

Responding to a community crisis

When disaster strikes: how churches can prepare, respond and survive



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On the 14 June 2017, a fire broke out at the 24-storey Grenfell Tower block in North Kensington. The fire burned for 60 hours and 72 people were killed. Seventy others were injured and 223 escaped the building. It was the deadliest structural fire in the UK since the Piper Alpha oil platform disaster and one of the most significant national tragedies since the Blitz.

I didn't attend the scene on the first day because my parish was in South Kensington and I didn't want to go over without a purpose. But on the second day I went to the site, having understood that my bishop at the time, Graham Tomlin, was there, and that further support might be needed.

There were many churches at the centre of that response. St Clement's Church, situated very close to the tower, opened its doors immediately and became a refuge as well as a hub for donations (and later psychological support). Notting Hill Methodist Church served as an emergency shelter. Latymer Community Church, where I became personally involved, provided immediate practical support and a community space, and went on to host one of the longest-standing memorial sites. Alongside these were the Tabernacle Christian Centre, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster, the Salvation Army and even St Paul's Cathedral.

For me, this period was a profound recognition of the role the Church can play in the darkest moments of local and national life. But it also raised deeper questions about what happens after the immediate response, and how (and if even) churches and leaders can prepare for events like these.

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My own experience of trauma shaped how I arrived at Grenfell. In 2005, following the 7/7 London bombings, I hosted an emergency service response out of a small church hall near Edgware Road. That experience was formative, but it was also deeply damaging. I later developed post-traumatic stress and experienced an acute anxiety-based breakdown. The experience shaped my ministry and was one of the reasons I went to Grenfell on the second day – not as an expert, but to see whether I could offer support informed by hard-won experience.



What needs to be considered

One of the immediate challenges at Grenfell was the sheer scale of well-meaning support. In the first 48 hours, people arrived with vast quantities of donations – beds, clothes, toys and household items. Much of it was left on surrounding streets, and St Clement's Church in particular was inundated with tonnes of goods that were not appropriate or usable.

Church leaders found themselves not only supporting traumatised individuals but also managing a complex logistical operation. Despite their gratitude, they quickly became overwhelmed and were eventually forced to ask people to stop bringing donations – an unexpected and emotionally difficult task. This is a good example for me of how uncertain we are in knowing how to respond to grief today; it very often becomes quickly materialised or monetised. I believe the Church has a crucial role to play in holding (maybe even organising) our grief experiences, as it did after WWII, without us needing to rush towards immediate actions.

Further, individuals from across the UK, and even from overseas, arrived offering counselling support. (One even started to sleep rough in the Latymer car park so that they could be 'available' to people.) Many were unaware that the Grenfell families had been moved into temporary accommodation away from the site. Others did not realise that offering counselling too early after trauma can be unsafe. The World Health Organisation (WHO) advises against counselling interventions in the first four weeks following a traumatic event, during what is often described as a 'settlement period', when the brain begins to piece together what has happened. In this context, churches can be vital gathering spaces – places of presence, peace and pastoral care – holding people in a physical space when everything else feels chaotic and unsafe.



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Bringing a community together

I already had relationships with leaders at Latymer Church, which became a hub of activity, including a growing memorial wall and a place where people could gather, talk freely and eat together. I conspired to respond to the chaos of the ‘counselling offering’ by holding a public meeting there within the first few days to introduce what we called the ‘Do No Harm’ plan. This was an approach designed to reduce the unintended harm caused by well-meaning responses and to encourage wiser coordination between all the non-governmental organisations on the site.

The meeting brought together several key people who were working to support the Grenfell recovery. Through a conversation with the leader of Mind, a working group was formed involving around 16 organisations of different faiths and practices, including the NHS. That group met regularly for two years to discuss the best ways to engage with a traumatised community.

From a church leader perspective, this collaboration was striking. We were able to offer insight into the social fabric and cultural dynamics of North Kensington – knowledge that some professionals underestimated, particularly the depth of mistrust in a community that already felt abandoned by government. Many local people would only trust pre-embedded partners, especially the local churches and the Al-Manaar Mosque, as access points for mental and emotional health support.

Collaboration over isolation

My experience at Grenfell contrasted sharply with my experience following the London bombings, where the church response had been insular and isolated. The danger for local churches is believing they can act competently and holistically on their own. While the Church is large, it is denominationalised and fragmented, and individual churches often lack the breadth of expertise needed for complex, multidimensional incidents like these.

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At Edgware Road, I felt intense pressure to perform and to know what to do. At Grenfell, I sought collaboration early and was invited into partnership with expert organisations. That avoided my previous experience of emotional overwhelm and a severe deterioration in my mental health, and instead initiated a period of shared responsibility, sorrow and collective wisdom. I was deeply impacted by partners from Mind, a Somali women’s mental health group, NHS CNWL and Cruse Bereavement. Support whose warmth, expertise, and commitment to the community were remarkable.

Is preparation possible?

Church leaders can be profoundly changed or wounded by traumatic events. Across the country, there is almost always a church and a clergy person attached to a disaster – national, regional or local. While the media looks for a competent spokesperson, the reality is that events like these often have a lasting and damaging impact on leaders’ mental health after the media spotlight has moved on.

Nothing can emotionally prepare someone for the horrors of a major incident. But major incident planning can help us to at least take sensible practical action. In crisis situations, adrenaline takes over and decision-making suffers. Plans function like fire drills – knowing who to call, what to do and how to respond. I have yet to see any meaningful training offered to clergy in this area, despite the frequency of the traumatic events each year across the UK.

There are specific traps churches fall into. One is overreacting: an unmanaged rush to be present that brings large numbers of people into environments that may be psychologically, and sometimes physically, dangerous. Another is media engagement. Clergy are often asked to speak on behalf of a community, which can be a powerful witness but also carries risks – of saying too much, breaching privacy or appearing self-serving. Basic media training can help leaders set wise boundaries.

Thinking short-term is probably the greatest risk where major incidents are concerned. There is a danger of becoming ‘paramedic priests’ – present in a crisis but absent in the aftermath. Long-term presence matters far more than short-term intensity. Grenfell demonstrated the longevity of trauma – years of marches, memorials and quiet accompaniment. The Church’s continued presence communicated a simple but profound message: you are not alone.

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Jesus’ words, ‘I am with you always,’ (Matthew 28:20) challenge us to accompany communities for years, not just weeks. But it is our Christian leaders who may also need to hear this message for themselves. Churches must be prepared to support leaders who may never be quite the same again. The reality is that major incidents like these create both direct and indirect victims. We are only just beginning to understand the power and significance of vicarious trauma and the deep emotional burdens of those who only came to care.

Next steps

- ♥ Explore major incident planning with your church leadership team.
- ♥ Develop a volunteer action plan for the use of the church building as an emergency shelter or as a civic facility.
- ♥ Build relationships with NHS, police and local authorities. These relationships will bear fruit in your community ministry and are invaluable when crisis hits.
- ♥ Consider media training for your leaders – this may be provided by your denomination.
- 🎧 Listen to Melanie interview Will about this topic on the Roots’ podcast: www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com

