

God in the gaps



Perhaps one of the most significant things we can take into a future COVID peak is the importance of being present for our patients

One of my favourite pastimes is walking the mountains of Snowdonia. I spent many a day off in its breath-taking hills when I worked in Bangor. One memorable day out a friend took me scrambling up the side of Tryfan, notorious not just for its rugged crags and picture-postcard formations but also its two, three-meter high monoliths at the top – nick-named Adam and Eve. North Walian climbing etiquette dictates that those ascending Tryfan for the first time should jump between the two, a gap is little over a meter. However, the stones are perched on the cliff edge, and the exposure on one side is knee-knocking. All sorts of doubts race through the mind. What if I jump too far? Not far enough? The landing so close and yet feeling so far away. The gap getting bigger every time I catch a glance at the valley disappearing below me.

As we make our somewhat groggy retreat down the side of the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, maybe this affords a quiet moment to reflect on what the last few months have brought us. One of my abiding memories is of the gaps wherever you looked. Gaps in rotas and around the lunch table as the virus took a heavy toll on colleagues' health. Stories of gaps in our national PPE stock. Gaps in our clinic and hospital lists as services were cancelled and patients heeded the advice to stay at home. For me, the most striking gap was the one by the bedside – the one in the chair a patient's loved one should occupy. While this gap was hard for me to witness as a carer, it was harder for the patient who had the pain of illness compounded by separation from loved ones. To say nothing of the sheer helplessness of family having to stand back and entrust the care of their loved one to others.

One of the striking things I heard the staff on the COVID wards talking about was how the patients had become like family. Doctors and nurses learnt how to be truly present for those in their time of need. Despite the risks to their health, the fear for their families at home, the fatigue of non-stop shifts and the frustrations of the lack of PPE, they could also see and feel the absence of their patients' loved ones, knowing that, for a time, they would need to stand in that gap. And stand in the gap they did.

There have been so many good examples of how we can adapt to help people in such crises again. From names and photos on our PPE to ensuring every patient has access to a video call. Perhaps one of the most significant things we can take into a future

COVID peak is the importance of being present for our patients. We now know better than ever that the road of sickness and deteriorating health is often one marked with fear and loneliness.

Our hospitals are filled with ever more advanced and sophisticated technologies, but COVID-19 has shown us that at their core, all clinical settings should be filled with care; to be a refuge for the suffering traveller. Our job is to provide and embody that care – to live it out in a way that technology will never be able to replicate, finding ways to communicate sensitively and clearly, even when we don't feel we have the words. To sit with those in distress, and not to fear the silence. We must show people that, whatever the circumstances, whatever the barriers (PPE or otherwise), whatever the protective distancing policies, they will never travel alone.

Yet, as the dust clouds have settled ever so slightly, and we now begin to have the chance to reflect on all that has happened over the last few months, I find it easy to feel somewhat guilty about missed opportunities. For the missed chances to help and support those who have suffered. For the things we could have done differently.

I am also fearful of having to show up and stand in the gaps all over again, wondering where the energy – both physical and emotional – will come from. I am thankful too that in the chaos of COVID, we were never left to work alone, in our own strength. We have a God who, from the beginning of the Bible story to the very end, longs to be with his people. From the Garden of Eden to the Tabernacle, from the Temple to the Church, we have a God whose promise to his people is 'I will be with you'. Through the incarnation of Jesus, we have a God who, in the most incredible way imaginable, both showed up *and* stood in the gap to bring those who would trust in the promise of his salvation home to himself. So, if we need to scale the peak again, we need not fear falling into the valley below, as Jude 1:24 tells us, he will keep us from stumbling and one day will bring us to be with him – forever face to face.

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