

# How can Congregations be Helped in Time of Tragedy?

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# Inspirations for the project

- Work in the US following shooting incidents etc
- The challenge of the horrific event in the UK and Europe, whether it be the vehicle driven through pedestrians, or the disclosure of serial abuse
- Recognition of the character of trauma and the particular theological response it requires
- The chance to work with good colleagues...

# Resources

- Work developed in the US especially by the Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth ([ictg.org](http://ictg.org))
- Laurie Kraus et al, 'Recovering from Un-natural Disasters' (WJK, 2017)
- Theological insights e.g. especially Serene Jones, 'Trauma and Grace' (WJK, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2019); Shelly Rambo, 'Spirit and Trauma' (WJK, 2010)
- Psychological insights e.g. Bessel van der Kolk, 'The Body Keeps the Score' (Penguin, 2015)
- Semi-structured interviews with ministers who have taken churches through shock events of various kinds

# Types of shock events

- Fire, flood, terrorism
- Sudden illness or death of the minister, a key layperson, or a child
- Reorganisation/planned closure of churches
- Financial scandal
- Disclosure of abuse by trusted person
- And others...

# In other words

- Disappointment
  - Disease
  - Disaster
  - Death
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- Whatever erodes the instinctive 'religious' convictions by which humans seek to live – that life is an ordered configuration of events, that others are not out to get me, that my life matters (so Ronnie Janoff-Bulman)

# Key learnings from the interviews

- The importance of context, and of pre-existing relationships/networks
- The importance of getting support, especially to manage press and media
- That the church building is a huge asset (unless it's the problem)
- The importance of the continuity of liturgy, but also being prepared to improvise (learning from eg Diana's death).
- That shock events are very costly to ministers, and may still stay with clergy long after. Self-care is vital, and getting a break!

# Also:

- Seek to keep the event in perspective as the community searches for the new normal
- Aim for dignity, respect, lack of sensation
- Listen and observe, don't assume you know what's going on. Theologising comes some way down the track.
- **But also:** such an event can be a real opportunity for the church to serve in new ways, and for a new minister to gain the trust of the community.





# Training Days I

- Health warning as to responses that may be triggered by the day.
- Introduction to the embodied character of trauma. 'The body keeps the score'. Experiential exercises to put people in touch with embodied responses. The importance of being heard and witnessed to, and of resonant response. The effect of power differentials. The use of 'systems constellations' in enabling traumatised individuals to be in touch with their 'felt sense' and to attempt to shift position.

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- Phases of response to a shock event in the individual – acute phase responses and the problem of delayed responses, common in clergy and first responders.



- Phases of response to a shock event in communities:
- the 'heroic' phase when superhuman efforts of support and cooperation are possible, succeeded by
- the 'disillusionment' phase, characterised by loss of unity, vision and hope, gradually giving place to
- a phase of restoration and wiser living.

# IV

- Implications for ministerial practice. A 'toolkit' of contacts/practices. The importance of calming, communicating, and caring.
- Case-studies to reinforce learning.

# V

- The importance of gathering, vigil, and ritual.
- Good practice in creating and organising liturgy after shock events.
- Eucharist as both central to many traditions and ambiguous for some people.
- Lament as a neglected art in Christian liturgy.
- The power of music and silence.
- Memorials and anniversaries.

# VI

- Biblical reflections. Traumatic situations as the context of writing of so much Scripture, which therefore offers a literature and a language of suffering.
- The particular importance of the Psalms. The 'turn' in so many psalms of lament.
- The exercise of writing a personal lament.

# VII

- Theological reflections. The risk of over-triumphalism in Christian worship and preaching. The importance of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Different genres of congregational narrative, and the need to perform the whole range of the scriptures. Learning to see the same event through protological, Christological, and eschatological lenses.

# VIII

- Return to pastoral considerations.
- Grief responses in the community in the disillusionment phase, and the transition to a new wisdom.
- The vital importance of support, supervision, and self-care for ministers.



# Further theological thoughts

- Rambo on PTSD and Holy Saturday
- The interior narrative genre of congregations (Hopewell)

# Shelly Rambo and the Easter story

- PTSD is an encounter with death, death survived by some, but thereafter their lives are always mixed with death
- Need a theology that acknowledges this remainder of death in life that is central to trauma
- Goes as far as to say that 'the language of resurrection is, in many senses, the language of the oppressor' (Spirit and Trauma 129). Rather 'resurrection is not guaranteed life, but life that must be witnessed into being.' (168)
- Understand therefore the Spirit not just as the giver of life but as the one who mediates between life and death
- The 'middle Spirit' is always searching out new forms of life amid the realities of death' (140). It is not just the Spirit of resurrection or yet of Pentecost.

# Three thoughts

- Bear as much as possible of reality (cf. 1. Cor 13.7)
- Perform the scriptures in full, including Lam., Job., Ecc., and esp. Pss.
- Cultivate 'three-lensed seeing', the capacity to contemplate events in the light of the creation, the Cross, and the promise of a life from which every tear has been wiped away.