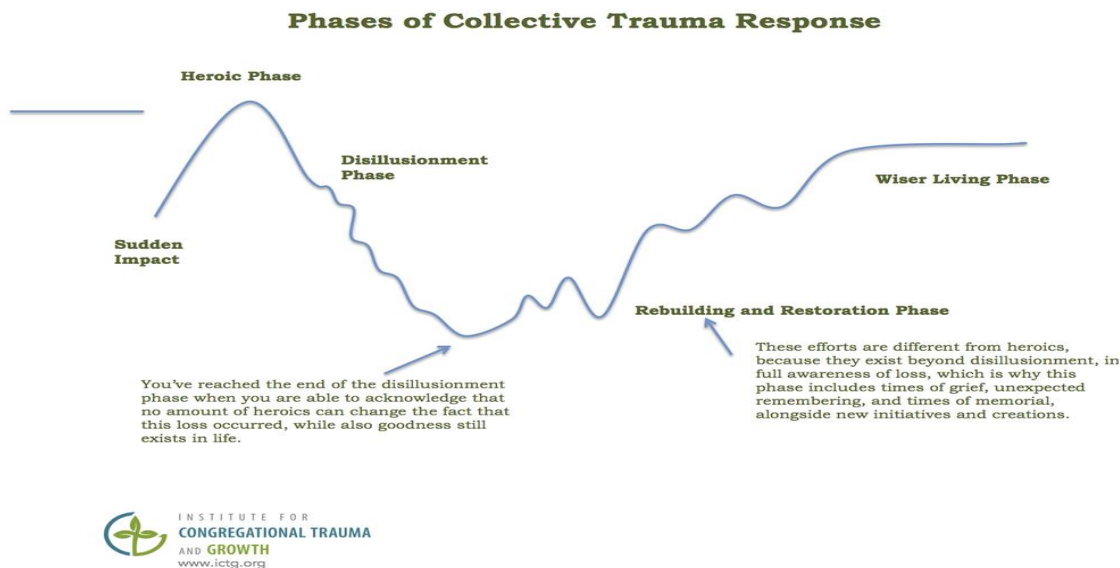


St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme 9. Here be dragons

Systemic facilitator and trainer Revd Hilary Ison shares reflections on responses to trauma to help us navigate these challenging times.

On a walk recently I was very glad of a map I had with me to help me navigate through unknown countryside. Maps are created when people have charted the terrain and noted the ways in which people have walked, to lay down the well-trodden paths.

This chart from the Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth is just such a map. It was created after people and communities had been through traumas of various kinds and noted the ways in which people journeyed through the terrain, such that recognisable paths are forged. For more information see www.ictg.org/phases-of-disaster-response.html



The chart is not prescriptive in the sense that everyone will react in exactly the same way, or in a tidy, ordered and linear way: rather it is a tool to help orient communities in the recognition that this is what is likely to happen in the journey through trauma and recovery over a period of about 24-60 months. It is also a good conversation starter, a heuristic tool, for communities in reflecting on their experience – where do we think we are now? Not everyone in a community or congregation will be in the same place at the same time. People react differently to the same event depending on their circumstances, their past experiences, and the resources available to them.

The ICTG chart was drawn up in response to one-off traumatic events such as fires, floods, terrorist attacks, earthquakes etc. The shock event happens and the process as documented in the chart begins to unfold in individuals and in communities.

In the heroic phase after the initial impact of the shock event, people discharge their stress hormones that have been activated by the shock through wanting to *do* something, either by helping victims, or by volunteering and donating things. People are energised, and it generally brings out the best in them – kindness, caring, generosity and selflessness. But operating at

this level of activism is exhausting, and it is not sustainable in the longer term. So when energy levels become depleted and the reality and awfulness of the situation sinks in, disillusion sets in. No amount of heroics can change what has happened.

In the disillusionment phase, people are tired, weepy, irritable, unable to concentrate and angry at what has happened and what may or may not have happened in response to the situation, especially against those 'in charge'. There may be grief at who or what has been lost, a questioning of faith and God. There may be competition among sections of the community or congregation for attention and scarce resources. Some will be looking for a rescuer and others will just be wanting to get back to normal as soon as possible. The difficult thing is that this stage cannot be short-circuited – the only way is through. It is messy and difficult, and requires a real holding of nerve and extra support for those in leadership.

As the chart indicates, the rebuilding phase emerges when enough people in a community are able to hold together the understanding that bad things have happened *and yet* goodness still exists in life. As with the psalmists, so congregations can rail against God for the losses and hurt, and yet hold onto the truth of God's loving-kindness, grace and presence in it all. Thus experience is integrated, new wisdom is grown - and a more robust faith. None of this is easy or straightforward: there will be lots of steps forward and almost as many back.

So what of this in the Covid-19 situation? In a sense it's the trauma that keeps giving. Or like an earthquake with aftershocks. We do not know yet what may happen further down the line. The problem is that there are no maps available to us to help us navigate through this Covid-19 pandemic crisis as it is an unprecedented situation in the experience of this generation. But perhaps we can take the elements of the ICTG chart to see how we can use them to chart our own experience and draw our own maps. Perhaps it is like the medieval cartographers who, when they came to the edges of the known world, simply wrote 'here be dragons'.

In response to the initial phase of the pandemic, we have certainly seen heroic and inspiring responses; amazing self-giving in those who have volunteered to help neighbours and communities; healthcare and frontline workers; clergy and congregations serving those who are in need; and ministers learning to record and live stream services and finding many creative ways to engage with congregations and local communities. But instead of a peak in the heroic phase, perhaps we need to draw a plateau – a stage that has lasted not a few days but now 12 weeks, as I write.

Many are now tired, emotional, increasingly frustrated with the loss of liberties, with the denial of the usual comforts of contact with families and friends, of going out and just being normal. Losses are mounting up and realities are hitting home. Government and church leaders are not able to rescue us all, and disillusion is setting in, together with questioning as to whether those in charge have really done their best for us. Some just want to get back to normal and others are fearful of coming out of lockdown too quickly. In the Church of England there is disillusion and anger amongst some clergy towards senior leaders, and mounting fear and distress at what the future holds in terms of the financial impact on dioceses and churches - while others are keen to embrace the new opportunities this change will bring.

And it is at this point, when energy levels are depleted, that we as communities and churches are being asked to be creative, all over again, in finding ways to develop a 'new normal', which may only be temporary, to cope with requirements of social distancing - and it won't feel 'normal' at all. Perhaps this could be a new element on the chart – a transitional phase in which we try to function as best we can with the uncertainty of not knowing if we will be on a gradual trajectory out of this crisis or find ourselves back in lockdown again.

This is where we are - at the edge of our known world so far. The rebuilding and restoration phase is yet to come and could be a long way off, with many valleys and false summits to traverse. It will be important for us to chart our journeying and to be kind and forgiving to ourselves and one another - for there is much to learn and endure as we travel, and we will need time and space to reflect on and integrate our learning. Wiser living is not a final destination, but it is the fruit of hope, trust and love shared amongst companions on the Way.

St Luke's thanks Hilary Ison and the Tragedy and Congregations team - www.tragedyandcongregations.org.uk - for permission to use their work as part of its Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website below or on 020 7898 1700.