

## 'Our pastoral response is one of listening'

A reflection by hospital chaplain David Southall



I was in full PPE on a Covid ward at 1 in the morning. It was busy. At staff nurse Victoria's request I had come to see a lady who was soon to die and to 'hold her hand'. Her daughters were already there and the lady was pleased to see me as she was an avid reader of my weekly newspaper column. She told me very coherently about her life and what gave it meaning. She knew she was going to die soon and asked for some prayers which I gladly did. I was there about an hour, and amidst the tears and laughter, I can describe it as a sacred space.

When I left, I remarked to Victoria about how chatty she was. "I know," she said. "That's the thing about Covid. I'm used to nursing end-of-life patients who slowly slip into unconsciousness and peacefully pass away. With Covid, patients seem to be well one minute and then just die... quickly... like that!" I could see tears in her eyes and asked how she coped. "I've just cried while you were in the room; and there will be more tears. I'm bearing up!"

That story is just one instance of the pressure on staff, patients and relatives as they treat people, one year on, with 100,000 plus deaths and rising. I could give you many more. And the stressors on staff go on and on. Staff who have to wear full PPE for 12 hour shifts. Staff who

have been redeployed to areas out of their comfort zone. Staff who are working extra hours to cover sickness. And this does not apply just to the clinical areas; all staff have had a mental and emotional battering from this pandemic. All of this does not factor in their personal lives. Those who have had Covid and are recovering from 'long Covid'; or who have lost loved ones; or whose families have succumbed to financial and relationship pressure due to the wider effects on society.

Of course, our Trust, along with others in the country, has put staff wellbeing as one of our top priorities; and chaplaincy has been at the heart of it. So, as Chaplains, we have an open door policy for staff to just drop in and talk about issues they are facing. We aim to create a safe space without any pressure to talk or any agenda. Chaplains have also been instrumental in setting up a mindfulness service for staff by which they can learn some skills which will help them with resilience and mental health. We are the focal point for local foodbank referrals for staff. Yes, staff are having hard financial times too and are using the foodbanks to supplement their needs. And we have been involved in other wellbeing provision, like a credit card with mental health crisis numbers printed on it for staff who are struggling.

We are not out of the woods yet but there are glimmers of hope with the vaccination campaign and a hope, in the words of R S Thomas that: "It will not always be like this." But that also brings the added stress, to already exhausted staff, that we will soon have to restore to service as usual. For many this will be a bridge too far and I predict that we will see staff leaving the NHS for other careers. And I also think there will be

a large mental health fallout among staff, long after the lockdowns and pandemics are gone. At the moment nurses are doing what nurses do (I speak from previous experience as a nurse in the NHS myself): they are just getting on with the job. But you can't run on empty for as long as this without incurring mental health problems.

But in all of this there is still hope and light. My personal view is that it is a huge privilege to have served as hospital chaplain for 12 years in Worcestershire and to have been a listening ear to staff whom I count as my friends. I am very grateful to my friends at Fernhill Heath Baptist Church for their prayers and support during this time, along with other local churches who let us know that they are praying for us a team. And Covid has led to some innovative practices and new ways of doing things across the Trust; things like virtual meetings and new ways of meeting patients' and relatives' needs.

But make no mistake. A senior nurse, who has seen everything, told me the other day that she has worked in the NHS for 40 years and has never known a time as hard as this. I think our pastoral response to those in our congregations who have worked in the NHS in these extraordinary times, is one of listening. Listen to the stories; hear the pain and anguish caused; provide a safe space for silence or speaking. This seems to me, in the long term, the path to healing.

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