

When a workplace grieves

Phil Jump reflects on the untimely death of Liverpool FC star striker Diogo Jota

I thought long and hard about whether events were still too recent and too raw to write a piece like this, so let me say from the outset that more than anything else, the untimely death of Liverpool FC star striker Diogo Jota and his brother André is a heart-breaking human tragedy. I hope that anyone reading this might first pause to remember and pray for their family, colleagues and loved ones as they continue to live with this devastating loss. The Portuguese striker and his brother lost their lives in a car accident in northern Spain in early July 2025, as they made their way back to Merseyside for pre-season training. Just a few days earlier, Jota had proudly posted his wedding photographs on social media as he and his wife Rute posed before the altar at which they had made their vows.

As a lifelong Liverpool fan, I was clearly impacted by the news, but more so as a human being than anything else. It was perhaps my previous involvement with the club in the wake

of the Hillsborough tragedy¹ and my role as a Senior Church Leader on Merseyside, that also caused my mind to turn to how the club, its fans and the city as a whole would process and respond to this awful news. Just the day before I had been on the phone to a member of staff, making arrangements for my tickets for next season's F.A. Cup ties. Our conversation was laced with positivity and anticipation, yet I could not help thinking of her again, as I imagined her less than 24 hours later entering the same workplace into an atmosphere of grief, shock and disbelief. What resources might that workplace community need to navigate such an unexpected and devastating contrast?

I wasn't surprised that all activity at the club was initially put on hold, yet soon there were new tasks to be attended to, as stewards became curators of an ever-growing carpet of floral tributes and star players travelled from around the world to be present at their friend's funeral.

And the reaction was by no means restricted to Liverpool. Other clubs, particularly Wolves for whom Jota had originally re-located to the UK, soon added their own tributes and condolences, while those with imminent fixtures with the club, quickly made clear that they were willing to facilitate whatever tributes were deemed necessary, even to the point of cancelling games if that was most appropriate.

Once upon a time, such expressions of collective grief would have been largely orchestrated and led by the Church, but although a man of evident faith, Jota was a professional footballer, and it was the world of football that rightly took the lead and continues to facilitate various expressions of tribute and mourning. It was in Diogo and André's workplace community that these most naturally belonged.

The point I would make is that when stripped back to its basic elements, Liverpool Football Club is an employer seeking to respond to the untimely





death of one of its staff. It is far from typical, in that few people would be revered to the level of a star footballer for the work that they do, (and let us remember that a great deal of his character and goodness were expressed off the pitch) but there was nonetheless a need to enable appropriate expressions of grief for co-workers, clients, partner organisations and the public at large. And it was the club rather than the Church that needed to take the key role in that.


Perhaps because this particular tragedy has been worked out on such a high-profile stage, it might serve to highlight the role that any employer might need to recognise in such circumstances. I would even suggest that this is of greater importance when the individual does not carry the public profile and celebrity status that makes such commemorations inevitable.

The Church had its place in all of this, highlighted by the audio livestream of their funeral service, complete with uncompromising translation of overtly Christian prayers and a powerful homily founded on the story of Lazarus. I know too, from my own involvement in events in the wake

of Hillsborough, that a great deal will have been happening behind the scenes. But as we might expect, much of the utterly appropriate processing and recognition has taken place through pre-match ceremony, flower laying in strategic times and places, subdued goal celebrations and the like, of which I sense there is still a great deal to come. The retiring of Jota's squad number, the commissioning of murals and the inclusion of his young family are all important elements in a process of grief and remembrance that has its roots in our faith traditions and values. This is not less true of the difficult practical arrangements, and Liverpool FC has attracted as much praise on social media for the way in which it has ensured that care is taken of Jota's family, as it did when winning the premier league title. And yes, even the achievement of winning the title has taken on a very different meaning in the light of events that followed.

Few of us (clergy perhaps being an obvious exception) go into work expecting to have to arrange funerals, acts of memorial or needing to manage the collective grief of a workplace community. Evangelistic speakers will often highlight that after family,

most people spend more time with their work colleagues than anyone else. The natural corollary is that when someone in employment dies, it is in their workplace where, after their family, that loss is likely to be most keenly felt. It is vital that in such circumstances the grief of the workplace community is given adequate and appropriate expression, and that fellow workers are able to express their condolence and support to their colleague's family.

I sense there is an important message for the faith community in all of this – such tragedies will sadly happen, and when they do, we cannot expect that the grief processing will all take place within the confines of our church buildings and liturgies. It will need to be expressed in ways that reflect the key purpose of their workplaces and include gestures that make sense to its context. How in such circumstances can we as church leaders help employers fulfil their inherent obligations; how can we as employers or managers help co-workers craft a workplace-appropriate response; and what relationships do we need to be building now if we are to be in a position to do so when the need arises? 

1. The Hillsborough disaster was a tragic incident that occurred on April 15 1989 at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, during an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. A fatal crush in the Leppings Lane end, where Liverpool fans were standing, resulted in the deaths of 97 Liverpool supporters. It remains the UK's worst sporting disaster..



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