



# idea

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**Called to lament**  
to mourn with those who mourn



# FLY TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

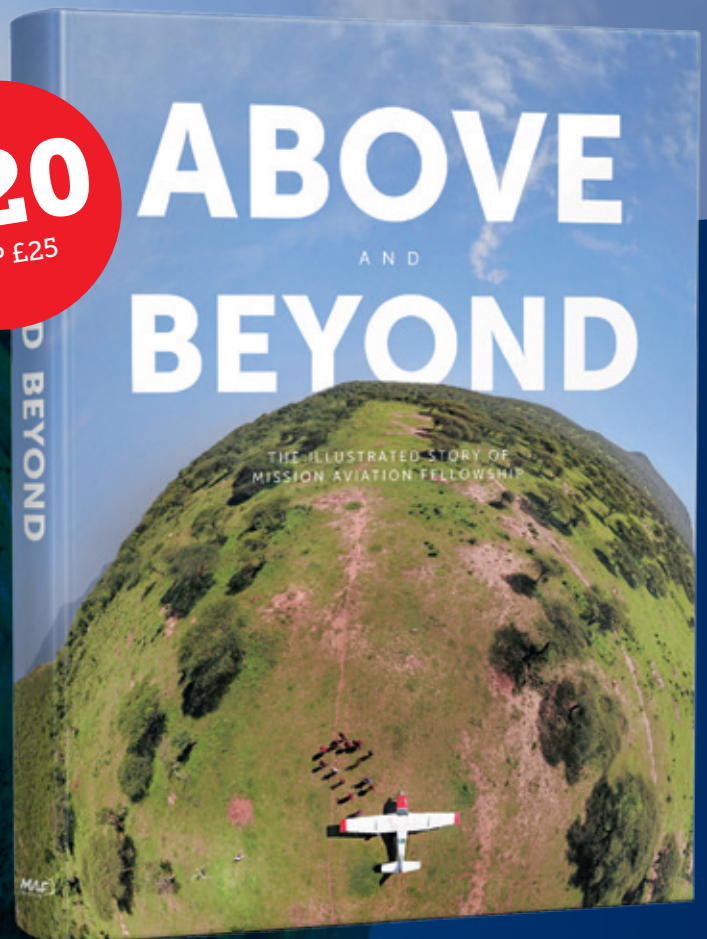
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# Welcome

## Cry out

“If ever there was a time in our history when we needed to rediscover lament as part of our life and practice, it is now.”

Fred Drummond, our director of Scotland and prayer, begins this edition by encouraging us to have honest, heart-felt conversations with God, individually and as faith communities (p. 2). This, he says, is crucial as we move into a new season, because “when we lose lament, we lose the mystery, healing and prophetic parts of our calling”.

Perhaps some of our contributors will help us bare our souls, as they recall the acute grief and pain they felt when death and sickness and more death shook their lives. Jacqui Parkinson stitched: “I lie alone in a bed made for two” (p. 7). Rev Malcolm J. Duncan wrote: “I have walked sorrow and sadness from I was a boy” (p. 14).

Rev Duncan also recounts having to make a



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choice: to allow the losses to define him or refine him. Choosing the latter helped open his eyes to the “beauty of God’s goodness and grace”; and it’s the very goodness and grace of our God that many of our authors urge us to remember as we journey through our own heartache and comfort and support others as they do the same.

As Andrew Moorcroft prays: “My God, you show me compassion...Words cannot describe your grace; I praise your majestic name!” (p. 22).

**Naomi Osinnowo**  
Editor



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# ABBA, Father...

We need to rediscover lament as part of our life and practice, says  
**Fred Drummond**, director of Scotland and prayer, Evangelical Alliance.

**L**ament is a thread that runs through our story as people of faith. It is part of who we are. From the prophets to the Psalms, and Job to the gospels, the theme of honest conversation between a worshipper and God is central.

By lament I mean an honest, heart-felt conversation with God. This is based on the belief that God is just, faithful and steadfast in His love for us. It is the sharing of who we are and how we feel, believing that something needs an upfront articulation. It is a bringing forth of our perplexity, our lack of understanding, our confusion – sometimes with bitter tears – into the realms of our relationship with the God we trust.

However, I sense that it is an area of our spirituality and experience that many of us in church leadership have underplayed or have even forgotten. So, I want to look briefly at what I believe lament to be, highlighting the need for both individual and community lament and addressing why it is so important as we move into a new season.

## Lament is serious business

Lament is not just a small complaint about a minor issue. It is a heart-felt grievance about a matter of deep sorrow and pain. Psalm 13:2 reads: “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”

As we read these words, we can feel the psalmist’s sense of frustration and even anger as they ask God why is this even happening? Psalm 22:6 reads: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.” This is life at its rawest: real, genuine grievances aimed at God; powerful questions borne from times of despair and suffering: where are you God? Why don’t you do something God?

“Laments are serious business; they are not an excuse for tears or emotions but deal with serious matters that are a source of struggle needing articulation.” (*Rediscovering Lament as a Practice of the Church* – Dorey, Duffield and Upton)

Even in the despair and sorrow that the worshipper feels, it is because of their belief in God that they are bringing their lament to Him.

## Lament is truthfulness

In our lives as believers of Jesus, we often communicate at a surface level. So much of our conversations is designed to keep us from becoming vulnerable. When we ask people how they are, we rarely really want a full analysis of that person’s emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. We can do the same in our prayers and worship. We can tell God what we think He wants to hear or

delve into platitudes and generalities. Not so with lament.

Laments are active, poetic, truth-telling. Job 3:23-26 reads: “Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For sighing has become my daily food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me, what I dreaded has happened to me, I have no peace no quietness; I have no rest.” Psalm 55:4-5 reads: “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.”

These are just two examples of the raw, sometimes almost brutal, truth that is shared in lament. There’s no desire to hide emotion or feelings. Rather, what is being articulated is the anger, frustration and disappointment that has come about in the disconnect between the worshipper’s perceived reality and the promises of God. These emotions are too real; the hurts are too deep for cliché or banality. Only truthfulness will suffice.

## Lament is faith-filled relationship

Even in the despair and sorrow that the worshipper feels, it is because of their belief in God that they are bringing their lament to Him. There is no sense that their faith in the power or sovereignty of God has in some way diminished. Rather, it is the sense of a lack of understanding of what God is doing or



why He is not active in a particular way, that leads to the disconnect that the worshipper is feeling. It is because of their faith that the person who brings their lament to God can be honest and share their biggest hurts with Him.

Often, as part of this relationship, there is a sense of journey that the lamenter goes through. Whilst this is not true for everyone, many of the psalms of lament move from a place of anger to a place of renewed hope. The lens changes from an initial focus on the situation to one that centres on God's power. The mood gradually alters from despair to hope. The writer may start with despair, but as they articulate their issue they begin to be reminded of the care and concern of God for them. Psalm 13 begins with: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" and concludes with: "But I trust in your unfailing love: my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for He has been good to me."

Theologian N. T. Wright comments on this in an article he wrote for *Time* magazine: "These poems often come out into the light by the end with a fresh sense of God's presence and hope, not to explain the trouble but to provide reassurance within it." (Christianity offers no answers about coronavirus. It was not supposed to - *Time* magazine).

I love that we worship a God who is holy, perfect and sovereign. Yet He

is also a God who enters into honest conversation with us; a God who listens and walks with us through our deepest pains and helps us to see something new in our situation; a loving God who does not distance Himself from the frustrations of His people.

## Communal laments

Whilst most laments are about an individual's concerns, there are some that are a call from the community of God's people. Psalms such as 44 and 79 are good examples of these. They demonstrate the corporate call against injustice and violence, bringing the frustrations of the people before their God.

There is something both prophetic and powerful about a community of faith so moved by situations around them that there is a united lament and waiting before the almighty God. The speaking out of injustice and pain gives voice to grief and despair and is an affirming and uniting act.

I believe it to be a prophetic and powerful act that the church does not engage in enough. In a world of such injustice, pain and violence, I believe that we, as the church, need to lament more about public life. To lose the power of communal poetic lament is to disengage with the pains of the world and, at least in my opinion, to walk away from our God-given calling to be salt and light in the world today.

Walter Brueggemann calls the psalms of lament 'psalms of disorientation'. He writes: "Life is savagely marked by incoherence, a loss of balance and unrelieved asymmetry. In our time - perhaps in any time - that needs no argument or documentation." (*Spirituality of the Psalms*, Fortress Press, p. 25)

There are many people in our nations who feel disorientated. They carry anger in the face of loss, woundedness at not being able to say goodbye to loved ones. Hurting, frustrated, confused people of faith who cannot connect their experience of faith to the promises of God. We cannot give all the answers, but we can give permission and space. We can point to our tradition of lament, gently leading people to engage openly and honestly with the God who meets us in our despair, and who gently guides us in that despair to a new place.

As a church, when we lose lament, we lose the mystery, healing and prophetic parts of our calling. If ever there was a time in our history when we needed to rediscover lament as part of our life and practice, it is now.

In a world of such injustice, pain and violence, I believe that we, as the church, need to lament more about public life.



## Developing a theology and practice of lament

One of the most significant and important things that all communities of faith are going to have to think about, and put in place, is a clear theology of lament.

Visit [eauk.it/cc-lament](http://eauk.it/cc-lament) for some simple ideas of how to practise lament as part of a faith community.



# HOW LONG, O LORD?





When rumours of a virus turn to evening government updates...

When headlines move to daily news of fresh infection growth rates...

When schools are closed, then holidays postponed. Everyone is asking, "Who has been furloughed?"

A slight change of plans, just wash your hands, "It's like the flu, remember?"

Let's stay at home, do PE with Joe, it'll be over by September.

## How long, O Lord?

When streets resemble ghost towns at peak lockdown regulation...

When we crave a crowd, we cry out for connection from full-blown isolation...

When millions search for online church with new-found innovation...

Everything is online but getting loo roll is a hassle. And trust in power is eroded by trips to Barnard Castle.

It all ends in tiers; there's no quick fix. When you're a table of seven but there's a rule of six.

## How long, O Lord?

When our dreams are dashed, ambitions strangled, our Christmas plans destroyed...

When a righteous anger rises at the murder of George Floyd...

When families are asked to grieve behind masks at graves of treasured loved ones passed...

Life is in limbo, we are stuck in between, it's herd immunity or miracle vaccine.

2020 short-changed by COVID-19, and children aren't getting the food that they need.

## How long, O Lord?

With ever-growing numbers of the daily deaths presented...

When this is the new normal... When what life was like lamented...

Will people stop using the word unprecedented?!

We are 'Zoomed' out, home-schooled out – restrictions extended.

And those we love die, unattended.

## How long, O Lord?

I have been deprived of peace.

I have forgotten what prosperity is.

So, I say my splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord.

My soul is downcast within me.

Yet, this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

By **Phil Knox**, head of mission to young adults, *Evangelical Alliance*



Go to [eauk.it/lament-spoken-word](https://eauk.it/lament-spoken-word) to download Phil's spoken word version of this poem, which has been made freely available so that churches can use it during online services.





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# GOOD GRIEF?

Sharing a personal journey

**W**hen my first husband, Rob Frost, died, I wasn't prepared for the body blow that grief can deliver. To help cope with the pain, I took up running; and while I ran, I cried and sobbed. Then, unbidden, words bubbled up in an expression of my pain. So, I decided to stitch my sadness onto some vintage handkerchiefs, chosen because I felt I was sharing grief with many others – the tears of parents, partners, children – the tears of those who comfort those in pain. Grief is a lonely yet shared experience.

The hankies were personal, not intended for display. But the people who did see them encouraged me to put photographs of them together for a book, *Good grief?*, which shows the raw feelings of one grieving person, with lots of visual images rather than lots of words, because I found, when Rob died, it was hard to take in too many words. Grief is a profoundly silent experience.





By **Jacqui Parkinson**, a textile artist whose large-scale panels tour many English cathedrals ([jacqui-textile.co.uk](http://jacqui-textile.co.uk))





# BISHOP PAUL ON GRIEF AND COMMUNITY RECOVERY

How can Christians help each other and their communities recover from COVID-19? Naomi Osinnowo asks the **Rt Rev Paul Butler**, Bishop of Durham.



**T**he Rt Rev Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham and a member of our council, kindly agreed to speak to me for this edition of *idea*. I wanted to find out from him how church leaders and their congregations can help Christians and their wider communities recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

As one might expect, we explored the challenges that churches and communities in the Diocese of Durham have faced over the past year, as well as the success stories. Bishop Paul also drew my attention from the local to the global, as he considered the role that the UK church can have in the COVID-19 recovery.

## On helping people grieve and discover hope in Jesus

“People haven’t been able to grieve adequately. The past year has brought about challenge, disappointment and sorrow, and many are completely bereft. So we, the church, are to help individuals, families, communities – our country – lament. We have a crucial role to play in helping people grieve well and discover the hope we have in Jesus.



Our tools can be found in the scriptures; the Psalms are full of lament. We also have the story that tells us about true lament and true joy on the other side. Every year we remember Good Friday and Holy Saturday, a time of lament, and then Easter Sunday – the discovery of hope and new life. We're not to race to the resurrection; we must allow people to journey through Good Friday and Holy Saturday in order to know the joy of resurrection.

Our churches can be spaces where people come and express their grief, informally or through formal services. In the community activities we run, people will raise over coffee the agony of the past year. When in-person toddler groups are in full swing again, people will bring up how tough it's been. At luncheons, people will open up. We need to share our space and community to facilitate the grieving process."

### On responding to physical needs

"At the same time, we continue to respond to people's physical needs. Of all Church of England dioceses, the Diocese of Durham has one of the highest concentrations of poverty; and our most deprived communities have been sorely affected by the pandemic. Over the past year, we have seen a rise in the use of foodbanks and food co-ops as well as a sharp increase in the number of people accessing debt advice.

As we have done in the past year, we work together to respond to people's needs. Collaboration between churches within the Diocese of Durham has been admirable. As church leaders, we have met much more regularly than we have done before, while churches have been working together on the ground to deliver support projects. Foodbanks, phone chains, shopping and collecting prescriptions for neighbours, connecting with those at risk of becoming lonely, and generally caring for each other are among the many ways we've met needs, together."

### On partnering with others and job creation

"Our churches have also been working even more closely with local authorities and local communities on delivering support for those most

in need. We now have stronger and healthier relationships with our local authorities, for which they express huge appreciation. We've been working effectively with various agencies too, such as the police.

These cross-sector partnerships have created opportunities for future longer-term engagement. For instance, the North East Chamber of Commerce has been in touch with the Diocese of Durham, looking to and calling on us to have a voice on employment, as we seek to tackle job losses in the region caused by the pandemic. We are able to work with them and others to help develop entrepreneurs and encourage business, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which is where most of the jobs will be created."

### On our place in the world

"As we move ahead with our own COVID-19 recovery, we're to recognise and remember that we are part of a global community and the world church. We must not just think about building back better in Britain; we must play our part in ensuring that other nations recover well from this worldwide pandemic too.

And yet, we can go even further. Over the past year, people have reconnected with their local neighbourhood, going for walks in parks, and have appreciated less noise and traffic. I, for one, have noticed that the birds haven't stopped singing, worshipping God. The lockdown has encouraged people to think more about what we can do at a local level to help address some of the ecological problems. We are seeing our churches step up in a new way to engage with climate change and creation care."

### On seeking God's direction

"I long for people to be willing to listen to the Lord to discover the best ways to serve in this time of ongoing lament, sorrow and rebuilding. We're to discover what's gone, possibly forever, and what it now looks like to be the people of God serving the world. Prayer is about placing ourselves before God and aligning ourselves with Him. It's very simply saying, 'Help us to follow Jesus where we are, in the power of your Spirit.' That's what God has called all of us to do, to be followers of Jesus wherever we are."





# Supporting THE COUNTRY'S BEREAVED

As the UK recovers from the pandemic, can I urge you to think how you can engage with our country's bereaved? asks **Rev Canon Yvonne Richmond Tulloch**, founder and CEO of [AtaLoss.org](http://AtaLoss.org).

I wonder how many of you have thought about death over the past year. Before March 2020, death hardly crossed our minds, but the pandemic quickly changed that, and it's likely, very sadly, that you or someone you know will have been bereaved since restrictions began.

When we combine the coronavirus deaths with the usual deaths per annum and additional deaths from reduced healthcare, our country is now, alarmingly, experiencing a 'tsunami of grief', with 1:4 people having lost loved ones since the start of the pandemic, all in traumatic circumstances.

At the best of times bereavement can be devastating: it presents a host of challenges that affect every area of life, often causing able people to become dysfunctional and to lose hope. For anyone bereaved during the pandemic, restrictions will have seriously exacerbated this pain. A large number of bereaved people have not been able to see loved ones before they died, say goodbye, attend a funeral or receive comfort from family

and friends, and so have been left with their grief journey put on hold.

Grief is a necessary human response to loss, and bereavement needs to be processed for healing to be reached. Unsupported grief can lead to depression or other negative outcomes, such as relationship breakdown, loss of employment or addiction. In fact, many of the problems in our society stem from unprocessed grief, as community support has waned. James 1:27 describes the kind of church that is acceptable to God as "looking after widows and orphans in their distress", and Isaiah 53:3 depicts Jesus as a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". Bereavement support is without doubt our calling as Christians, and never in our lifetime has it been needed more.

However, there's a problem. I have been involved in bereavement support now for almost 10 years. My husband died suddenly in 2008 when I was a church leader working in mission. Like many other bereaved people, my life gradually fell apart. I was





lonely and fearful, I lost my appetite, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't concentrate, I lost my confidence, and I descended into despair. Church and my faith should have been the greatest source of help, but two things surprised me. The first was how grieving made me question my beliefs, and how uncomfortable church can be. The second was how little those around me knew about what I was going through and how to help.

I soon discovered that this experience is common for those bereaved – that bereaved people naturally asking the big questions of life can feel especially isolated and alien in church. It became apparent that if we could better understand and support grieving people and provide an environment where they felt welcomed and at home, it would not be difficult to see thousands of new people become part of the life of the church, as well as prevent others from leaving through the back door. This has been my ministry ever since.

The pandemic has now made this so much more important. Through initiative Loss and HOPE ([lossandhope.org](http://lossandhope.org)), I'm involved with ecumenical church leaders in equipping churches in bereavement support. We have gathered training, resources and ideas to enable Christians across the country to learn how to come alongside bereaved people and to provide the welcome, understanding and help they so need. In particular, we are encouraging churches to run The Bereavement Journey ([thebereavementjourney.org](http://thebereavementjourney.org)), a series of films and discussion groups (online or in person) to enable bereaved people to process their loss, and in an optional session to consider faith.

Everything that's needed is available to make it easy for churches to run, even publicity through a nationwide signposting website, [ataloss.org](http://ataloss.org). Our hope is that churches across the land will now provide the community support that our country in mourning so very much needs.

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10 minutes with...

# REV DR TANI OMIDEYI

Senior pastor, Temple of Praise



## Tell us about Temple of Praise.

We're a community church in Anfield, a deprived ward in Liverpool. People from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures make up our church, which is based

in a former cinema, not far from Anfield football stadium.

We believe God has placed us here to bring transformational change to and through the community; we therefore describe ourselves as a 'community transformational church'. Over the last 25 years, we have seen God do amazing things in our community.

## The past year has posed particular challenges for people from disadvantaged communities. What have you seen in Anfield?

North Liverpool wards in our area feature in the worst five per cent of the English indices of deprivation, though parts of it are in the worst one per cent. High crime, low educational attainment, poor physical health, high unemployment and low life expectancy are the problems that beset the town and its people.

If the indices were bad before the pandemic, we can only imagine what they'll be like afterwards. Food poverty has rocketed, and families have struggled to feed their children; people's emotional and physical health have declined.

In our consultations with a 1,500-strong group from the community, 85 per cent said their mental health has been badly affected by the crisis. A similar percentage said they're under huge financial pressure, and it's increasingly difficult to cope from day to day.

It doesn't help that Anfield is densely populated with very little greenery: people haven't been able to depressurise during lockdown. We expect mental health to be a huge challenge as we exit this third lockdown.

## How has your church responded to these challenges?

We learnt in the early days that we have to be systematic in what we do, which is why we carry out consultations. Some years back, this approach led to us establishing Liverpool Lighthouse, an urban arts and community centre, and Harmonize Academy, an alternative provision free school.

Liverpool Lighthouse in particular ([liverpoolighthouse.com](http://liverpoolighthouse.com)) has been at the heart of our community response amid the pandemic, as in March 2020 we moved our church fully online and have been reaching into Anfield, neighbouring Everton and beyond,

primarily through the centre. We decided that if the community couldn't come into our building, we had to be in the community.

Our food project has tripled in size and impact over this period, and we're now supplying food to hundreds of families each month, as well as equipping them to cook healthy meals. We run a range of other projects and schemes too, including a music school attended by 35 children and guided walks in Bright Park, Knotty Ash, our six-acre wooded parkland, to alleviate loneliness and enhance wellbeing.

## The vaccination programme signals a gradual return to normality. What does this mean for your local community?

For the many who have been housebound over this period, it will be met with great relief. There will be lots of jubilation, but we're praying people do not go wild. The tears and pain that have been hidden will come out, too. I think we'll find a lot of brokenness. Yet we hope that through this period people will have seriously reflected on their life and will want to engage with Christ.

## What ongoing support will your community, and communities like it, require going forward?

Communities such as ours need people who will listen to better comprehend the challenges (old and new) and develop solutions along with them. So, for the first two-three months, we'll likely be on the ground seeking to understand the landscape. As we've done in the past, we'll consult our community rather than jump at solutions.

We're trusting God that we'll be in a position to properly support the community.

## What advice would you give to church leaders ministering in similar contexts in this time of recovery after a gruelling year?

First of all, a huge well done! God is with us and has taken us through this. Now, let's not rush to provide solutions but instead strive to better understand where our communities are at.

It's important that we seek God's wisdom and His divine inspiration on how to respond. The answer is with Christ, and we have got to listen to Him, but it helps if we know the landscape, as that informs our prayers and requests.

Finally, take time to rest so you don't burn out. We as leaders have gone through challenges that we're yet to work out ourselves, so we need wisdom on how we approach things.

# OUR TEARS LET IN THE LIGHT

I began walking with God through the rubble of my grief and pain and saw more clearly and deeply the beauty of His goodness and grace, says **Rev Malcolm J. Duncan FRSA**, author of *Good grief: living with sorrow and loss*.

**W**hen Jesus promised His followers that He had come that we might have life in all its fullness (John 10:10), He was including every part of human experience, including our losses and our laments. Christ's repeated promises to transform our sorrow and to carry us through everything that we face are liberating to the broken-hearted – at least they have been to my broken heart.

Nobody is immune to sorrow. I have walked sorrow and sadness from I was a boy. Personal illness, sudden death, suicides, tragedies, life-threatening illnesses in two of our children, and the loss of two children in early pregnancy are all part of my story.

Confronted by these losses, I had a choice to make. Would I let them define me or would I let them refine me? Choosing the latter, I began walking with God through the rubble of my grief and pain. It is a journey I am still on. I pause often. I think long and hard about what grief is and about what grief is not. On more than one occasion I have wondered if my life would be forever shrouded in the pain of these partings. It will not. Each loss left a tear in the manuscript of my soul. They have not been the end of my story, though. These tears let in the light.

Grief has stripped my faith of its unnecessary tassels and baubles and helped me see the beauty of God's goodness and grace more clearly and deeply.

I have learned many lessons. Darkness and sorrow are places of transformational encounter with God. Death feels alien to us because we were made for life. The world does not stop for us in our mourning, but God waits with us in the silence, offering us hope. The presence of pain does not equate to the absence of God. God's silence does not mean that God is indifferent. Death and loss loosen our grip on people whom we can often put before God. There is a deeper beauty in lament. There is a cadence to loss. Every note in the symphony of our lives matters to God. In the end, God wins. Death never gets the last word – Christ does.

Grief is a road I would not choose, but it has revealed my frailty, exposed my vulnerabilities, and brought me into a deeper and more authentic relationship with God than I have ever known. We can no more avoid sorrow than we can avoid life, because to be alive is to face death. Christ transfigures the darkness, however, so that in it we discover the hope of God's promises. Just as Lazarus was brought through death and into life, so we have the hope that Christ wins. Sorrow is not the last line of our story – hope is.

In the end, God wins.  
Death never gets the last  
word – Christ does.



The following excerpt is taken from the opening chapter of *Good grief: living with sorrow and loss*.


## When Shadows Fall: walking through the valley of grief and loss

**M**y darkness wasn't abnormal, it was normal. It wasn't unexpected, it was expected. My confusion, my pain, my struggle, my world falling apart – this was all normal. It was what happens when the darkness of death descends... If others were trying to muffle my cries, God just wanted to hear them. If others were upset by confusion, God was not. In my seasons of loss and sorrow, the two statements of Christ in His death have been my statements... The dying Saviour uttered the profoundest cry of human abandonment ever heard and the deepest cry of trust ever spoken... Just as darkness descended on Jerusalem when Christ died, darkness descended on me through death and heartbreak. And it was okay to experience complete loss and abandonment and utter words of absolute dependence at the same time...

My soul was set free to sob in sorrow and to cling in hope to God. I remember the day this truth penetrated my soul because it ties into something else that I learnt through the text in... Luke 23:45. In his description of the day that Jesus died, Luke simply says, "While the sun's light failed." I think it was the pathos of it, the beauty of it and the power of it that laid waste to my soul.

... I realised that the darkness of sorrow and pain and heartbreak that I had lived in for so long were not to be feared. My mind raced over my own personal losses and I realised that I never got to say goodbye to any of the people that I loved. I would have given anything to kiss my dad or my mum goodbye and tell them that I loved them... Somehow the fact that Luke tells us the sun's light failed on the day that Jesus died was a comfort to me. I think a piece of the sun in my life died when I lost those that I love. That breaks my heart. Yet even in that brokenness, there is a space to meet God. The darkness had become a sphere of encounter with God for me, not just a reminder of loss. And the Gospel that helped me with that was John.

Here, I reflect on the darkness and the shadows of bereavement. Having explored the wider biblical metaphors of darkness, and the ways in which we can encounter God in them, I reflect here on three descriptions of the darkness of the crucifixion: the cry of abandonment in Matthew 27:45, the cry of trust in Luke 23:44, and Luke's description in the next verse of the darkness that descended on Jerusalem as Christ was crucified.



# CHANNELLING MY LAMENT

In my lament I decided there's more that I can do to help tackle the racial disparity that exists in the UK, says **Rev Nims Obunge MBE**, senior pastor of Freedom's Ark and CEO of the Peace Alliance.

"It is better to protest than to accept injustice." *Rosa Parks*

Last year our world was given a rude awakening by the unjust killing of George Floyd, as the police knelt on his neck for up to nine minutes until he died. His death, which was shared across global media platforms, sparked a wave of riots and protests in the US and across the world.

These protests in June and July were not ignited simply by this needless killing but were also an outcry against the disproportionate exercise of police force against black people, which had also resulted in several other deaths, not just in the US. There was also an underlying feeling of anger and an outcry against systemic racism and a demand for equality in other parts of the world, including the UK.

I recall being unable to just sit at home and watch the news reports of thousands of protesters in central London and in 260 cities and towns in the UK. I needed to go and pray alongside protesters, asking God to keep our cities peaceful and give us a moment in our history when we would as a country consider an appropriate response to achieving equality, especially for black

"But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." *Amos 5:24*

and other disenfranchised members of our communities.

Although I was aware of coronavirus restrictions, I felt a stronger imperative not to sit back and assume change would come by inactivity. There was a compulsion to be part of this fight to ensure a better future for my children and their future generations. Although very challenging, I did the best I could to be socially distant and wear a mask in what was now to be Britain's largest anti-racism protests in decades.

I was also concerned about the possibility of another protest riot in our country, as I recalled as if it were yesterday ushering away children and women on our streets as the Tottenham protests and subsequent UK-wide riots of 2011 started following the police shooting of Mark Duggan.

These protests, fortunately, were to be different, as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) brand seemed to have a resonance

across society. The majority of protesters were peaceful, coming from every class, race and generation, with even parents carrying their little children to be part of what could be a moment of historical change.

I was still, however, concerned about incidents of violence against police and citizens. On several occasions, I called out for church leaders and church members to support the police and the protest organisers' efforts to maintain peace, so we wore our Peace Alliance yellow jackets and acted as coordinators and stewards.

Reflecting on these protests, I am concerned that some issues raised by the *Macpherson Report* following the killing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, which concluded that the investigation into his killing had been "marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership", still exists. Yet still, the leadership in the police deny institutional racism's existence and assume its use as "unhelpful".

What is also challenging is the home secretary's recent portrayal of



the BLM protests as “dreadful” during a radio interview. This is against the backdrop of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in a published report on 26 February 2021 warning that police risk losing the trust of the communities they serve after their latest inspection on the disproportionate use of stop and search powers. The inspectorate said: “Over 35 years on from the introduction of stop and search legislation, no force fully understands the impact of the use of these powers.” HMICFRS pointed out that ethnic minority people were four times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people; black people were about 5.7 times more likely to have force used on them than white people, and more than nine times as likely to have tasers drawn on them.

On 3 March the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) referred a police officer to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for possible GBH (grievous bodily harm) following his discharge of a taser to the back of Jordan Walker-Brown, a 24-year-old black man in my

“It is a sin to be silent when it is your duty to protest.”

*Abraham Lincoln*

community as he ran from police and was jumping over a wall, which has left him permanently paralysed from the waist down. He was carrying a small portion of cannabis for personal use.

The HMICFRS report also revealed that black people were eight times more likely to be handcuffed while compliant and three times more likely to have a spit and bite guard used on them than white people, for reasons the inspectorate said are “unclear”. It also pointed out that the use of these powers was “unfair” and could lead to more black and ethnic minority people being drawn into the criminal justice system, as well as disrupting their lives, education and work opportunities.

I was once a member of the London Criminal Justice Board, and I also chaired its advisory panel. I was a member of the Home Office Stop and Search group and of a panel that scrutinised the Metropolitan Police

in their use of stop and search. I lament that the issues we have sought to address over many years remain so apparent.

In my lament I decided that I needed to do something more than protest, and so in a series of conversations with Baroness Philippa Stroud of the Legatum Institute, we decided to set up and co-chair a race equality commission. We agreed we would bring together people from a diverse range of backgrounds and ethnicities, all committed to exploring why racial disparity exists in the UK and identifying the changes that would make a tangible difference to people’s lives. Our vision is to see an end to injustice against anyone and create an opportunity for everyone in the UK to prosper, irrespective of their colour, culture or class.

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” *Micah 6:8*





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# FLOWING FROM HIS THRONE

**A**t a time when we are both lamenting the horrors of coronavirus and looking forward to pathways out of lockdown, the truths of Scottish minister George Matheson's late 19th century hymn, O love that will not let me go, are more pertinent than ever.

Borne out of a season of suffering in his own life, the loss of his sight and the refusal of a marriage proposal, Matheson is said to have penned the lyrics in less than five minutes.

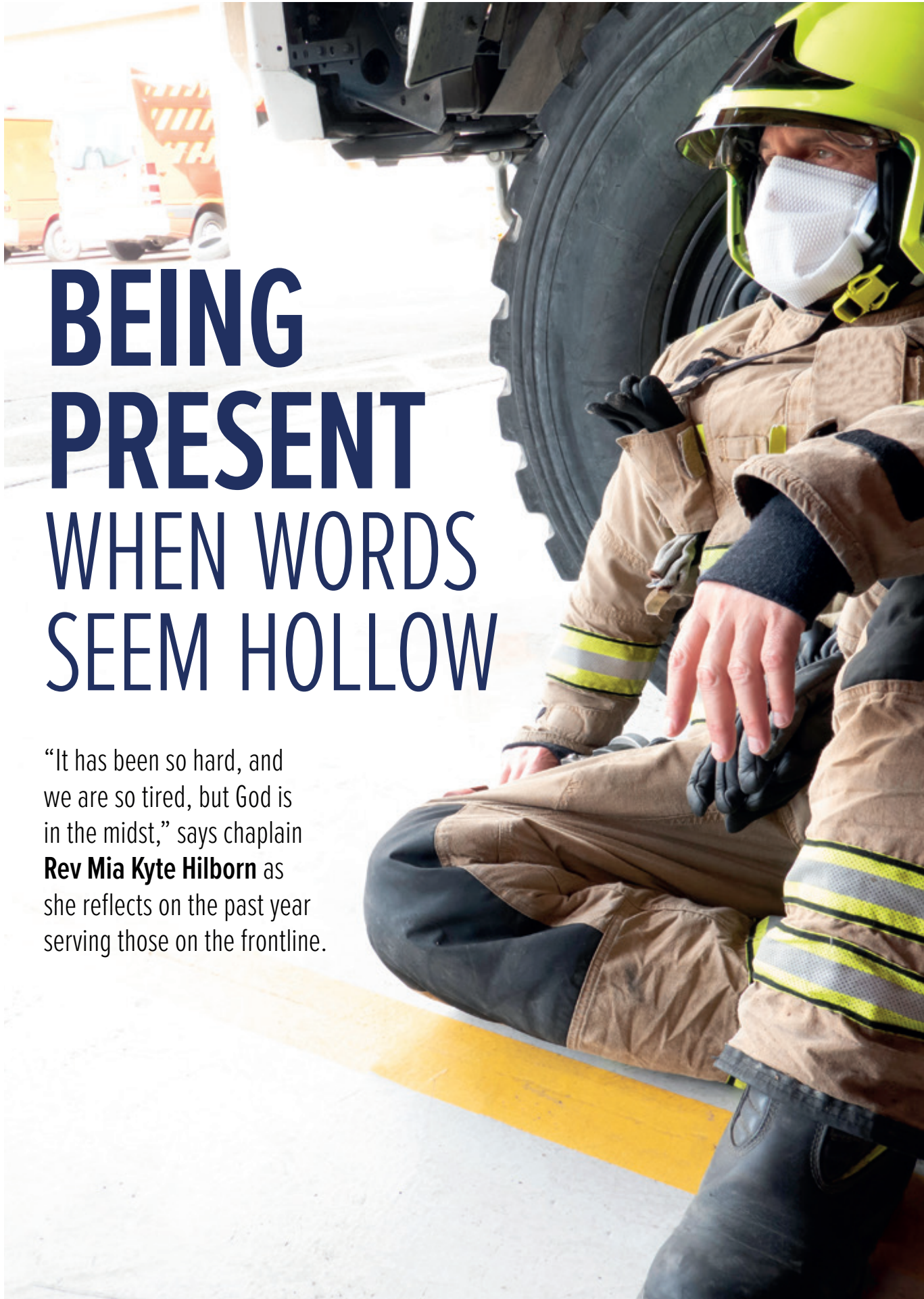
The words of the second verse depict a time when God will have restored all things to Himself, a time when "He will wipe all tears from our eyes" and there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

But until that time comes, let's take comfort in the words of the refrain of this arrangement which remind us of the love of God flowing from His throne room and into our lives.

By **Siân Rees**, director of *Evangelical Alliance Wales*

## Listen

You can listen to Sound Of Wales' rendition of this classic revival hymn, which has been reimagined within a fresh musical framework, at [eauk.it/sound-of-wales-idea](http://eauk.it/sound-of-wales-idea)



# BEING PRESENT WHEN WORDS SEEM HOLLOW

“It has been so hard, and we are so tired, but God is in the midst,” says chaplain **Rev Mia Kyte Hilborn** as she reflects on the past year serving those on the frontline.



“How long, O Lord, how long?” These words are the cry from Psalms 13:1 and 79:5 and are the words of Habakkuk’s appeal too: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” (1:2).

**T**he pandemic continues. It is the first time anyone younger than 101 has lived through a time like this, where every connected country and people group have been perversely united against a common enemy, coronavirus, in its increasingly variant forms.

The so-called Spanish flu was different, as the information exchange was far less, scientific and medical knowledge was nowhere near the complexities of today, and society wasn’t as mobile.

I am head of chaplaincy for Guy’s and St Thomas’ and Evelina London Children’s hospitals, and for the London Fire Brigade and the Firefighters Memorial Trust. My work is with the sick and the dying and those who care for them, as well as those who rescue and protect people and property. It is a large multi-faith and belief team.

Along with everyone else, we are so tired. We have gone through the excitement at the beginning of the first wave: the adrenaline rush to get things changed, to prepare the best treatment possible in the circumstances, to make sure everyone had a useful and fulfilling role. In the summer we had some time to step down as we waited for the next wave. It came, slowly, but it came.

We were transfixed, watching numbers, waiting, trying to make sure people took snatches of time to walk along the river or in a park. Many, including myself, don’t have a garden. As London prices are, staff either travel long distances to get to work or live in poky flats. If you are in a multi-generational family living in a crowded living space, then coming to work in a COVID hospital or a fire station covering ambulance shifts can be places of respite.

Some staff have told me that work is their ‘safe place’, where they have colleagues who understand what it is like to work in health or emergency settings in the middle of a pandemic. At work they trust personal protective equipment and safety procedures; they can’t in the same way trust travelling, going to the shops or sometimes the people they live with.

## So many tears

The cries for help in more recent weeks and months have come from different places in the hospital, social care and emergency services worlds. The single mum struggling to work from home and educate her children. The healthcare professional juggling working with coronavirus patients whilst

caring for two shielding people whose mental health has been badly knocked. The dad, a nurse in the thick of the coronavirus fight, who has decided to leave one hospital and go to another, because with no chance of a relaxing holiday perhaps a change will help him cope.

The support staff member who has no opportunity to support their family in another country after their sibling has been killed. The many teams of staff that have lost a colleague during the last year, maybe due to coronavirus but mostly as a result of other illnesses. The patient who hasn’t seen a family member for many months as they live a long way away; now they’re close to death, should the family come into a busy COVID hospital?

The firefighter struggling with mental health issues after seeing too much. The proud parent of a firefighter who doesn’t know how to express that they’re terrified they might catch coronavirus. The person who has been made redundant during the pandemic and is questioning whether they should eat or travel into central London to see their dying loved one for the last time. The parent caught between visiting a sick baby or looking after their other children at home – social distancing means they can’t easily do both. Even so, there is hope, there is always love, and there is respect. God is in the midst.

To survive this time, we have learnt that we need to be flexible and kind to others. One of my team sends a joke to the chaplains every day; yesterday’s was: “There is always light at the end of the tunnel, except there has been a power cut.” It made us laugh.

As Christians, we need to walk as Christ walked on the way of the cross; it is an incarnational theology that is required, which offers love and prayer, service and calmness – being present when words seem hollow.

Paul wrote: “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:3–6).

## Please pray

For those who work in healthcare, social care and emergency services, and their families, friends and patients. Pray for us chaplains too. It has been so hard, and we are so tired. The successful rollout of the vaccination programme is a positive sign, but the recovery will continue beyond the pandemic.





# let's PRAY

*“On the glorious splendour of your  
majesty and on all your wondrous  
works, I will meditate.”*

PSALM 145:5

## A culture of prayer

At the Evangelical Alliance we pray regularly and champion prayer, because we believe that as we seek God's face together, the Lord hears us and amazing things begin to take place. Join with us, using our prayer centre for inspiration: [eauk.it/prayer](https://eauk.it/prayer)





## FATHER IN HEAVEN,

You are worthy of my praise. You are my God, creator of heaven and earth. You are my king, reigning with splendour and majesty. Monarchs rise and fall but your throne is greater, and your kingdom will endure forever. I praise your majestic name!

Who am I that you are mindful of me? I do not compare to you. Your fingers have formed me, and your breath gives me life; I have my being in you, the almighty. You are the beginning and the end; I'm a mist that vanishes. Each day, I despise and belittle you; I turn and go my own way.

My God, you show me compassion; you crown me with steadfast love; you redeem my life from destruction. You have given your own Son over to death for me. Words cannot describe your grace; I praise your majestic name!

Father, what can I give you in return? Take my life and be the meditation of my heart. Strengthen me to seek you; fill my mind with thoughts of your splendour that I might praise your majestic name.

A M E N

By **Andrew Moorcroft**, graduate researcher,  
Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland

# WITH GOD IN THE STORM, AND AFTER

It's now over a year since the first lockdown, and as healthcare workers look at what has been and what is to come, they need prayer more than ever, says **Prof Steve Sturman**.

**T**here is no single narrative. Each person in healthcare has their own story to tell of what has happened in the past year. For some, critical moments in resuscitation loom large with the exhaustion of PPE-clad shifts. Others relive the incessant surge of sick patients, all needing attention simultaneously, with the sense of inadequacy to meet those needs.

But away from emergency and critical care other stories unfold. We remember patients, not just with COVID-19, fighting illness and disability on the wards, alone, struggling with imposed isolation, just when they needed the love of their families most. We have watched them suffer alone and die alone and we, as staff, know this is not how things should be. The clinics are silent, the waiting rooms empty, and we struggle to deliver care from a distance by telephone or video. Who knows what is happening unseen and unattended to? And we are helpless to do more, it seems. These failings in care cause us moral injury.

Clinicians have found their lives disrupted by the need to take on new roles and carry the anxiety of uncertainty about their competence. At the same time there has been the frustration of de-skilling as years of experience are laid aside to do other necessary but unfamiliar tasks. All this against a background of fear of personal contagion and, worse still, bringing it home to those we love.

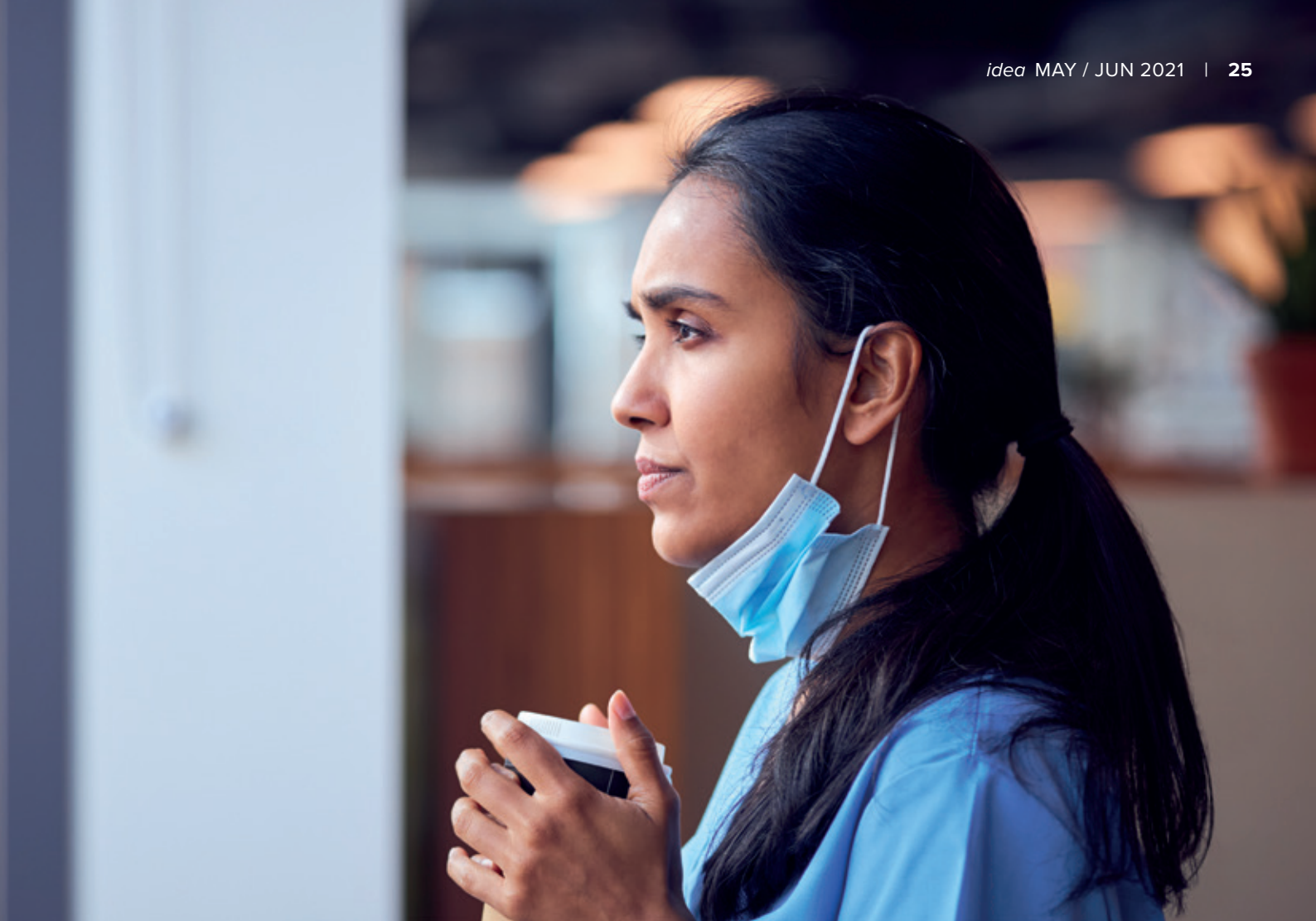
We have watched colleagues get sick and have

realised we are vulnerable. We have seen their empty desks and wondered if they will return. Successive waves have revealed our susceptibility to post-traumatic stress. A colleague unexpectedly breaks down and cries, "I can't go through it again" as intensive care switches over once more to COVID-mode. It is hard to keep the heroic response to crisis going, and we find fatigue that is deep-seated in our teams.

All the time regular life is on hold. Training is disrupted, exams rescheduled, medical and nursing education suffers, and annual leave is cancelled. Normal outlets for rest and recovery are suspended. Even church is virtual.

And what of Christians in healthcare? The Christian Medical Fellowship (CMF) has been supporting nurses, doctors and students around the UK, and we find that Christians are not immune from the challenges of this epidemic. There are even additional stresses. The loss of regular church contact is felt keenly. Health professionals relocate frequently, and nurses and doctors new to an area have had difficulty finding fellowship during lockdown. This is compounded by isolation from their families and friends due to coronavirus regulations. Members have said they feel locked in a cycle of work with no fellowship. Also, as those who serve Christ, we feel the sense of failure as we have seen patients suffering and we have been unable to help.





There is another side, however. We have heard of members cherishing God's word more than ever before as circumstances have developed. We hear testimonies to God's faithfulness and a flourishing of intimacy with Him in the storm. Members report increased prayerfulness and new opportunities to share the love of Christ. One member commented: "This pandemic period has reinforced the importance of delighting in God for me." Another spoke of being encouraged to 'share the faith question at work'. Another testified: "We've all gone into this knowing God is with us, that this assault course is taking us somewhere and there is nothing so bad that can happen that God cannot bring good out of it." Another spoke of initial weeping but then reflected: "But that moment passed, and I've had a quiet peace ever since. Not an illusion that everything will be okay, not a dread that it will be awful, just a quiet confidence that whatever is happening in the world, God is in it." We hear lament but we also hear of God's safekeeping.

As we look forward, we see the challenge that looms, a huge mountain to climb as we re-adjust to restore clinical care to pre-coronavirus levels. We have waiting lists thousands long. And everyone is weary, it seems. How will we do it?

What then can the church do? Please pray for strength and endurance for healthcare staff you know. Pray for perseverance and exceptional

Successive waves have revealed our susceptibility to post-traumatic stress.

stamina to take on the challenges ahead. Pray too for those who are coping with the disruption and loneliness the past year has brought. Look out for those who are carrying loss and trauma, and bear one another's burdens. Pray especially for Christians to not just survive but to grow in grace, to "shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15), showing the love of Christ in their work. Intentionally look out for those who appear online or who you might otherwise meet who are isolated or weary and "welcome them as Christ has welcomed you" (Romans 15:7). And thank God - His grace is sufficient.

### Connect with CMF

Professor Steve Sturman, a neurologist in Birmingham, is associate head of Doctors' Ministries in the Christian Medical Fellowship.

For further information and resources around CMF's coronavirus response and other areas of ministry, including media and blogs, visit [cmf.org.uk/resources](http://cmf.org.uk/resources) and [cmfblog.org.uk](http://cmfblog.org.uk)

As we gradually move out of lockdown, I urge you to think about how you can best detect the signs of trauma in the children and young people you are supporting, says trauma and attachment occupational therapist **Ruth Stephens**.

# How to become A TRAUMA DETECTIVE

**N**ever before has the subject of mental health and trauma been so important for us to understand in our churches, charities and outreach projects. The pandemic has resulted in lots of challenges and loss, the effects of which could be thought of as collective trauma.

It is also important to remember that some people may have been through other traumatic experiences earlier in their lives, and for them the pandemic may have been a trigger or may have catapulted them to breaking point. Recent research has coined the phrase 'adverse childhood experiences', ACEs for short, which include parental death, separation, and emotional/physical neglect, and these often result in what is known as developmental trauma or toxic stress.

A recent research study in Wales showed that 14 per cent of the population had suffered four or more ACEs, and that this was likely to lead to complications later in life. People who come from a deprived area (such as that mentioned by Rev Dr Tani Omideyi on page 13) are more likely to have experienced ACEs, and during the pandemic we know that deprivation has increased. Later in their lives, children who have experienced ACEs are prone to sickness and disease, mental ill-health, lower educational and occupation opportunities, and more.

## What's happening in the body

Early traumatic experiences in life affect people at every level of body, mind and spirit. In my role as an occupational therapist, I have worked with many

children who have suffered different traumas as a result of poorly attuned care, abuse and neglect. These stressful experiences are often stored deep in the subconscious parts of their nervous system and can then easily be triggered by a newer stressful event, which may cause them to go into 'survival mode'. Their body may then move into a state of high alert or retreat, and at worst may possibly shut down.

All of these are protective coping mechanisms. If people don't feel safe inside their body, they won't be able to face the challenges that are ahead, let alone be able to open up to others and encounter Jesus and His love for them. Many aspects of a person's life, including their family life, may be affected. They may form unhealthy patterns of relating to others in order to gain the security that they seek deep down, and they might behave in ways that are challenging in our youth and children's activities.

## What to look out for

For children and teenagers, feeling calm, settled and able to focus on the here and now doesn't come easily. Their body is often in a constant state of 'survival mode'. This has huge implications for them in our kids' clubs and youth activities. If they can't settle or 'regulate', then relating and engaging may be difficult; and because staff and volunteers may also be experiencing a level of burnout themselves, they too may be easily triggered to frustration and to respond sharply.

In your children's or youth ministry you might experience the fallout from trauma in the form of challenging, unpredictable behaviours, and these may be more noticeable after the coronavirus restrictions lift.

Children and young people, and even adults, may experience sensory overload, particularly where there are a lot of sensory demands such as people touching them, loud noises or bright lights. Church environments can be very sensory demanding, and, after the restrictions lift, I think we can expect more anxiety around sensory overwhelm. For someone who has experienced a level of adversity, it may feel very exposing and they may struggle to integrate.

Christians are called to be compassionate and have been empowered with the Holy Spirit, but we also need resourcing to make a difference. Whether you are a children's worker, youth worker or are in any way involved in a church body, I invite you to think about how you can best detect the signs of trauma in the children and young people you are supporting and find practical ways to make the environment feel safer for them.

Helping people understand how their body feels when it is in a 'just right state' can equip them to settle. Is their body feeling on high alert or is it too sluggish and slow so that they feel flat and poorly engaged? Creating an environment that feels safe is important so that they are able to fully receive the love of our Father God.





## There are five areas that we should focus on when supporting those who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):

### 1. Promoting awareness of the impact of ACEs

#### What this might mean in practical terms:

- ✓ Training for your team and raising awareness of the effects of ACEs

### 2. Reduce the sources of toxic stress

#### What this might mean in practical terms:

- ✓ Good safeguarding procedures and practice
- ✓ Ensuring that we have good policies and procedures for safe recruitment of volunteers and staff
- ✓ Supporting the whole family

### 3. Helping build resilience and core life skills

#### What this might mean in practical terms:

- ✓ Modelling routines and life skills such as basic self-care and daily living skills
  - ✓ Running parenting groups
- ✓ Mental health and wellbeing support groups
- ✓ Sport and activity built into programmes, especially for young people

### 4. Providing buffering key relationships

#### What this might mean in practical terms:

- ✓ Consistency in support
- ✓ Showing curiosity about behaviours
- ✓ Mentoring and buddy schemes
- ✓ Good pastoral structures in place

### 5. The sensory environment

#### What this might mean in practical terms:

- ✓ Pay attention to making the environment welcoming
- ✓ Consider sound levels
- ✓ Consider lighting


There are also some simple practical things that can be done to make sure our children and young people can settle more easily. When our activities meet again in person it is going to be helpful to begin with regulating, calming activities that help them settle and that have some of the following qualities:

- Playful (which doesn't necessarily mean childish)
- Short times of focused activities alternated with high impact, active games
- Rhythmical: such as to and fro or marching games
- Undemanding yet predictable

Try and look behind behaviours and become a trauma detective. Look out for people who are withdrawing, especially if they are not normally like this. Remember that 'big' behaviours are often a plea for support. Last but not least, remember that in your role, you too need to be aware of your own limits and shout out for support.

To find out more and increase your awareness of developmental trauma, visit [www.jointhedots.solutions](http://www.jointhedots.solutions)

“When I look at the suffering in the world and even nearby, I always remind people, particularly Christians, that this isn’t where the story ends,” **Manoj Raithatha**, pastor of Pinner Baptist Church, London, tells Naomi Osinnowo.



# JESUS, OUR ETERNAL HOPE

**F**or an individual who became pastor of a new church just months before the UK went into lockdown and churches had to close their doors, Manoj Raithatha seems as hopeful and jovial as he was when we worked together at the Evangelical Alliance. It’s not that the past year in his life has been without challenges; he says he’s had no option but to draw closer to Jesus, our eternal hope, and that’s sustained him no end.

I caught up with Manoj to find out what he’s doing to inspire hope in his church and community in these torrid times.

**Since you left the Evangelical Alliance, where you served as national coordinator of its South Asian Forum, we haven’t had the opportunity until now to chat. How are you?**

This season is refining me, helping me to draw closer to Jesus, the only person I really feel I can turn to. So, considering all the challenges, my own and other people’s, I feel refreshed and encouraged. The nature of church ministry helps too. We keep going. We don’t stop because of a pandemic. Perhaps for church leaders in particular, the regularity of services, prayer, evangelism, food distribution and other aspects of church life, helps us to focus on the work at

hand – taking care of the flock and witnessing to those around us. In John 10 we are reminded that Jesus, the good shepherd, wrapped His arms around people and looked after them, even amid trying times. For me, this is a brilliant example of leadership.

**The pandemic hit the UK five months into your role as pastor of Pinner Baptist Church, changing church life as we knew it. Baptism by fire?**

New church. New location. Completely different culture to the church where I previously served.

I was getting to know the church. I was getting to know the congregation and the community. We were seeking God on how to move forward. Suddenly, bang! Pandemic. Lockdown. It was very quick.

And yet, through our online services, prayer meetings and cell groups, we as a church community grew closer and stronger. People, me included, connected in ways that we may not have in normal circumstances.

Together, we prayerfully reflected on our calling as the body of Christ in Pinner, and this has led to the church becoming outward focused, responding to the needs of the community more than ever before.



**Barking Baptist Church (BBC), where you pastored before, is a church at the heart of its community. Did your experience there help prepare you for this role?**

Barking and Dagenham, the borough where BBC is based, is among the most deprived in London – many people live in hardship. Serving in this community was an eye-opener, as I’ve had a pretty comfortable life. My wife and I supported The Source, a drop-in centre run by Barking Churches Unite (see *idea* Jul–Aug 2020, p. 28), of which BBC is part, and I saw the heart of Christ in action as Christians served the homeless and the hungry. This heart for service is something I’m encouraging in Pinner.

Barking also taught me the importance of unity within the church; and in this season of church scattered, I’ve focused heavily on the church gathered through consistent fellowship rooted in scripture. If we’re to come out of this the other end, we have to be united, remembering, with a humble and prayerful spirit, that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, called to love and serve the Lord together.

**Could anything prepare you for the loss and grief you’ve seen in different areas of your life – church, family, community, business, among friends?**

Seeing the suffering has been extremely difficult. I see it on the news, hear about it from people and then it comes closer to home.

A close friend and colleague at Instant Apostle, my business, died of a heart attack while walking her dog, leaving behind a husband and two sons. How can you prepare yourself for that? You can’t! That’s what makes it terribly painful; you’re suddenly faced with the loss of someone you care about and the grief of those left behind.

But the Lord has been preparing me, since I started in Barking, by softening my heart so that I can offer comfort where it’s needed. I come from a business background, where being tender-hearted isn’t a desirable trait. Because of God’s work in me, I can sincerely share another person’s burdens, hurt with someone who’s hurting. Jesus wept, didn’t He? And I’m His under-shepherd, so I weep too.

I hold this together with the eternal hope that I have in Christ. When I look at the suffering in the world and even nearby, I always remind people, particularly Christians, that this isn’t where the story ends. We look to the hope that we have in Jesus and make sure that we bring this message to the people around us.

**How do you encourage a church of 60–70 people to remain hopeful when at times it has seemed there’d be no end to this pandemic and each member has their own struggles?**

Some members are worried and anxious about the future. Some haven’t been able to get their ongoing

illness treated owing to the pressures on the NHS. Money is an area of concern for some. Members of our congregation contracted coronavirus, which was a scary time for us all. All of this causes lament, not only death.

I’m to meet people where they are, just as Jesus met the Samaritan woman where she was. But I can’t leave them there. My wife has always told me that I have to ensure people leave a service with hope. So in our worship we now have more time and space for prayer. Among other things, we introduced Morning Light, a weekday 15-minute biblical reflection where we read scripture and pray. We’ve already read through John’s gospel and the Psalms, and we’ll start Hebrews shortly.

Increased emphasis has been placed on small groups so people can connect, get into the Bible and pray together. We’ve also launched a men’s group. Those who regularly engage in the word of God and are part of a small group are faring better. They’re built up spiritually.

**How do you then in turn share this hope with your local community?**

As we’re built up spiritually, we don’t store up spiritual reserves; we help others. We have come to realise that while it’s tough for us, our calling in Christ is to love and serve others. We’re only here for a fleeting moment, so whatever time we have to do some good, that’s what we’ll do.

I mentioned earlier that the church has become more outward focused, and in the past year we’ve set up a monthly foodbank collection, given food hampers to local families who are struggling financially and safely shared the gospel in the local area. We spread hope through these expressions of God’s love. We’re also learning to journey with individuals and families, as it’s important that we build these more intimate relationships and stand with people.

You’ll remember from my time at the Evangelical Alliance that I taught and spoke on how food can strengthen relationships. When safe to do so, through our initiative Hope 15:13 ([hope1513.com](http://hope1513.com)), we’ll use food to help bring the church together after such a long period physically apart, but also to build and deepen relationships with our local community.

**Manoj, it’s good to speak with you. I’m sure our readers would join me in praying for you. How can we pray for you?**

My prayer is that we, as the UK church, would have eyes to see the needs around us, and that in our humble submission to God, we would faithfully respond. For it’s the work we do in our communities that will see our nations saved.



**NEW  
'NORMAL'  
NEW  
'FORMULA'**



## How do we share Jesus at this time of pain and suffering? asks **Andy Frost**, director of Share Jesus International.

I love hearing stories of God doing the miraculous. People being set free from addiction. Incredible financial provision. Supernatural healing. Stories of God's power breaking into our fragile lives.

Acts 16 is one such story as Paul and Silas, imprisoned in Philippi for freeing a young lady from an evil spirit, experience a violent earthquake that shakes the prison's foundations, causing the prison doors to fly open and everyone's chains to come loose. Just imagine being there.

But, just a few years later, there is a very different story as Paul writes to the Philippians, the same people who had witnessed the miraculous prison-break. This time he is under house arrest and in chains. There is no miraculous escape. No apparent divine intervention. I wonder if the church in Philippi was asking, where is the power of God?

I have listened to many evangelistic training sessions over the years, and I have helped train churches around the UK on how we share our faith. One of the most simple and profound methodologies has been helping Christians share their testimony.

Very simply, various training courses help Christians break down their story into three segments: what life was like before knowing Christ, the moment or season they came to faith, and what life is like now. I will often then encourage Christians to practise sharing their stories, keeping them short and succinct.

It's interesting that, as we edit our stories to keep them short, we often focus on the spectacular and the incredible. We might focus on the moment we experienced God's power freeing us from a sense of despair, or the moment we experienced the joy of knowing a prayer for a sick loved one had been answered. The problem is that our testimonies then end with something along the lines of, "And then I became a Christian and everything has been great".

In this season, I have been challenged that we need to stop heavily editing our testimonies. I believe we should be more open about the moments when there is an ongoing struggle, otherwise our lives can seem glossy and fake in the midst of a very broken world. This pandemic has shown us all afresh the pain of death, the fear of sickness, the challenge of uncertainty.

If we want to connect with people as we share our stories, so that they may ultimately connect with Christ themselves, let's stop sweeping the hard knocks of life under the carpet. Let's stop pretending that we have everything sorted and that we have all the answers. Let's be honest about the challenges we all endure.

Thinking this through practically, might we benefit from having a new 'formula' for how we encourage our congregations to share their testimonies? We could share about before we came to Christ; we could share what happened to bring us into relationship with God; we could share what life is like now; and then we could share how we deal with the brokenness that we witness and experience ourselves.

It's when we encounter Christ and adopt the bigger narrative of the Christian story, that we come to understand that the world we are living in is not the way it was meant to be. It's from this position that we share about God's peace in the storms of life, talk about the comfort we receive when we grieve, and explain that the Psalms give us a template for how we can be real with God even as we experience anguish and sorrow. It's from this position that we share how we have a hope, despite all the challenges - because in this bigger story we know how it all ends, when every tear is wiped away.

Paul, writing to the church in Philippi, had not seen the power of God breakthrough in such a way that his chains fell off, but even from his cell, he had experienced God's power as he writes: "What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel" (Philippians 1:13).

Let's stop sweeping the hard knocks of life under the carpet.

### Great Commission

The Evangelical Alliance's Great Commission hub exists to help you and your church witness to Jesus. Explore [eauk.it/gc](http://eauk.it/gc) and see how a wide range of stories, tools and initiatives from Share Jesus International and many others can facilitate you as you make Jesus known.



By **Gavin Calver**, CEO of  
the Evangelical Alliance

# LEADING IN THE STORM

**T**his season has been like a rollercoaster ride with the ups and downs coming thick and fast each day. We don't know what's going to happen next or how we are going to react to it. Instead of feeling like we are calmly walking along the path on solid ground with a clear view of what lies ahead, it seems that we are on a surfboard in the middle of the waves, hanging on and hoping for glimpses of the horizon.

I'm reminded of Jonah in the storm and the boat breaking up, wondering what to do. They tried to throw things overboard, they called on their gods whilst Jonah lay sleeping, but really the only thing that was going to work for them to survive the weather and the water was to call on the name of the Lord. Jesus is the only one who can rescue and save.

We have to keep the main thing the main thing – however rocky the season is – for the Lord is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). As a family, we have had to cling tight to Him to carry us through the uncertainty. Yes, we have read the newspaper and watched the news, but it's having our heads in the word of God, being led by His Spirit, that has enabled us to find a sure and solid foundation in these uncertain days.

As last Christmas approached, we were looking forward to a bubble of six and seeing family, but then just a few days before, the rules were changed. London entered tier 4 restrictions and Christmas gatherings were cancelled. I remember sitting down at the dining table and sharing with the children that they would not see anyone else over the festive break. Our hearts felt heavy but then we began to softly sing the worship song Our God reigns. The volume grew louder until we were praising our king for all He has given us and not moaning about what we were missing out on.

The Lord is calling us to “cast our anxiety upon Him because He cares for us” (1 Peter 5:7).

There have been times of thinking, “How will I get through this week?” “How will I carry on through another few days of uncertainty, illness and grief?” I've tried to put on my running shoes, head out into the fresh air and press in with Jesus. I have kept hearing, “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The Lord is calling us to “cast our anxiety upon Him because He cares for us” (1 Peter 5:7). We are not called to carry everyone else's burdens but to surrender them to Jesus and know He is their saviour and that His love never fails us.

I have been leading the Evangelical Alliance for 18 months, and the vast majority of this has been in lockdown. Surviving the storm has involved breaking things into bite-sized chunks, taking things one day at a time, whilst remaining attentive to the bigger picture and looking upwards and wider to see what the Lord is saying and doing. My whole team has played a critical part in us getting through these days – we need each other now more than ever and we were never called to go it alone.

My favourite film is *The Shawshank Redemption*, and I love this line spoken by one of the main characters: “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” No matter what life throws at us, we have hope in Jesus. If He stops being central to my life, the storm rages. I pray that I will never allow myself to love the work of the Lord more than the Lord of the work, and that this will remain true all the way through my life and yours.



# changing church

Is the 'missing generation'  
still missing?

Download the report:

[eauk.it/missing-generation](http://eauk.it/missing-generation)

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