

PERSPECTIVES - REFLECTIONS ON TWELVE YEARS' WORTH OF FUNERALS *Quadrant, May 2006*

In the 12 or so years I have been pastor of my present church, I have conducted 130 funerals – on average just over ten a year. Some years are busier than other years – amazingly last year I only conducted three funerals; on the other hand, there was one Christmas when six of my members died within a week!

Unlike some Anglican churches, most of the funerals I take are of people associated with our church. True, just under half were in formal membership (63 out of 130), but a good number of non-members were regular in attendance. However, a not insignificant proportion had no immediate links with us, but their relatives wanted me to take the funeral of their loved one because at some time in the past they had gone to a Baptist Sunday School! Currently I do not seem to be having so many funerals of the latter kind – I suspect because there is an independent minister in town who, probably for financial reasons, has offered his services to the local undertakers as a ‘duty’ chaplain.

Of the 130 funerals I have taken here in Chelmsford, only 16 have been burials – the rest have been cremations. It is indeed a long time since I have met somebody who has a theological objection to a cremation. Just occasionally I am asked to inter the ashes of a loved one into the ground – I have never been asked to scatter ashes, nor have I done a burial at sea, nor indeed a burial in a woodland spot. Funerals, for me at least, tend to be a fairly straight-forward business.

Although I have not kept precise statistics, as a rule of thumb the funeral of the vast majority of members entails a church service, as well as a service of committal at the crematorium. Whereas, by contrast, the vast majority of non-members involves only a service at the crematorium.

Increasingly, the funerals of church members tend to take up more and more time. Indeed, it is not unusual for a funeral to take up most of the day. Let me explain. In the case of church service, it is very rare for the deceased to be brought into church. Instead, we begin with the service of committal at the crematorium – or at the graveside in the case of a burial. This is normally a family-only affair and takes place late morning. The family then usually return home for lunch – it is a good opportunity for the extended family to meet up with one another before. After lunch they then go to meet a wider circle of friends at a service of thanksgiving in the church. Unlike a crematorium service, where 20 minutes is the norm, the church service often lasts an hour. It is then followed by a tea-party for everybody.

The question, however, which I have been asked in this article to address is: to what extent do I see funerals as part of our church’s vision and outreach? What, for instance, is my motivation in holding funerals for non-churchgoers? At this point I sense that I may disappoint the editor. For first and foremost I see a funeral as an opportunity to exercise pastoral care as distinct from engaging in evangelism.. At all funerals I see my role as first and foremost that of ministering the grace of God to the mourners. Yes, I am there to help the congregation celebrate the life of a friend and loved one – but primarily I am there to assure the congregation that there is nothing which can ever separate them from the love of God.

At every funeral service, and not just at the service of a non-churchgoer, there is an evangelistic edge to my address. I always speak about the difference Jesus makes to living and to dying. I always speak about God wanting to draw near us in our need and encourage people to put their faith in God. For I am conscious that at every funeral service I take, whether it be a funeral of a Christian or not, non-Christians are present. Yet although the Gospel is clearly presented, I do not feel it right to present a direct Gospel challenge. This would be an abuse of my position: I am there to bring God's comfort into the situation. Even then, I sometimes wonder how much the mourners take in – they are often too upset or too numb to hear.

But, of course, the funeral service itself is not the only opportunity to talk about the difference that Jesus makes. Every funeral demands at least one home visit (and often two or three) before the service, and ongoing care after the service. However, in the case of non-church funerals, my experience is that often the relatives live out of town.

When I visit a family I always leave a copy of *Losing a Loved One*, published by the Christian Publicity Organisation. The particular leaflet I wrote myself, immediately after my own father's death. I look forward to using *A Loved One Dies: Help in the First Days*, a 34-page booklet which I have also written and which the Baptist Union of Great Britain have just published. Again, both the leaflet and the booklet spell out the difference Jesus makes to living and to dying – as well as offering practical advice.

What difference has all this made to those whom I have sought to help? The truth is that God alone knows. People tell me that they are very grateful for my help. However, if it be asked, has anybody come to faith as a result of the funerals I have taken, the answer is probably 'No'. In church growth terms, only two people have become regular churchgoers as a result of my ministry at funerals. But, dare I say it, there is more to Christian ministry than making disciples. When it comes to funerals, whether they be of Christians or not, I am content to speak of God's love and his grace, and to leave the outcome to God.

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