

'Let your help come from knowing people's needs'

Vania John-Baptiste is the minister of Underhill Baptist Church in north London, and a trained counsellor specialising in bereavement counselling.



As we move towards a post-Covid world, she shares these thoughts on offering a pastoral response to those in our congregations and communities

Make space to listen

As we emerge from the pandemic, in order to better help and support people, we need to begin by knowing what their needs are – this can be done through something as simple as listening.

When I joined Underhill Baptist Church in July, one of the first things I did was to meet with our leadership team and ask them questions regarding how the lockdown, the restrictions and social distancing had impacted their life. I found that I was better able to help others by listening to them and finding out where they're at – it's important to let one's help come from knowing people's needs.

One of the things I am considering setting up at Underhill, is a support group for the church and the local community in order to provide space for people to come and talk about how the pandemic has affected them - a place to come and talk and share experiences and help each other by listening and sharing.

As we think about sharing the gospel with people and responding

to people's pastoral needs in these challenging times, we need to consider a place where we can be still. Be a real presence. Be someone to talk to and who is willing and able to listen. More importantly we need to listen to discern God's voice in all this. How does he want us to respond?

Know the needs are different

There will be a variety of issues around loss and bereavement: loss of loved ones, income, homes, loss of one's way of life/social structure. Any one of these will bring its own challenges and trauma. It means different things for different people. Everyone has coped differently and has their different stories. Being a presence, bringing a good listening ear, and standing alongside people is a good start to the journey of helping them to process their emotions.

Some of the challenges of Covid-19 have caused some people's coping mechanisms to break down, so it may be a case of encouraging them to go back to basics: self-care (eating and sleeping well); keeping in contact with family and friends. Sometimes we may need to be a signpost to appropriate organisations, or some of the useful resources online.

Know your limitations

In offering a listening ear, we also need to know our limitations – and this is particularly pertinent for ministers: we can't do it all! We may have to consider coming alongside local organisations that are already offering and providing help and support. Which online resources are you aware of? For example, Cruse Bereavement Care, who provide free care and bereavement counselling to people suffering from grief; St Joseph's Hospice, who provide

counselling advice; CARIS Islington Bereavement Service, and Mental Health organisations such as MIND and CAMHS, who provide support for young people facing emotional and mental health challenges.

Covid and bereavement

The impact of Coronavirus on bereavement and grief has significantly intensified the grieving process. For instance, not being able to visit your loved one who is dying in hospital and saying goodbye as you would have expected, as well as restrictions placed on funerals. It has been difficult for people to make sense of how the person has died, so in this instance grief may be delayed, as people have not been able to process their emotions.

We also need to think about the different cultural and ritualistic traditions where people usually gather to celebrate and honour the life of the deceased – which Covid-19 has prevented people from doing.

Create ways of saying goodbye

There are definitely ways of helping someone explore saying goodbye to a loved one who has died during the restrictions posed by the pandemic, as well as ways of remembering the person who has died. All this involves discussion beforehand. If those who are grieving find it difficult to express their feelings in spoken words, perhaps they can be encouraged to write a letter to their loved one. Or invite them to draw a picture asking 'What does saying goodbye look like to you?' Don't take it for granted that we know. Other ways to explore saying goodbye could be replicating journeys they used to go on with that person such as a walk, or a visit to a café.