



IMPACT REPORT

2023 - 2024

Introduction

Sunderland Connect Network (Connect Network) is a charity with a mission to bring faith, hope, and healing to individuals and communities in Sunderland by working collaboratively with the Christian community. We value strong relationships and believe in the importance of enjoying the journey as we work towards our goals, with Christian values at the core of all we do.

Our Projects

Christian Leaders

Leaders Connect - A group for Christian ministers and organisation leaders who meet for mutual encouragement, practical support, to pray and to explore ways of working together on key challenges facing our city.

Connect Network met regularly throughout the year with the **Leaders Connect Steering Team** to plan meetings for the Leaders Connect group. Peter Wallace, pastor of Lakeside Baptist Church took on the role of chair when Alf Waite stepped down. Connect Network hosted and facilitated **27 prayer meetings**, which were attended by a **core group of 10 church leaders** from a variety of traditions. Connect Network also facilitated **4 lunches**, which were attended by a wider group of leaders including charity leaders. We hosted two at Connect Network's Centre, Silkworth Independent Methodist Church and Hope Vineyard Church hosted the other two. The focus of the lunches was on bringing encouragement to the leaders through the teaching of our guest speakers; Bishop Paul Butler, Stephen Lindridge, and Steve Sutton. We also celebrated Christmas together with a lovely lunch served by our friends at Hope Vineyard Church.

Health & Wellbeing

Sunderland Good Food Partnership - A collaborative network of local people and organisations with a common interest in food.

Connect Network was invited by Sunderland City Council to join the Sunderland Good Food Partnership steering team. We worked together to develop the Sunderland Good Food Charter. We want everyone in Sunderland to have access to nutritious, affordable, climate-friendly food and this Charter sets out our vision for good food across the city.

https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/resources/partner_uploads/sunderland_1699975612.pdf

Keeping it Together - A network of ministers and others in Christian ministry getting good quality input from professionals and supporting each other.

This is the third year we have run the Keeping it Together network in partnership with Dave Burke, pastor, and mental health first aid trainer. We recognise that Christian ministry can be psychologically demanding, and we are aware of the need to nurture our own wellbeing whilst supporting others who are struggling, but there is often a struggle to find the time and the resources to do this. Throughout the year we hosted **ten one-hour online sessions** for ministers and those in Christian leadership. The attendees were blessed with the level of professional input from those active in the field of mental health. We looked at the bible and some of the helpful ways it addresses concerns around our mental health.

*“A big thank you for initiating such an essential oasis and support for those in Christian ministry.”
(KiT Participant)*

In addition to the online sessions, we organised **two free retreat days** at Shepherd's Dene in Northumberland. You could visibly see the stress melt away as soon as the attendees entered the tranquillity of such a special place. **72 took part** in Keeping it Together over the year.

Poverty

Gifts of Love - In response to the enthusiasm of the Churches and local schools, we co-ordinated our annual Gifts of Love project.

80 families were supported with **food hampers** at Christmas through the generosity of these churches and schools.

Children and Family

It was a privilege to work in collaboration with Cornerstone Northeast Christian Adoption and Fostering Service and Home for Good, who believe the church is ideally placed to ensure that every child and young person has the loving home they need. We agreed on a mission statement and created a digital storyboard to bring to life the story of a child in foster care. This was presented at the Believe in Sunderland Roadshow held at Hope Family Church.

Mission Statement to offer Children a safe home in Sunderland

There is a crisis in our country, a crisis in our own city of Sunderland and we need your help. Last year there was **over 80,500** children who could not stay at home with their birth families and as a result needed to become 'looked after' which is a term used to describe being in foster care/children's homes. The number of children unable to live with birth families has increased every year for the last decade. There are simply not enough foster carers to provide safe and loving homes for Sunderland's most vulnerable children, with demand outstripping supply. Sadly, this means children are not always 'matched' on where is best for their unique needs but rather who has a spare room. There are **over 2000** children waiting to be adopted in the UK with children who are of an ethnic minority waiting considerably longer to find their 'forever home.'

Something is going wrong for this to be happening, and we are calling out to the Body of Christ in Sunderland to stir into action. **More needs to be done** to help keep children at home - can you support a family? **More needs to be done** to provide children with loving foster families - could you open your home to foster? **More needs to be done** to find adoptive families to love those children who cannot go home - could you be a child's forever family? **Please join us in building hope in Sunderland for our children.**

Promoting the Gospel among Young People

Following the hugely successful youth work survey, we were able to form a strategic team to map the work ongoing by existing churches and Christian charities. We were also able to gather several youth work charities, including Wearside Youth for Christ, Scripture Union, the Message Trust and KICK, to think about how we best support one another to create pathways from outreach to churches. This is an ongoing work largely being spearheaded by Wearside Youth For Christ. We're delighted to be supporting the connections across the city to form these strategic pathways, so that we can reach more young people across our city with the good news of the gospel of Christ.

Equipping - Increasing the effectiveness of the churches' support and where to signpost vulnerable people.

Faith in Mind - Workshops and one-to-one coaching to support churches working with those affected by trauma or addiction. Run in partnership between Connect Network and Rebekah Allon-Smith, Psychologist and Trainer.

The Faith in Mind project involved people from **13 churches and 3 Christian charities** across Sunderland, participating in workshops exploring themes of trauma, addiction, and mental health through the lens of neuroscience and psychology. These workshops aimed to resource and support Christians in their mission, ministry, pastoral care, and work with those in need. Participants were members of church pastoral teams or community mission projects, who frequently supported those affected by these challenges.

We had **20 committed and enthusiastic participants**, who enjoyed meeting with like-minded people of faith from different church communities and learning together in a supportive environment. As well as gaining insight for the benefit of those they support, participants also talked of profound personal growth as they explored themes which touch on God's creative power and what it means to be human.

An active listening exercise (exploring the neuroscience of empathy and mentalisation) was profound for many participants who described never having *listened or been listened to* in this way before. This exercise set the tone for the engagement between participants throughout the course. The attitude of listening to *hear and understand* and not to judge came a simple yet profound outcome of the project.

A second area of impact was a recognition of the importance of personal emotional boundaries and that *'It is not our job to fix others'*. For several participants, recognising the need to step back, say no, take less responsibility, pay attention to their own limitations, feelings (impending burnout?) were key insights.

Participants commented on the programme supporting them to become more in tune with their own thoughts and feelings, a deeper understanding of those who are struggling and the complexities of experiences like addiction. People talked of growing in humility and in their awareness of God's love for them. Participants grew in appreciation of the diversity of God's creation and saw hope for healing in understanding the topics more deeply.

One participant who has a senior leadership role in her church said that the Faith in Mind programme and content caused her to reflect on her own attitudes to pastoral care:

"This Faith in Mind course I have learnt so much. My expectations have completely altered as to what... was in my power to control and I've realised that people's needs are hugely complex and my job isn't to fix them but to walk with them through it, where they are, and for a lot of people they are the only ones that have to start the healing process, that God can work with them but it has to

be something they want to do and that I can't see people as a project that I need to fix. That's not my role... What I'm really amazed at is just how wonderful God is. That the creation he made... yes, we know that his perfect creation was broken... but within that, our brains are fluid and with professional support and with God, there is hope for everybody."

What also stood out for us, in running the project, was the immense personal challenges of participants themselves. Whilst, in secular contexts, it is well recognised that those providing support themselves need support, this is less commonly recognised in church contexts but was glaringly obvious in our project, where every participant juggle difficult personal situations with their caring and pastoral roles. Through this project we saw the benefits of the opportunity to learn and to receive support and care.

Believe in Sunderland Roadshow

Connect Network's annual Believe in Sunderland event took to the road again this year, providing an opportunity to engage the wider Christian community from across Sunderland by visiting 5 areas of the city. Riverlife Church, east of the city, were the first to host the roadshow. 15 churches and charities were represented and enjoyed a time of prayer and worship, before hearing about some of the exciting youth work activities being delivered by numerous churches and charities. Then onto Hope Family Church who hosted us in the Washington area. The theme was *'Life in all its fulness'* and provided us with a platform to showcase our storyboard about children in foster care. This was an opportunity to stir the churches into thinking about their role in supporting children who are in care. We hope the *roadshow* will continue in the coming year.

Communications

Communication remained a key priority for Connect Network. We kept in touch with our community through monthly **e-newsletters and daily social media posts**, which included important information about **training, events, vacancies, and support** available within the network.

We put a spotlight on **toddler groups, youth clubs and coffee mornings** being delivered by the churches in Sunderland. This was enhanced by one of our volunteers' visiting churches who were open to showcasing their great work. It was wonderful to see how these churches are providing community for every age group and as a result are helping to reduce social isolation.

Working with **Premier Christian Radio** was a great way to end our year as we were asked to invite a mix of churches and charities to take part in a special interview on their Drive Time show to shine a spotlight on what God is doing through his people in Sunderland.

<https://www.premier.plus/prayers-of-hope-with-ian-britton>

"It was a privilege and a pleasure to speak with you live on Premier Christian Radio. It is always so good to hear first-hand accounts of what God is doing through his local church on the ground where it matters. I pray that those who listened were like me, challenged to ask God how they too can be used by Him." Josh Carter, Radio Presenter, Premier Christian Radio.

"It was great to hear such encouraging stories from God's people in Sunderland working together to bring change at every level. My prayer is we can continue to share this good news from Christians in Sunderland and beyond!" Charmaine Noble-McLean, Director of Content, Premier Christian Radio.

The Centre

It was so encouraging to see the Centre becoming increasingly more recognised as a Centre for Christian churches and charities to use as a venue. The number of groups using the centre increased and many commented on the *good feel* of the place. It also proved to be an ideal venue to run our

own projects such as the Faith in Mind workshops. Below is a list of the charities and groups that have used the Centre throughout the year:

- Three13 Training & Enterprise (ran various courses, Alpha, prayer and vision day and open day)
- Kick Academy (football for primary age children)
- Green Pastures (hot desk)
- The Fruitful Vine Church, Catalyst Church, RCCG Church
- Sunderland Community Church, Dominion City Church
- Ingeus
- The Message Trust (*No More Knives* vision night)
- Katwalk Kimberley (sewing courses)
- Change the Game (Netball, football, seated exercise, bootcamp)
- Hylton Care Home (seated exercise, coffee mornings)
- Time to Shine (dance club)
- Wearside Youth For Christ (meetings)
- Leaders Connect (prayer meetings, lunches, steering team meetings)

Networking

Connect Network attended the annual **Gather Movement summit**. The summit is a wonderful opportunity for Connect Network to meet leaders from other cities who are equally passionate about bringing the Christian community together to see cities transformed. We were invited to share about the work we do in Sunderland as a way of helping others learn from our model. We also enjoyed the opportunity to speak to members of **Hetton Independent Methodist Church** about our work and were inspired by their involvement with their local community which we have promoted. Connect Network took part in an interview for a podcast called **Faith at the Frontier**, to share about the impact our **Faith in Mind** workshops were having.

Database

We have **170 Christian churches and charities** on our database, serving across Sunderland, including Washington and the Coalfields.

Volunteers

We had **8 active volunteers** throughout the year and Connect is indebted to the commitment and willingness of all those volunteers who have helped to deliver our charitable activities both on the frontline and with their behind-the-scenes expertise. In the absence of a Trustee acting as Treasurer, we are especially appreciative of the very professional services of our **Finance Officer**, who has worked with the close supervision of the Chair, Secretary and Director, to keep all our financial activities in order and without whom we would not be in the position we are now.

Governance

The Trustees met five times during the year, receiving monthly management accounts and reports from the Director on delivery and performance. We have been awarded grants of £30,000 during the year and donations of £15,000. **Our total income amounted to £72,000** and expenditure came to £75,000. The Trustees believe we are in a good position to further develop our work in 2024-25 and further enable the churches to benefit the city.

Chair's Comments

I'm very pleased to commend to you the contents of this report, which both demonstrates and underlines the enormous achievements and impact Connect Network has had in the city over the last twelve months. My thanks go to all those who have made this incredible success possible.

Notwithstanding all that's been reported here, it is with some sadness that I need to inform you that the work at St Andrew's Centre will very shortly cease. Our licence to occupy the premises is being terminated with effect from 2nd April 2024, owing to the landlord's desire to sell the property. Connect Network had hoped to be in a position to purchase the building, and whilst we raised some limited amounts of capital towards this and made a formal offer based on our valuer's assessment of its market value, we were unsuccessful with our bid and now need to vacate the building. The Trustees and Director will now take time to reevaluate our situation and what the future might look like. In the interim, we will make temporary arrangements to deliver some but not all our services.

I very much hope we are in a better position and able to share more encouraging news when we publish our 2024-25 Impact Report.

To Close

Connect Network expresses its gratitude to all the individuals, charities and funders who supported our work, big or small, and extend a special thanks to their small team of dedicated volunteers, who have generously given their time and talents to support the cause. Connect Network is committed to continuing its work towards empowering individuals and communities to live life to the full, with Christian values at the core of all they do.

Deborah Fozzard
Executive Director

December 2024