

'THEOS



Prepare your church for
emergency response:
Lessons from Grenfell

INTRODUCTION

The Grenfell Tower fire was, in terms of lives lost, the worst fire in Britain since the Second World War.¹ The scale of the crisis was matched only by the scale of the emergency response, including many churches and other faith groups who were swift to serve their community, some opening their doors before emergency teams had arrived.

This guide is based on over thirty interviews with faith leaders, survivors, local residents, and representatives of local authorities. We asked them what they would want other communities to know to enable them to respond well to a crisis in their neighbourhood. They emphasised the importance of being: 1) prepared, 2) visible, and 3) flexible. Whilst this guide has been created specifically for churches, these lessons are relevant for all faith and community groups.



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/grenfell-one-year-on>

LESSONS

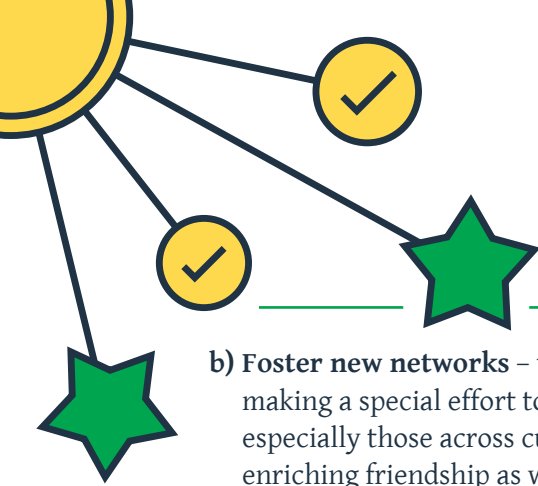
1. PREPARATION

Churches can best serve their neighbourhood when they've prepared in advance. This includes:

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- a) Equipping your existing networks** – To avoid issues with safeguarding or overcrowding, use pre-existing networks to develop lists of volunteers whom you could call in case of emergency. These volunteers could be DBS-checked and have basic training in first aid, and so enable your church to politely but firmly decline the offer of assistance from people who may not have received adequate safeguarding or pastoral training or experience.

Think creatively about your networks and how you could ask them for support at short notice – you might have a member of your congregation who is a counsellor, who could be able to put together some resources for the pastoral care of those dealing with post-traumatic stress. Or maybe you have a neighbour who is an event-planner, skilled at managing crowds and delegating tasks, who could act as an Operations Officer during the crisis.





- b) **Foster new networks** – the Grenfell community suggested making a special effort to get to know your neighbours, especially those across cultural or religious lines, as an enriching friendship as well as speeding up the crisis response.

Make yourself known to your local authority as able to help in a crisis. If you are part of the Local Contingency Planning Group, ensure your church is well represented. If you are not part of a Contingency Planning Group, it is a good idea to make your local authority aware of what you are able to offer (church halls, washing facilities, power supplies, prayer space, etc.), and offer to join the planning group.

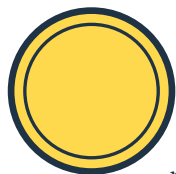


- c) **Practise your response** – This needn't be onerous – think along the lines of school fire drills or first aid training. By making sure everyone knows what their role would be and can respond efficiently and calmly, a disaster response can be more manageable.



2. VISIBILITY

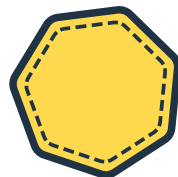
If you have uniforms or other identification – e.g., dog-collars or high-visibility vests – wear them during the crisis. This is important not only so you can be identified as a point of call and able to help, but as a way of expressing your solidarity with the community, in the crisis and for the long-term. If your church does not have dog-collars, consider other clothing to raise visibility – such as brightly coloured T-shirts with your church's name and logo.



3. FLEXIBILITY

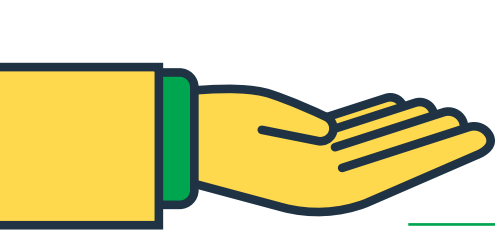
In a crisis, be willing to react to the situation as it unfolds, and change approach if needed. There are three particular areas where flexibility is key:

a) Financial donations – in a crisis, financial donations are often more helpful than gifts of food and clothing, as cash takes up minimal space, requires little sorting, and can be put towards anything – from accommodation to post-traumatic



counselling to holiday camps. To enable this, you can have tools ready to process cash donations (such as collection buckets), as well as bank transfers, by setting up a charity bank account and keeping it dormant and untitled until it is needed. The bank details can then be quickly shared in a crisis for people who would like to donate.





b) Offers of help – it's important to be open and prayerful about your needs, especially if they change as the crisis unfolds. You might find that the help you really need from people outside the congregation is more specific than dozens of volunteers sorting donations: the services of an administrative assistant for instance, or help with logistics.

c) Religiously sensitive pastoral care – in our increasingly diverse society, it becomes more important to be ready to meet your community's needs, especially those whose cultures or beliefs are different to your own. If you are aware of what needs are likely to emerge in your community, such as headscarves for Muslim women who wear them, or providing halal or kosher food, you can plan accordingly, and be flexible when those needs arise.



CONCLUSION

Along with these practical pointers, it's important to recognise the role faith groups can play in our communities, and not be afraid of discussing your faith. The church and other faith leaders we met at Grenfell told us how they had been open about their faith and its influence on their response to the crisis, and that this had led to positive conversations with members of the community. Of course, it is never appropriate to be forceful or aggressive in talking about our beliefs, especially to people made vulnerable in a crisis. At the same time, there is no need to feel shy or unable to be open about faith, especially at a time when people are likely to be grappling with difficult questions about life and God. Being open and honest, being ourselves, can be a real encouragement even to people with different perspectives.

If you would like to hear about the faith groups' response to Grenfell in more detail, please visit our website (<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2018/06/01/after-grenfell-the-faith-groups-response>) or contact us for a hard copy.

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Theos is a Christian think tank, committed to the belief that religion in general and Christianity in particular has much to offer for the common good. We stimulate the debate about the place of religion in society, challenging and changing ideas through research, commentary and events.

Please do get in touch if you have any further questions.

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