

## LEADING A CHURCH THROUGH TRAGEDY

BY KATE WHARTON

One thing we all learn fairly early on in church leadership is that there's no such thing as a 'normal' day. We regularly find ourselves dealing with things that are unusual, sad, funny, strange, complicated... But what about when tragedy strikes? When something happens out of the blue which rocks the whole church and community, what do we do? How do we lead our church through such a time?

I was licensed as Vicar here at St. Bart's in September 2017. It's a lovely church, and I quickly felt at home. One day in June 2019 I was awakened early in the morning by the phone ringing. It was Heather, one of the church wardens, telling me that there had been an accident involving the other church warden, Clive. I immediately drove to the house where Heather and her husband Graham were with Clive's wife, Jacqui. Very early that morning two police officers had knocked at her door. Clive had died in a tragic accident while on holiday in Spain. Immediately we drove to see Clive's daughter, Ruth, at work to tell her the news, one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

This was something I wish I'd never had to deal with, and I pray that I never have to deal with anything like it again. The sad reality,

however, is that many of us who lead will find ourselves from time-to-time having to lead our churches through some sort of tragedy. I want to offer a few thoughts from things that were helpful here, and some lessons I learnt along the way that may be of help should you ever find yourself in a similar situation.

### TRY TO BREAK BAD NEWS IN PERSON AS MUCH AS YOU POSSIBLY CAN

Heather and I made a list and set off as soon as we could. We both had a large number of very difficult conversations that day. Where we couldn't get to someone in person, we phoned them. We asked people to hold off from texting friends or posting on social media for a bit until we'd had chance to get the word round. This was difficult and exhausting, but important for many who were especially close to Clive.

### PROVIDE A SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO GATHER AND GRIEVE

We were due to have a Standing Committee meeting the evening Clive died, which we cancelled. As we spoke to people we found lots of them saying they wanted to be together, so we simply opened up



the church for an hour, with no agenda. On the Saturday we also cancelled a church barbeque, and arranged a more organised time that afternoon of gathering together to pray and comfort one another.

### THE FIRST SUNDAY WHEN YOU GATHER TOGETHER AS A CHURCH AFTER THE TRAGEDY IS IMPORTANT

Clive died on a Thursday and so alongside breaking the news and supporting people, I had to change completely what we had planned for the Sunday. I made the decision to stand down others who were leading and preaching at 9am and 11am and do it all myself. I changed the Bible readings and the songs and the whole format of the services. We simply gathered as family to cry and pray together. We sang songs and read Bible readings that declared God's goodness and love, and helped us to hold on to

hope. I spoke a bit about Clive, and pointed people to Jesus and the hope we have in him. I also needed to start by announcing the news again since there were still a few people at that point who hadn't heard.

#### **YOU MAY WELL HAVE TO DEAL WITH A LOT OF MEDIA INTEREST**

If this is the case, do make sure you access support and advice. Our Diocesan Comms Team were brilliant. The local newspapers and radio stations were all keen to run the story because Clive was such a well-known member of the community, far beyond the church. I knew they would print something either way, so I was keen to ensure that it was something Clive's family were happy with – and to make sure I gave them a quote which mentioned Clive's love for Jesus.

#### **BE THERE FOR THE COMMUNITY AS WELL AS THE CHURCH**

Clive was a recently retired teacher, and a steward at Everton Football Club. He had taken many primary

school assemblies locally. Many, many people knew him, and many of them were in touch with the church following his death. The majority of them were people of no faith, but they all had big questions and were looking for comfort and support. There was a challenge as to how we offered this support appropriately, whilst also pointing them to the hope which is only found in Jesus.

#### **EVERYTHING ELSE YOU WERE DOING WILL HAVE TO WAIT – EXCEPT IT CAN'T ALL WAIT**

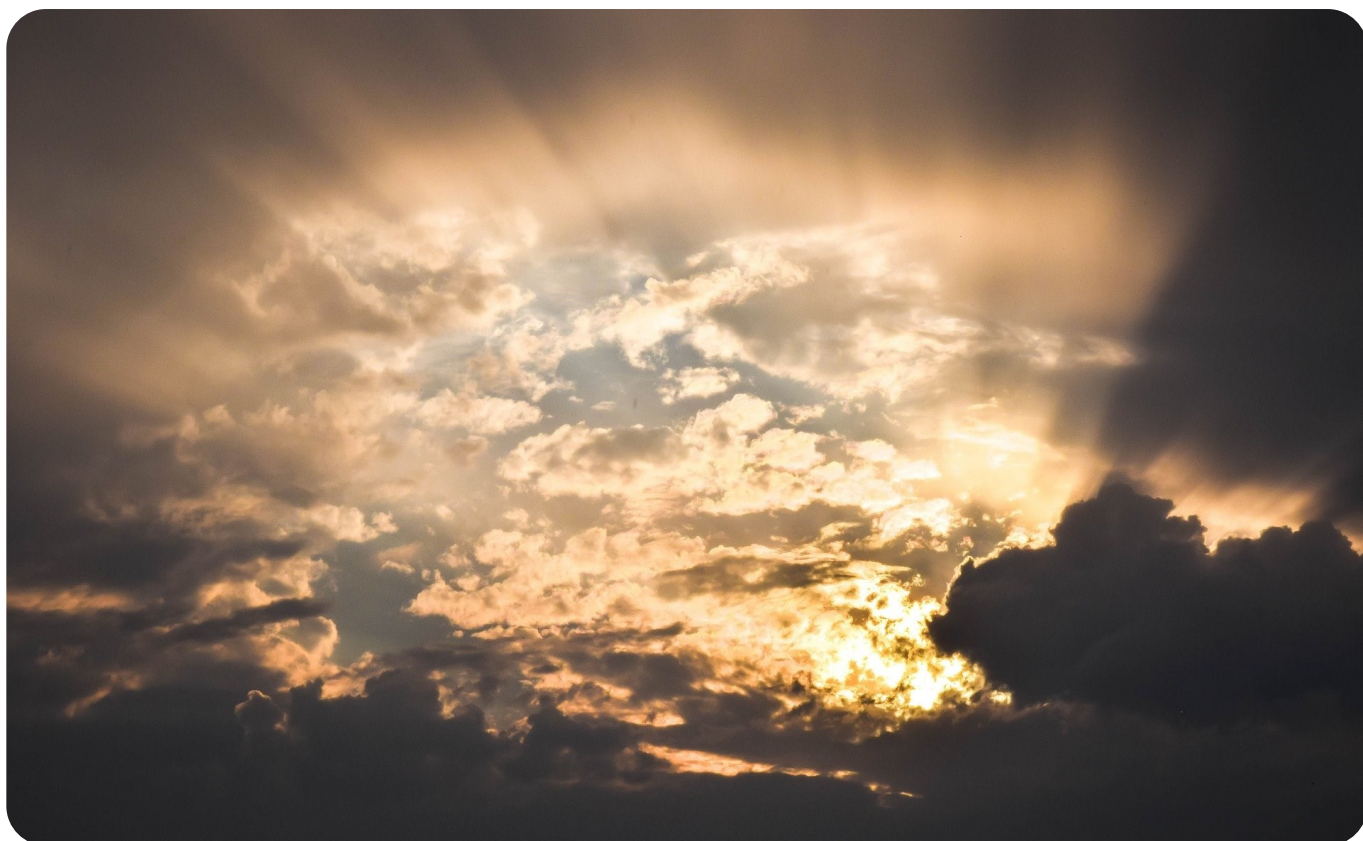
My diary had to empty very quickly for the immediate few days after Clive's death. Many things were cancelled. And yet some things still had to happen. There were other funerals to take. People were ill and needed to be visited in hospital. There was a nursing home holy communion to take. On reflection, I probably should have cancelled more 'normal' stuff than I did. A few days later I went to school for assembly, to find they'd made other plans because they'd assumed I wouldn't be coming!

#### **FIND SOME WAY TO DEAL WITH YOUR OWN GRIEF**

A wise friend asked me before the funeral how I was dealing with my own grief. Clive was a dear friend and colleague, so this wasn't 'just another funeral.' I said I was just hoping to make it to the end of the service and then I could deal with it after that. My friend suggested that actually I needed to work through some of my own grief first before I could lead the community in expressing theirs. That was very good advice. It wasn't a one-off thing, of course, but taking some time just to process my own feelings was really helpful and necessary.

#### **FIND WAYS TO MARK THE PERSON'S LIFE AND DEATH**

Immediately after Clive had died we bought a book of condolence that we left out in church for a number of weeks. This proved really helpful for people needing to express their feelings, but hopefully will also be of help going forward to Jacqui and Ruth. A few months after Clive had died, on his birthday, we decided to gather together a number of us to do





the Parkrun locally (which he did every week) and then gather for breakfast at our church café. A previous vicar shared some funny stories from his time working with Clive. We gave some thought to how to mark the first anniversary of Clive's death, which was another milestone moment for us all.

### THERE WILL BE SOME BIG QUESTIONS

When a church congregation faces something like this, inevitably all of their huge questions will come to the fore. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it does need to be named and faced. All sorts of issues around death and suffering and God's will and why bad things happen to good people will need to be talked about.

### THE FUNERAL WILL NEED A LOT OF PLANNING

I've done an awful lot of funerals in my 15 years of ordained ministry. I've done funerals of people who have died by suicide, of babies and children, of people who have died suddenly. I found this one the hardest by a long way. Mainly, I guess, that was because of my own grief. But it was also logistically complex. For a start the issues of repatriation meant that it was some time after Clive's death before we could have the funeral. Then we knew that attendance was likely to be huge so we had to think about extra seating, and sorting out the technology so we could relay the service by TV feed to our upstairs room. We had to make a plan for what to do if the press came. I had to hold together a lot of raw and angry

grief and try to help people work out what was and wasn't helpful to speak aloud on the day.

### BE IN THE CORNER OF THE BEREAVED PERSON

When I spoke in church the first Sunday after Clive died, I encouraged people to be there for Jacqui, to call, text or write, to pray – but not just to turn up without warning. We organised a meal rota, but I asked people only to take food on their day, so she wasn't overwhelmed. When people offered practical help, we filtered it first. I taught people about [Ring Theory](#), where the name of the bereaved person is written inside a small circle, then the next closest in another circle around that one, and so on until everyone connected is listed. The idea is that you 'comfort in' and 'dump out' – so you can say anything you like to a person further out than you, but to those further in, you can only comfort. I wanted to protect Jacqui from well-meaning people missing the mark. Sometime later, after I'd seen off a delegation trying to 'cheer her up by giving her a job', Jacqui texted me to say 'thank you for having my back'.

### BE IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

An event like this casts huge ripples – ripples outwards around the community, but also ripples forwards. There are moments that will catch everyone unaware. Grief is a long, slow, arduous journey and there are no short cuts. Be around a month later, and six months later, and a year later,

and on, and on.

This was an incredibly tough season for the whole church, and for me personally. There are still tough moments, of course, as we learn to live differently, as we always must do when we lose someone we love. And yet in the midst of it all God was so clearly at work.

Many of Clive's non-Christian friends – work colleagues, neighbours, relatives, fellow football fans, friends from band and Parkrun and cycling club – were at the funeral and heard that in the midst of our devastating grief we had hope, because of Jesus. The talk I gave that day was somehow simultaneously the hardest and the easiest funeral talk I've ever given, because I was able simply to talk about the faith that Clive held so dear.

As a church community we've come together during our sadness, we've supported and comforted each other. At the end of the funeral we sang Clive's favourite hymn, which will now probably forever more make me cry – but through this time we have truly known the truth of the words 'Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside'.



### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. What's the most difficult pastoral situation you've ever dealt with? What lessons did you learn from it?
2. Do you know how you'd respond to people's big questions about life, death, suffering and eternity? Is there anything you could read or think about now which would help?
3. If a tragedy struck your church tomorrow, how prepared would you be? Is there anything you could do now that would make you better prepared?