

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme 15. Easing out of Lockdown – what next?

Following on from her earlier reflections from a perspective of trauma in Week 1 and Week 9 in our series, systemic facilitator and trainer Revd Hilary Ison offers further insights gained from her work as part of the Tragedy and Congregations team.

Stress is exhausting

As we ease out of lockdown, I wonder what your reaction was when it was announced that churches could open again for private prayer and then for public worship? If the Twitter-sphere is anything to go by then it was, as would be expected, a very mixed experience, with some really glad to be back in church again, and others more cautious or unable to open up for various reasons. But whatever your situation, just coping with the experience of the past four months will have been exhausting on a personal and professional level, as well as psychological and emotional. The stress reaction to a crisis is fuelled by the release of adrenalin to help us respond as best we can. But that stress response is only meant to last for a short time to deal with an immediate event - not four months and counting! It will be in our bodies as well as our minds that we will be registering the effects of this.

Take time out

In a recent poll of clergy in the Diocese of London, it emerged that 72% had not had any time off since lockdown began. It's understandably been really difficult to take time out during lockdown but it is vital for ministers and church members to take time out over the summer, whatever that will look like. Your whole brain-body needs to rest and allow the nervous system to reset before ploughing on to the next phase of this crisis. Self-care is vital if we are in this for the long-haul.

Take time to reflect

You may have come across the saying, *"we have travelled so far, so fast, that now it is time to sit and let our souls catch up with us"*. I've seen it in various forms, but the truth of it is important for this in-between time from one stage of the pandemic to the next. It's important for us on a personal level, but also for ministers to be able to encourage church members and church leaders to reflect on their experience and where we are now. There is no 'going back to normal' as many of us wish for, and there will be many losses to acknowledge and grieve, as well as new insights, initiatives and opportunities that have emerged. But most importantly, what has shifted within ourselves as people and congregations? What have our experiences been and what have we learnt? When we travel this road of reflection, we are better able to make life-giving choices about how to move forwards as God's people on the Way.

Living with the unknown

One of the hardest things of living through this pandemic crisis is living with uncertainty, with the anxiety of simply not knowing. Nobody knows how this will all turn out, and what ups and downs there will be on the way. It makes us feel insecure and vulnerable. How can we resource ourselves to live with such vulnerability – both our own and as leaders, trying to hold it for others? For leaders in these times, it means holding your nerve and being prepared to live with the vulnerability of 'not knowing' the answers, but being prepared to work them out together.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke counselled his 'young poet' to be patient with the uncertainties in his heart, to 'love the *questions themselves*' and to live them, without seeking answers. He would not be given the answers, wrote Rilke, because he could not live with them. Instead he

should 'Live the questions now.'¹ 'Perhaps [we] will then gradually,' suggests Rilke, 'without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.'

We are travelling this journey as the disciples did in the experience of Holy Saturday – of the extreme vulnerability of not knowing the outcome, nor of what lies ahead. What holds us is that we are accompanied; Jesus has travelled this road. We can only be present to the experience and live into it in the company of the one who is faithful and who holds our souls in being.

A visual aid to help us reflect on our experience in the storm....



Three representations of resilience:

1. the rock – solid, unmoved as the waters swirl around it in the raging river
2. the tree – well rooted in the ground, able to bend and flex with the wind and all that buffets it
3. the sand dune – the storm lifts up the sand and swirls it around so when it lands again after the storm, it is still sand but completely refigured in shape and form

In what ways do any of these representations speak to my experience, or that of the church?

This and other reflections can be found on the Tragedy and Congregations website - <https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/category/blog/>. St Luke's thanks the Tragedy and

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, (Tr. M.D. Herter Norton; New York/London: Norton, 1993), 35 (italics in the original).

Congregations Team - Hilary Ison with Christopher Southgate and Carla Grosch-Miller - for this penultimate reflection in the series.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website or on [020 7898 1700](tel:02078981700).