

A LESSON FROM THE GRENFELL TOWER INFERNO

THE MONUMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF BEING PERMANENTLY PRESENT



By: Mike Burnard

On 14 June, in a fourth-floor flat in Grenfell Tower, West London, the sparking of a faulty fridge-freezer started one of the most devastating infernos in modern-day Britain. The speed with which the fire consumed the 124 apartments was frightening. The fire that erupted in the 24-story Grenfell Tower quickly engulfed the whole building and all that onlookers could do was to watch in horror. Approximately 80 people lost their lives and hundreds were injured. Countless people were displaced, escaping the flames with nothing but their lives and the pyjamas they had been sleeping in.

Very often it is times of hardship that draw communities together. West London was no different. The community's response to the tragedy was incredible and the outpouring of generosity and kindness was both heart-warming and unifying. But it began in an interesting way and it emphasised a Biblical principle that should be applied with equal fervour in regions forgotten by many.

Mike Frost, teacher and head of the missiology department at Morling College in Sydney achieved his doctorate by examining a mission-shaped approach to being and doing church. On his Blog of 27 June, he explored ***THE MONUMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF BEING PERMANENTLY PRESENT*** referencing the Grenfell Tower Inferno as follows¹:

*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. Passers-by and people who'd come to help also found refuge there. By 7.00 am, 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.

¹ <http://mikefrost.net/monumental-importance-permanently-present/>

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 80 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 simple 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.

If the Church of England had embraced that strategy there probably wouldn't have been a St Clements for the victims of that fire to take refuge in.

NT Wright talks about how, in Christ, heaven has invaded earth and the whole world is now holy land. 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.

But Wright says the placing of all things under the reign of Jesus involves more than just charitable work:

"The church should go straight from worshipping in the sanctuary to debating in the council chamber; to discussing matters of town planning, of harmonising and humanising beauty in architecture, green spaces, and road traffic schemes; and to environmental work, creative and healthy farming methods, and proper use of resources. If it is true,

as I have argued, that the whole world is now God's holy land, we must not rest as long as that land is spoiled and defaced. This is not an extra to God's mission. it is central."

On 14 June, in North Kensington, west London, that involved being permanently present, and turning on the lights and opening the doors.



What does it look like in your neighbourhood?

What does it look like in the famine-stricken regions of Yemen, the burnt-down refugee camps in the Beqaa valley and the camps of death in Uganda? What will it look like in Syria and Iraq with countless refugees starting to return to war-torn regions where hope left when people fled. Will the small group of believers that chose to stay behind be sufficiently equipped, strengthened and encouraged to ***open the doors and switch on the lights***? Will they be able to make their presence felt as they ***share in the brokenness and the forgottenness of the people they serve***?

There is no doubt that the Church in Iraq and Syria (which was almost destroyed by IS), is facing a new season, after years of devastation. As refugees start

returning home, there are new opportunities for Christians to play a key role in rebuilding and reconciliation. This is also a critical opportunity for the global Church: to support Iraqi and Syrian Christians in the possible 'Christianisation' of the region.

For more information on opportunities available to support those who are, and have been, ***PERMANENTLY PRESENT***, please visit the website at: <http://www.incontextinternational.org/project-hero/>



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www.incontextinternational.org
mike@incontextministries.org