

# accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

## What Happens When a Church Faces the Suicide of a Member.

By Nick Bundock-Rector of St James and Emmanuel, Didsbury.

Lizzie Lowe died on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2014. The death of any fourteen year old child is a tragedy for the family and community, but when that death is by suicide the devastation is incalculable. As I look back on those early days of shock and tears I have come to appreciate that each moment of that time was also a series of choices. How we responded to those choices would shape the kind of people we were going to become in the years ahead.

My name is Nick Bundock and I'm the rector of St James and Emmanuel church in Didsbury, Manchester. I had known Lizzie since she was a little girl at the church school and Hilary, Lizzie's Mum, was and is the treasurer of the church. Kevin, Lizzie's dad, was and is a loving and committed member of the church and wider community.

In the early days after Lizzie's death the church did what all churches do in these circumstances, we came together, we supported each other, we grieved and we enabled other people to grieve. People of faith, other faiths and no faith found solace in our buildings as we opened them up and welcomed tearful teenagers,



teachers, parents and friends into our spaces for shared grief. In those early days after Lizzie's violent death there was a sense that the church was one of the 'good guys'. We had offered healing and stability for a community in shock.

This all changed on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2014 when the coroner reported that Lizzie, 'was a successful student, but was going through issues of developing maturity and exploring her sexuality and was struggling to come to terms with that against her faith beliefs'. Suddenly and quite naturally the narrative changed. Questions were asked online, in the media and in the community about the relationship between sexuality and Christianity and more specifically the part played by our church in fostering a culture where a teenager felt torn apart by the conflict between faith and sexuality and unable to share those feelings openly without judgement.

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Over the years since her death I've discovered that this tragedy could have occurred in thousands of churches in this country because a toxic culture of silence and theological disapproval hangs over the Church at large. We were not alone, but we were, quite rightly, at the centre of this controversy. How we responded to this scrutiny would shape us for decades to come.

The journey of St James and Emmanuel since the coroner's hearing has really been one of repentance. We cast off the veil of silence about sexuality and began to talk about it like never before. Like many ministers, I'd been afraid to begin a conversation about sexuality for fear of stirring up a hornets' nest, but I hadn't realised how silence is more damaging than disagreement. We also said goodbye to a good number of people who simply couldn't reconcile our new position of radical inclusion with their own beliefs. This was very, very painful for me as pastor, but it was also necessary in our particular context. I do wonder about people who can lose a teenager to suicide and yet remain so unmoved by that tragedy that they are unable to undergo a re-examination of the very beliefs that formed the crucible of that tragedy, though that is between them and God. But I have come to appreciate that sexuality and faith is such a deeply rooted and visceral issue that reactions on both sides of the debate can be extreme and can be immensely difficult to reconcile.

St James and Emmanuel has changed beyond recognition. I cannot describe how liberating it is to be in church where nobody is hiding any more. A church which can love and embrace the homosexual person can also love and embrace themselves. It's amazing how few churches actually have openly gay members and have the joy of discovering that they are wonderful, committed Christians too! There is nothing like getting to know somebody to disarm your prejudices. We've also found that by making the church safe for LGBT+ people we have also made it safe for a community of more than fifty Farsi speaking refugees and a wonderful group of adults with learning difficulties. Sunday worship in our church is joyful. That's the only word for it.

Alongside our embrace of LGBT+ people we have also begun to take a serious look at mental health and suicide, particularly in the young. We host and support a youth choir who put mental health at the centre of their work. Every member of the core team has undergone suicide prevention and postvention training. We are now working to establish a group of community 'listeners' for anyone who just needs a safe space to talk and be heard. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Hilary and Kevin have established the 'Lizzie Lowe Legacy Fund' so that our work on suicide, mental health and sexuality can grow. I have also become something of a

campaigner for clarity in church life. I'm not naive. I know that many churches are so divided on the issue of sexuality that the St James and Emmanuel journey would be impossible for them. But every church, no matter what its stance, has a duty to be clear. I've lost count of the number of gay Christians who thought they'd joined a loving and welcoming church only to discover that doors were always closing when they wanted to lead a home group or take part in leading worship. If your church is not affirming of LGBT+ people then you have a safeguarding duty to be clear about it. Nothing less will do.

And this brings me to my final point. Life is unpredictable and nothing is certain. I've drawn particular comfort over the years from Peter's experience in Acts 10. Peter was just having a normal day when he suddenly received a life-changing vision. A sheet was lowered before him and he was instructed to eat the unclean animals it contained. Peter was horrified by the very thought, but he also obeyed. Thank goodness he did because his willingness to 'break the rules' opened the Church to the first gentile Christians and this changed the very course of history. I'm very proud of our little church here in Didsbury; in its own small way it has been prepared to 'break the rules' in order to respond to the vision of a fully inclusive Church. We've discovered that the 'unclean animals' we were too afraid even to talk about were actually the very healing we needed to become fully whole and reconciled to God. How easy it would have been to have grieved for Lizzie, supported her devastated parents, but then quietly move on without seizing the radical opportunity God had presented to us for repentance and growth. And this is my appeal to those of you reading today, don't let our experience pass you by – our tragedy could also become your healing.

