

The monumental importance of being permanently present



It started with the sparking of a faulty fridge-freezer in a fourth-floor flat. But the speed with which the fire consumed the 124 apartments was breathtaking.

We couldn't believe our eyes as we watched it on our screens.

The inferno that erupted in the 24-story Grenfell Tower in west London quickly incinerated the whole building and all we could do was watch gape-jawed with horror.

Families appeared at their windows screaming for help. Some people tied bedsheets into a makeshift rope to escape the furnace. Some leaped to the ground below. It was all too horrible.

We know now that nearly 80 people lost their lives and many others were injured. Hundreds were displaced, escaping the flames with nothing but their lives and the pajamas they had been sleeping in.

We also know that the community response to this tragedy was incredible. The outpouring of generosity and kindness was heartwarming. But it began in an interesting way.

At 3.00am the night of the fire, Rev Alan Everett, the vicar of the nearby St Clements Church of England, was woken by a call from a fellow priest who lived in Grenfell Tower. The priest had called to alert Everett that he had a national disaster unfolding almost literally on his doorstep.

Alan Everett ran to the church and turned the lights on and opened the doors wide. He didn't know what else to do.

Soon people started stumbling out of the dark, making their way to the safety of the church. Passersby and people who'd come to help also found refuge there.

By 7.00am, the parishioners of St Clements were serving breakfast to the displaced and the volunteers. Local restaurants began delivering food. Donated clothes and blankets filled the church sanctuary. Instead of a church, St Clements looked like a warehouse.



The church became a refuge, a triage unit, a feeding station, an aid delivery centre. All because the local vicar simply turned the lights on and opened the door.

And because they were *there!*

There's no doubt that the new churches planted in repurposed warehouses in industrial areas on the edges of towns are full of equally generous people. But often they have no proximity to their cities. Usually their minister doesn't live near the church building anyway. If he or she decided to open the church they would first need to drive across town, by which time the need to house, and care for, and assess the injuries of the victims of a fire like the one at Grenfell Tower would have gone elsewhere.

After the blaze, locals harboured considerable resentment toward politicians. They had been informing the authorities that Grenfell Tower was a fire-trap, but their calls had gone unheeded. Now that 79 people were dead and hundreds made homeless, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Lord Mayor all turned up for a photo opportunity with the community. But they weren't fooling anyone. It wasn't the government or the City of London who snapped into action on the night of the fire. It was the church.

St Clements is a small, poor church, but the people of the parish trust them. Their local charity helps thousands of local people every year. But their numbers aren't huge and they're struggling to keep the lights on and the doors open.

How ironic then, that the simply act of turning the lights on and opening the doors should have had such an extraordinary impact on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire.

As Alan Everett says, “We are called to share in the brokenness and the forgottenness of the people we serve.”

Giles Fraser, writing in the Guardian concluded, **“This being permanently present is no small thing. Not least because, as Christians believe, the light will always beckon people out of the darkness.”**

I think there’s more to the mission of the church than merely being present. I agree with David Bosch that unexplained acts of kindness and love do not in themselves constitute the full mission of God’s people. We need to share Christ, to offer hope, to develop ministries that allow the community to collaborate with us and be served by us.

But you don’t get to do any of that stuff unless you can embrace this “no small thing” of being **permanently present**.

One of the central tenets of the church growth movement, which has so deeply influenced the new suburban churches at the edge of town, is that non-growth is just as important to discover as growth. If the church isn’t growing in a given area, a new strategy is needed to move to another more promising area.

The work of God’s people is to claim all places as God’s and to fashion ways for others to see the holiness, the new creation unfurling around them.

On the night of the Grenfell Tower, in the midst of horror and darkness and tragedy, the little, local parish church was holy land.

What does it look like in our neighbourhood?

After Giles Fraser reported on the beautiful work of St Clements, a few anonymous readers left comments on the Guardian site:

“i am not a religious person but i have to say the local churches & people during this unimaginable horror have gone someway to restore my faith in humanity when the victims have manifestly been failed by the well heeled & well paid that are supposed to look after us in times of crisis.

“I am not a religious person either. But I do envy (the irony of sin) the sense of community that the church/mosque provides.

“Local churches and church people: yes indeed. But ‘the Church’ ? As irrelevant as ever.”

Are we listening?

Rev Dr Mike Frost