doing mission in new and creative ways? How is 'the shaping of things' now? I participated at Connection for two years in 2005-2007 including intensive participant-observation and conducting interviews and focus groups in May-June 2006. What follows is an initial report of Connection's story and the key cultural features I observed and that I am learning from. This is part of my larger research project into emerging churches in Melbourne and how they are expressing mission and innovation.³

Introducing Connection Community – Connecting with God and People

Connection Community is a reinvented Church of Christ congregation in Croydon started by Wayne and Paula Nebauer. One of Connection's expressions of church is '601', which met at Maroondah High School hall on Sunday evenings sometime after 6:00pm. On May 28 Farris⁴ reflected on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest* as part of a baptism service.⁵ He combined a few clips from the movie with philosophical and pastoral commentary. 'Dr' McMurphy, for example, takes some of the patients on a fishing trip and accepts them, which Farris says is like Jesus who took his disciples fishing and helped them discover their identity and purpose. The message is at the beginning of the service – Connection changes the order to suit the occasion and to keep change as part of their culture. The topic is focused around a particular movie – as with other messages that month on *Lord of the Rings*, *Shrek*, *Amilie* and *The Ten Commandments*. Most Connection services include some multimedia input including movie clips.

Caleb calls the congregation to worship in song, telling us that Israel used to send musicians in ahead of their army. He leads a band of three singers, two guitarists, drummer, bass player and percussionist, and another 110 people in the congregation. Being sensitive to possible newcomers, he comments that people may find singing 'really weird' and suggests they could just listen and perhaps clap and be the percussion. The worship is typical of contemporary-

³ Darren Cronshaw, 'The Shaping of Things Now: Mission and Innovation in Emerging Churches in Melbourne' (DTheol thesis in process, Melbourne: MCD, Forthcoming 2008).

⁴ I refer to church participants simply with a first name pseudonym, except when quoting published documents or pastors. For pastors I use the full name for the first reference and thereafter first name, which may suggest a level of familiarity normally inappropriate for academic reporting. However, first names distinguish case study participants from literature sources, and participant-observation did bring a 'first name' level of familiarity between the researcher and participants.

⁵ Connection 601 service, 28 May 2006

styled praise and worship – loud, enthusiastic, repetitive and following digitally projected words on the screen. They may swap different parts of the service around, but the sung time of worship and the teaching input of the message are packaged in a similar format to most contemporary 'seeker-sensitive' churches.

Chris Spratt, one of the pastors, introduces the baptism segment by declaring it is a 'cool' thing to do as a public sign of cleansing and following Jesus. Lewis, the first young adult to be baptised, comes to the stage and shares his testimony of radical change. For five years he was pursuing stardom, sex, drugs and rock and roll, which led to substance abuse and heartache for his family. Then during two trips to the Philippines in June and September 2005 he rubbed shoulders with others from Connection and was impacted by a missionary. He 'let God in' and felt a call to missionary service. Connection has a tradition of one or two friends saying something at baptisms, and Lewis invites his friend Karl from outside the church. Karl shares: 'We spent millions of hours talking about love and God and music, and he went to the Philippines and found God and ditched me in the midst of our rock stardom. It's the best thing I've ever seen him do'. Another pastor, Nathan Crouch, questions Lewis about why he wants to be baptised and whether he believes in Jesus. He replies 'Yes, I do you honour', and then Nathan immerses him in the hired hot-tub and announces him 'dunked'.

The other baptism candidate, Annette, describes in a video clip her journey in high school away from God and what baptism means to her. She experienced depression and eating disorders, though she still always believed in God, and came back to faith through the witness of a friend. The snippets of her conversation give insight into her faith, and the video puts the testimony into a more creative format than a traditional five-minute narrative. Her friends Mona and Aby express how proud they are of her and share verses of Scripture, and then Kristen baptises her. After a song, the worship leader invites people to come and pray for Annette and Lewis, and forty people respond and lay hands on them to pray. It is a united and prayerful picture that the service finishes on.

Connection is a reinvented congregation in Melbourne's outer-eastern suburbs. It started in 2001 with a vision to 'do church' differently for a new century. The new church was birthed out of Croydon Church of Christ, which was 128 years old, founded in 1873, but tired and diminishing in numbers. It sold its property, called Wayne and Paula as pastoral leaders and started exploring together how to do church in a new way. Since those early days, Connection has fostered a passion for community, a flare for creativity and a desire to see how Christ relates to everyday life. They have been on the move a number of times, outgrowing two Sunday night venues and starting a Sunday morning 'Life Connection' gathering at Daisy's Bistro, and then, three locations later, at Sofia's Restaurant. Key community ministries include involvement at Maroondah High School, 'Kids@Play' playgroups, and the Dining Room – a weekly meal for anyone who needs it. Weekly programs for children and youth, midweek

Bible courses, home groups and CPR 'Care, Purity and Relationship' accountability groups help people grow deeper in their faith. Creative Arts are featured through drama, plays, multimedia at most gatherings and vibrant music and worship on Sunday evenings. For the last three years an internship program has added staff and part-time helpers for the church programs. Open Homes, a hospitality-based and inclusive network of small groups, is a new expression of church alongside Sunday gatherings.⁶

The vision of Connection's experiment in church life is 'connecting with God and people'. They were founded around intentional relationships. Their vision or prime directive is 'to be a vibrant and creative faith community that passionately pursues God and loves people'. The seven key cultural values that Connection seeks to intentionally cultivate are a pursuit of God, an outward focus, building up people, giving, leadership development, creative fun and change. Connection also seeks to be characterised by being casual, friendly, creative, celebrative and team-oriented.⁷ They aspire to be a culture-driven church, working towards these values, rather than primarily aiming for growth in numbers.⁸

A key narrative of Connection's people and culture is their story of new hope and growth. The remnant of people at Croydon Church of Christ held together, largely because the young people liked each other's company and the parents wanted to persevere for their children. They were tired from administering a retirement home and had struggled with some previous pastors.⁹ Yet even at that time there was a heritage of innovation in worship and leadership development. Rohan, for example, who led the youth group, used innovative multimedia communication and invested in the next generation of youth leaders. When Wayne and Paula came, they built on the heritage of perseverance and drew people together to dream about reinventing the church. Wayne describes it with the metaphor of 'a spark coming out of the ashes'.¹⁰ They tried new things and encouraged people to start ministries with a community focus. The clear vision to develop an intentionally missional focus and creative approach to worship paid off as the church grew from thirty to a hundred people in Connection's first eighteen months.¹¹

Four of the features of Connection that leaders and participants refer to and that have brought new hope and growth are its culture of innovation and change, its approach to Sunday events as 'shop windows' to introduce people to church, seeing mission as community service and empowering people to live out their passions.

⁶ Wayne and Paula Nebauer, 'Connection Pack: Heaps of Information About Us' (2005). Stored at Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD), Kew, with Connection research journal, i-viii.; <http://www.connection.org.au/>.

⁷ Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

⁸ Nathan Crouch, Director of Staff and Ministry Development, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 3 May 2006). Digital audio recording and transcript of this and other interviews stored at MCD on CD.

⁹ Oscar, Connection leader, 'Interview by the Author' (Heidelberg, 29 May 2006).

¹⁰ Wayne Nebauer, Connection team leader, 'Interview by the Author' (Wonga Park, 21 September 2006).

¹¹ Keith Hickin, 'Croydon Church of Christ / Connection Statistics 1998 to 2005' (30 November 2005). Stored at MCD with Connection research journal, 381-386; W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

Innovation

Innovation has been a particular feature of Connection from its beginning. The young adults that formed the core of Croydon Church of Christ were eager to do new things and their parents were content their children were going on in faith and enjoying church. Wayne and Paula were passionate about new expressions of church, particularly to help young adults connect with God.¹² When they first met together on retreats to dream about where the new church would go, they practised green light thinking at retreats to release imaginative ideas. Paula said this process got people thinking outside the box: 'It took people from thinking in a small box to thinking ... God is the God of the impossible'.¹³

On retreat they renamed the church 'Connection' and started articulating their core values, including developing a culture of change:

We want to create a culture where, at a personal and corporate level change is continuous and expected, where we keep striving to go to the next level, where we avoid stagnation, complacency and mediocrity, where we strive for excellence and relevance. Change is inevitable – let's embrace it!¹⁴

Some people say, 'Let's not just change for the sake of it', but Connection believes there is virtue in change for its own sake. It communicates willingness to change and helps people get used to change at one level in preparation for greater degrees of change. Connection's leaders say that Wayne hates the statement, 'That is the way it has always been done', and insists that is not a legitimate reason for something to be done or stay the way it is.¹⁵

The early services of Connection set the pattern for later innovation. When Connection started no Sunday was alike. They came up with a theme and then planned music, drama, games, input and 'all sorts of crazy activities'.¹⁶ They moved the stage around or put the seats in different places, or once left the seats stacked up – so that people would not know what change to expect when they came through the doors. Moving around to different locations also helped foster the culture of change. When people draw a picture to represent Connection, some represent it with a bus and a trailer because they have set up and packed up wherever they went.¹⁷

¹² Paula Nebauer, Connection team leader, 'Interview by the Author' (Mooroolbark, 15 September 2006).

¹³ P Nebauer, 'Interview'.

¹⁴ Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

¹⁵ Connection, 601 participants, 'Focus Group #2 by the Author' (Croydon, 3 June 2006). It is worth evaluating how 'dramatic' Connection, and other emerging churches, are in the sense of impulsive organisational dysfunction. Manfred F R Kets de Vries, *The Leadership Mystique: An Owner's Manual* (London: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2001), 82, 146.

¹⁶ W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

¹⁷ Crouch, 'Interview'. Connection's wide variety and gypsie-like moves is similar to Willow Creek's story, which was part of their inspiration. Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

Change and innovative ideas do not always lead to fruitful ministry. It is a constant challenge to maintain enthusiasm and passion for innovative worship and new directions in mission. It is easy to default back to a more usual 'sing and talk' service and to church systems that exist for themselves rather than the broader community. Sometimes well-laid plans do not achieve what they were designed for. For example, Nathan first came to Connection on 'beanbag Sunday', a novel format idea for an informal sing and chat, which by all accounts was a dismal failure.¹⁸ But trying different forms of expression meeting in different places has produced energy for trying new things in mission and worship. The leaders encourage people to 'have a go', even at the risk of failure, and they feel free to close down programs that do not work or lose momentum. They claim they evaluate everything, but they tend to be quicker to move on to the next thing than reflect thoughtfully on why the last thing did not work.

Apart from the intrinsic value of new ideas for mission and worship, innovativeness is attractive to a certain type of people and helps cultivate a fresh atmosphere in church life. Isaac, for example, explained why Connection's desire for change attracted him:

[Change] is usually the enemy of Churches, especially traditional Churches ... Connection is one that wants to change and sometimes even wants to change just for the sake of changing ... It is like when you change your room around, it feels weird at first, but then you look at it a week later and you really like it and it's refreshing ... I would like to be part of a Church that was always changing just because they knew that by deliberately doing that they would be awakened, renewing themselves and not getting stuck into a system.¹⁹

Another example of someone attracted to Connection by its innovation was 'Iona' and his family. They were new to Melbourne and for a year did not settle into a church. But Iona loved the laid-back feel of Connection when he first brought his family. He came to Daisy's but was redirected to the local park where they were having a barbeque that morning instead of the normal Life Connection.²⁰ Iona's family had been Christians before. The missional challenge is for Connection's innovativeness to also embrace people who do not have a faith background.

Shop windows

Wayne and Paula, while at their previous church, spent seven or eight years in Beach Mission programs honing skills in creative programming and relevant communication. Wayne said that one evening he was leading 'Jesus loves me this is I know' and in one of the front rows a man was singing loudly with a can of VB beer in his hand. Wayne had a desire to explore the kind of church that would be more relevant to the average Aussie. They read about Bill Hybels'

¹⁸ Crouch, 'Interview'.

¹⁹ Connection, 'Focus group #2'.

²⁰ Iona, leadership team member, 'Interview by the Author' (Ringwood, 30 May 2006).

seeker services and caught a vision for non-traditional gatherings that would be friendly to unchurched people.²¹ They tried some creative expressions at their previous church, where Wayne was an associate pastor being groomed to be senior pastor. But in 2000 Wayne realised the process of changing the existing church was too difficult and felt called, as did Paula, to plant a new church.²²

One of their concepts is that Sunday gatherings are 'shop windows' for church. Life Connection on Sunday mornings and '601 in the evening are designed to be accessible, relevant and contemporary in order to attract people into a deeper experience of community. It is like window-shopping – when people see something is attractive they may come in closer and see more.²³ The first regular public gathering was Sunday evening, which commenced on 20 May 2001 in Yarrunga Community Centre.²⁴ It was designed as a fun and vibrant gathering with games, quality music, drama, multimedia, teaching input, audience participation and 'anything else we can think of'.²⁵ 601 has developed as an experiential and inspiring time of corporate worship with a contemporary feel. The shop window seeks to attract people in, which is more attractational than suggested by the incarnational rhetoric of the emerging church literature.

As Connection grew and decided they wanted to exist not just for young adults, they explored more family-friendly times and expressions of church. After an aborted attempt to move to Saturday late-afternoons, they brainstormed about an additional 'shop window' on Sunday mornings. Life Connection developed with a more relational format with coffee, cake and conversation, and usually no singing. The Life Connection team uses multimedia and thoughtful questions to prompt discussion about how God and life connect. Iona describes it as a powerful Socratic style of teaching with questions that prompt open discussion.²⁶ Wayne has developed this teaching style into an art-form, in order to help people discover and learn things for themselves. Some participants say that sharing and conversation around tables at Life Connections go deeper than the 'karaoke and lecture' format of most mainstream churches where members 'face the back of people's heads'.²⁷ The children's ministry 'Outrage' runs concurrently and its priority, including an employed coordinator, shows that children are important to Connection.²⁸

The vision of Connection is to continue to grow as a multiple-congregation church in public buildings. Specifically, the plan is to expand 601 'until it fills the largest rental space in the

²¹ Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*.

²² W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

²³ Nathan Crouch and Chris Spratt, Connection pastors, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 9 June 2006); P Nebauer, 'Interview'.

²⁴ W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

²⁵ Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

²⁶ Iona, 'Interview'.

²⁷ Connection, participants, 'Focus Group #1 by the Author' (Croydon, 21 May 2006); Connection, participants, 'Focus Group #3 by the Author' (Croydon, 4 June 2006).

²⁸ Kristen, staff member, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 8 June 2006).

local area' and to expand the number of Life Connections and establish 'multiple hotel, restaurant and café gatherings in the outer-east region of Melbourne'.²⁹ Until July 2006, Sunday gatherings were all in school halls in the evening and hotels or family restaurants in the morning. In the hotels, although not so much Sofia's restaurant, some participants enjoyed never quite being sure who might walk past or come and sit down. Ronwyn commented on how meeting in public helped her:

This church has been very open to innovation and new approaches to doing/being church. This has mainly been evidenced for us in having Sunday morning gatherings out of the safety of a purpose built structure where we are vulnerable and exposed. It has certainly gotten me out of my familiar, cosy comfort zone on a Sunday morning.³⁰

It is part of Connection culture to meet not on church property but in what Oldenburg refers to as 'third places': places such as pubs, cafes, clubs and interest groups that people use, after the home and workplace, as informal public gathering places.³¹

Part of presenting Sunday gatherings as 'shop windows' is to say they are not the totality of church life. They introduce people to church and give a window to see what the community is like, but are ideally not the sum total of what people will experience.³² Connection leaders say Sunday gatherings are not enough to satisfy the desire to 'do life' together, nor are they enough to feed people's need for spiritual growth. Nathan warns:

If you think you can come on a Sunday and get all you need in your spiritual growth, this is not the place for you because that is unhealthy. Unless you immerse yourself with people during the week; unless you come to midweek things; and unless you learn how to live and go through Bible yourself – then, you are not going to grow very much anyway.³³

Hence 601 and Life Connection do not strive to provide sufficient nurture to mature Christians, but serve as an entry point into church life and avenues for discipleship that include small groups, mentoring, Bible courses and programs for children and youth.³⁴

There are drawbacks to the Sunday 'shop window' gatherings. Some grieve the relative lack of worship and preaching on Sundays. Moreover, their missional edge has been blunted by

²⁹ Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

³⁰ Ronwyn, Participant survey form (20 May 2006). These forms are stored at MCD.

³¹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989). Frost and Hirsch refer to 'Third Place Communities' in Tasmania as a model of incarnational church. Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping*, 40, 74-75.

³² P Nebauer, 'Interview'.

³³ Crouch, 'Interview'.

³⁴ Chris Spratt, 'Discipleship Plan of Action 2004' (2004). Stored at MCD in Connection Research Journal, 172-175.

some changes in location. Life Connection at Sofia's was working better than some previous locations in terms of good relationships with management, but it was not open to the public at the same time as Life Connection met and some participants experienced the location as noisy, cold, lacking cosyness and smelly. Furthermore, having Outrage at a separate location from Life Connection is less-than-ideal, particularly for newcomers.³⁵ 601 and Life Connection now meet at the Connection ministry centre; the office and church space rented from Croydon Seventh-Day-Adventist Church. The new facility is more flexible, but it is the first time Connection has met regularly in a church building.

Mission as community service

Connection started with a focus on creative gatherings but as they grew in their shop window gatherings they also got more involved in their local community. They adopted and offered programs at local primary and secondary schools. The secondary school principal was initially sceptical but Nathan led a team, which helped with sport, woodwork, excursions, mentoring and assisting teachers, as well as lunchtime programs, Friday breakfasts and camps.³⁶ The school placed a limitation of 'no preaching, no praying, no gospelling' but the team actually found this gave focus to their service as an act of love.³⁷

Connection has been involved every week since the beginning of 2005 with Croydon Soup Kitchen, which changed in November 2005 to 'The Dining Room'. Instead of handing out a quick meal on the street, they can invite people into a room and sit down with them for a more substantial meal. They have a volunteer social worker, warm clothes to offer and information about local referral services. Connection people regularly volunteer, not in order primarily to preach but to serve. Isaac expressed his motivation: 'We are trying to say, "We care about your life in a physical sense, in a mental sense and your health as well as your spiritual life"'.³⁸ Roxanne, who coordinates the 'Kids@Play' Connection playgroups that started in 2005, has a similar philosophy of service and relationship before proclamation:

I believe that by truly loving them as Christ does and serving them you show them Christ's love instead of just professing it. ... Many are struggling with parenthood and life how much more of a witness is it to give them a casserole, watch their child and give them an ear encouraging them and loving them. Surely this will show God's love better than professing it and walking away. Our playgroup is focussed on relational ministry.³⁹

³⁵ Indiana, 'Visitor Observations', Email to the author (14 August 2006). This and other primary electronic documents are stored at MCD on CD.

³⁶ W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

³⁷ Crouch and Spratt, 'Interview'.

³⁸ Isaac, Connection volunteer staff member, 'Interview by the Author' (Ringwood, 30 May 2006).

³⁹ Roxanne, 'Kids@Play', email to author (October 26 2006).

The school program, Dining Room and playgroups are motivated by an incarnational and holistic approach to mission of going to where the people are in their local community and meeting them at their point of need.

The priority of mission as community service is enhanced by a number of factors at Connection. Some participants say that meeting in non-church buildings reminds them of their community engagement.⁴⁰ They have also made intentional decisions about staffing and programs that reflect their commitment to engage the broader community.⁴¹ Iris' mission work with JEM (Justice Empowerment Missions) has influenced a number of Connection people to be more open to mission among people on the margins of society and in poorer parts of the world.⁴² The Kingdom Team, Connection's global mission group, have organised regular short-term mission trips overseas and formed 'Caleb teams' to help Connection missionaries to raise support.⁴³ Overseas interests have heightened people's awareness of poverty and mission needs; but it is a common phrase that 'mission is not just overseas' because they are also eager to address mission as local community service. For example, Caleb asserts: 'To be the church ... that is mission. To act and speak as Christ showed us, to a dark, lost world. "Mission" could be next door, or on the other side of the world. "Mission" takes on 1001 different forms'.⁴⁴

In 2005 Connection explored plans for leasing and fitting out, with an option to buy, a building in Chirnside Park as a community and ministry centre. The vision and business plan was to include a café and other community-connecting businesses like a hairdresser and childcare. Different Connection partners were lining up to operate the various businesses. The nature and scale of the 'Connection Centre' was inspired by Wayne's study-visit the year before to America. He saw some big seven-day-a-week church buildings and observed:

Significantly growing churches take huge faith steps. This usually involves finances and urging their people to give generously for the sake of greater kingdom impact (which in the US means building a big building and then people come!). "Let's not tell God what He can't do!"⁴⁵

Wayne and Paula feel it was unfortunate that the church did not 'catch the vision' sufficiently. There was in fact a groundswell of uneasiness and opposition from people who saw the proposal as financially questionable and/or a shift of ministry philosophy to move towards purchasing a big building. There was also some surprise about how far the planning had

⁴⁰ Iona, 'Interview'.

⁴¹ Crouch, 'Interview'.

⁴² Iris, Connection participant, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 5 June 2006).

⁴³ R Herzog, 'Kingdom Team: Manual and Financial Policies with Regards to the Kingdom Team', (Melbourne: Connection Community, 2005).

⁴⁴ Caleb, Participant survey form (20 May 2006).

⁴⁵ Wayne Nebauer, 'USA Tour', Report (October 2004).

proceeded without consultation.⁴⁶ Positively, the proposal showed Wayne and Paula's creative thinking about building structures that would facilitate community interaction, and people's response showed their commitment to staying connected with the community through community-owned buildings and not being distracted by financial pressures.

Empowering people

A fourth distinctive feature of Connection is the way they empower people to pursue their passions in ministry. At the retreat where Wayne and Paula started dreaming with the people from the old Croydon Church of Christ, the green-light brainstorming was to empower people to contribute their ideas. Wayne explains:

We tried to encourage initiative. We tried to encourage creativity. We tried to empower people and say, 'Listen, if you got a dream, go for it. You know, we do not want to hold you back. We want you to release your dreams'.⁴⁷

They articulated their core values and culture that included building up people and leadership development.⁴⁸ Wayne and Paula formed small accountability groups (CPRs) to get to know key people who could make things happen, and the groups multiplied.⁴⁹ They invested themselves in people with a view to helping them get in touch with their dreams and finding the resources to make them happen.

One of the structures Connection has designed to empower people is church 'partnership'. Instead of having members who are differentiated by their right to vote, Connection invites people who want to deepen their association to be 'partners'. It is a mutual arrangement of support and goals. Becoming a partner involves a partnership consultation, where potential partners discuss with leadership team members some goals of spiritual development and ministry, and the leaders undertake to help the partners achieve their goals.⁵⁰ The idea is that partnership goals are to be reviewed every twelve months. In principle partners appreciate the innovative system, although in practice only a few partners have ever conducted annual reviews.⁵¹ It is one of the processes the leadership team would like to follow up more.

Leadership structures are also designed to be empowering. Ministry teams are empowered with authority to lead in their area. This team-based authority and decision-making means the leader of the team, in consultation with their team, sets the direction and makes decisions about their ministry. The leadership team may prioritise which mission projects to pursue and

⁴⁶ Business Review Team, 'Chirside Connection Centre', Report to Connection Leadership (Croydon, 30 November 2005). Stored at MCD in Connection research journal, 268-270; Connection, 'Focus Group #3'.

⁴⁷ W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

⁴⁸ Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

⁴⁹ P Nebauer, 'Interview'; W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

⁵⁰ Connection, 'Partnership Uncovered', Information brochure (2004). Stored at MCD in Connection Research Journal, ix-xii; Nebauer, 'Connection Pack'.

⁵¹ Peta, staff member, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 23 May 2006).

appoint appropriate people to lead ministry teams, but the teams then plan their own efforts. For example, the Kingdom Team decides who to allocate mission giving to and the playgroup team determines their philosophy of ministry. Those involved in the ministry and who are making the biggest investment have the right to determine its direction, within the frameworks of Connection culture.⁵²

Heather experienced a balance of strong direction and empowering leadership when Wayne introduced 'Open Homes' in 2005. After 601 and Life Connection, Open Homes are a third expression of Connection with formats that groups can design for themselves, provided they are hospitality-based (community building) and inclusive (missional).⁵³ Heather commented on the process that introduced Open Homes:

I think there are two parts to decision-making in Connection. One is autocratic that determines the flow of things, where we meet, that whole idea of having open homes. And then there is the other, which we have probably all experienced, a very much empowering attitude of what is your passion? How can we help you? And I think both are compatible and work really well and Wayne had ideas for the open homes and we tried them out just amongst ourselves, found some did not work, some could work. It was a melting pot of ideas and people have taken them and run with them.⁵⁴

Initial experiments include a chess night for men, a card-making night for women and a party-based Open Home for young adults. Another possibility was a Friday night neighbourhood wine and cheese night.⁵⁵ So Open Home leaders, like other ministry leaders, can innovate and plan however they like, within the hospitable and inclusive framework of what Open Homes are designed for.

Another empowering program of Connection is its internship. The internship is a part-time commitment with ministry responsibility and input for spiritual development.⁵⁶ It has empowered many of Connection's key leaders. The first interns in 2002 were Chris and Nathan who were amazed at the responsibility and freedom they were given and subsequently came on staff.⁵⁷ Chris became director of spiritual development and was appreciated for his mentoring and his approachability and relational style. Nathan became director for ministry and staff development and is an excellent team builder and a careful organiser. By 2006 twenty people had done an internship, which added other staff and part-

⁵² Connection, 'Focus group #2'.

⁵³ Wayne Nebauer, 'Open Homes' (2005). Stored at MCD in Connection research journal, 193-196.

⁵⁴ Connection, 'Focus Group #3'.

⁵⁵ Chris Spratt, Director of Spiritual Development, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 3 May 2006).

⁵⁶ Connection, 'Internship 2006', Information brochure (2005). Stored at MCD in Connection Research Journal, xiii-xiv.

⁵⁷ Spratt, 'Interview'.

time helpers for church programs and helped people to go deeper in their faith.⁵⁸ Ronwyn, a 2004 intern, was a nurse and the internship helped encourage her to develop 'faith community nursing', a holistic service of pastoral care and health advice. The internship helped Farris develop a drama ministry that ran three productions— *Cosi*, *Midsummer's Night Dream* and *Medea*. Farris' vision is to use drama to explore how life and God work, and to include a lot of people especially people who are not yet connected with the church.⁵⁹

Empowering people to pursue their passions is one of the strengths of Connection. When Roxanne came to Connection she expressed a desire to run playgroups. Wayne told her that they prayed for people with passion to come to Connection and they would love to empower her. He asked for a proposal about the possible location, cost, leadership, program, support needed and relevance to the church's purpose and outreach, which Roxanne submitted and was accepted.⁶⁰ That is how Kids@Play started. Wayne's favourite example is of a young woman who had a vision for a girls' drop-in centre 'girlzone'. He helped her dream the possibilities, explore how to involve other churches and consider the costs. It did not eventuate, but he said it was worthwhile simply because of the life he saw in her as she started to dream.⁶¹

Looking forward to new leadership

One Sunday the Life Connection theme was 'encouraging one another'. People gathered around eight different tables, ordered their coffee and were welcomed by Adam, one of the Life Connection coordinators. Adam led us through a number of questions that prompted conversation around the tables, starting with: 'What of relationships at Connection have you most appreciated?' People shared about particular people's stories over the last year and the value of hearing other people's opinions. After coffee and cake, Adam offered another 'table talk' question: 'What do you personally find incredible about the life of Jesus?' The table groups discussed the question in a 'table talk' and then offered their thoughts to the whole group in an 'open-mike'. They mentioned Jesus' compassion, heart for those on the margins and apparent arrogance to claim he was the Son of God. Someone reflected it is amazing about Jesus that we see him in one another's serving – clearing tables, teaching our children, helping make Connection a healthy community. Adam then reflected on Jesus' life in the seven minute 'heartland', like a sermon spot, and introduced communion, which we shared while a video and song played in the background.

Connection is an innovative and empowering community with interesting approaches to worship and mission. Iona reflects on the potential of Connection's openness to new things:

⁵⁸ Intern numbers were two in 2002, three in 2003, five in 2004 (one of whom continued from 2003 into a second year), nine in 2005 and two in 2006. In 2007 there was a reduction in staff numbers because of financial constraints and no interest from prospective interns and so the internship did not operate.

⁵⁹ Farris, Connection volunteer staff member, 'Interview by the Author' (Croydon, 1 June 2006).

⁶⁰ Roxanne, 'Kids@Play'. Others at Connection often refer to Roxanne's vision as an example of how Connection empowers people. E.g., Peta, 'Interview'.

⁶¹ W Nebauer, 'Interview'.

That is really scary shifting from having God in a box to letting Him out of the box. To let God out of the box is one of the scariest things I recommend. It takes individuals a few years to really be able to do that and it takes churches much longer and this is one of those churches that is very much prepared to take God out of the box.⁶²

Following my visit and research, Connection was at a crossroads as it faced changes in location and leadership. Wayne and Paula finished as team leaders during my time as researcher. It will be interesting to monitor how much the reality matches the rhetoric of what culture and goals they work towards as they transition to new leadership.

⁶² Iona, 'Interview'.