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Offering hope, not just empathy

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Churches need to win back funerals from civil celebrants, says Robert Atwell

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FUNERALS are one of the most important aspects of our ministry. It is a privilege to be with families in their loss. But attitudes to death and funerals are changing. Thirty years ago, a Church of England funeral was the default option of the majority of the British population. This is no longer the case.

The number of non-religious or "secular" funerals is increasing, and, in some urban areas, these now account for 40 per cent of all funerals. A new cadre of "civil celebrants" is emerging, many of whom do an excellent job, and the Church is feeling the draught.

Those who continue to look to the Church of England in bereavement do so for a variety of reasons. Many are loyal members of our congregations. For some, the choice of an Anglican funeral is more a matter of convention or family tradition than religious conviction. For others, it is a connection with a particular church, or a particular minister.

Some, although not regular church attenders, still see the C of E as a benign institution to which they are linked, however tenuously, and which can bring significance in the face of death. But this is a diminishing constituency. Increasingly, people are claiming to be "spiritual but not religious", although they may not be ready to tick the "No religion" box on a census form. And it is this constituency that secular celebrants are capturing, and which we need to win back as part of our mission.

How we engage with this diverse clientele will determine many people's attitude to the Church and all things Christian. The bereaved want guidance, and value a sense of a minister's being alongside them, but they usually bring with them a clutch of inchoate beliefs, often with little or no Christian background to shape them.

Clergy are familiar with funerals, crematoria, and cemeteries, but can easily forget that, for most people, a funeral is an occasional event. The bereaved want advice, but are sensitive to being patronised or judged. As with weddings, it is the quality of the relationship with the officiating minister that matters most to them, and the initial encounter sets the tone for what follows. Even the voice of the message on the parish office answerphone is important, because, for the bereaved, at that moment it is the voice of the Church.

RESEARCH conducted by the University of Chester into funerals in the Warrington area surveyed funeral directors and the experience of the bereaved, before and after a funeral. There was the occasional horror-story of clerics' getting the name wrong, or looking a mess, but, by and large, the research suggests that Anglican ministers are doing a good job.

That said, a frequent gripe of funeral directors is that clergy, unlike our secular competitors, are slow to agree to conduct a funeral; and do not return phone calls promptly. In contrast, humanist and civil celebrants respond punctually to the calls of undertakers, and with generosity to the requests of the bereaved. Typically, they are courteous and professional in their dealings, recognising that undertakers are often under pressure from a bereaved family to finalise arrangements.

Sadly, some clergy will conduct the funerals only of known members of their congregations. In the words of one undertaker: "There are clergy who serve the public, and those who think the public serve them."

Most seriously, in company with some of their clients, many of the funeral directors who were consulted see the Church of England as old-fashioned and inflexible. They report that the funerals conducted by (admittedly) a minority of the clergy are woefully impersonal. Some ministers still refer to the deceased as "our dear brother/sister departed", and never mention the person's name.

Increasingly, funerals are bespoke, and in an age where informality is paramount, too many clergy and Readers are not connecting with people. Funeral directors insist that the Church must do so, or the growth in secular funerals will continue unabated.

ON THE positive side, funeral directors say that there are three things that distinguish Anglican funerals from those conducted by humanist and civil celebrants.

First, there is a distinctive understanding of death, and a belief in the transformative power of the resurrection; second, we offer hope, whereas secular celebrants offer only empathy; and, finally, we offer pastoral care. The involvement of a civil or secular celebrant with a bereaved family finishes at the cemetery gate; a Christian minister is committed to the continuing pastoral care of the bereaved.

At a funeral, the bereaved are uniquely receptive to what a minister has to say. We need to speak of God and his love for us in Jesus Christ with confidence. Sharing our convictions about death and resurrection is not being arrogant. Being confident and being pastorally sensitive need not be mutually exclusive.

Obviously, if pastoral care is to be a reality, and not just a slogan, then we need to identify members of our congregations with good listening skills to be trained as bereavement visitors, mindful of the fact that three months after a funeral is often a low point in bereavement. Many parishes are already doing this.

Following up on funerals is too important a task to be left simply to the clergy. Bespoke funerals can be enormously time-consuming: it would be good if over-stretched clergy were more ready to share the load with Readers and lay teams.

One issue that needs to be addressed with urgency is our reputation for inflexibility. An Anglican funeral service can and should be tailored to the requirements of the bereaved. The funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, was described at the time as unique, "as befits the unique person she was". But every person is unique in God's eyes. If the Church of England can do it for royalty and the famous, we can also do it for the old gentleman who lived round the corner.

The funeral service as authorised in Common Worship: Pastoral Services provides a structure with a great deal of flexibility in how it should be organised. A minister can and should adapt it to fit pastoral need.

A well-planned funeral service should include the sharing of memories, and give expression to the variety of feelings that may be present. It should provide a fitting tribute to the deceased, and often this is best done by a member of the family. There should also be an acknowledgement of the finality of death, in the belief that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life.

Obviously, the expectations of those wanting a funeral in church, as distinct from those wanting a service only at the crematorium, or at the graveside, vary enormously. A family may request that the funeral take place in the context of the eucharist. Families of African or West Indian descent might request an open coffin.

By contrast, it is becoming customary in some circles for the committal to take place privately, and in advance of the funeral service, which then takes on the character of a memorial service. I believe that this development should be resisted. This reversal of the traditional order, often designed to meet the needs of hospitality to those who have travelled long distances, prevents the majority of mourners from coming to terms with their loss. Seeing the coffin brings home the reality of death. Its absence confuses people.

AS FAR as music is concerned, a congregation at a funeral today is more likely to know "I did it my way" than Psalm 23. Reconnecting people with the riches of the Christian tradition is a challenge, but one from which we should not draw back. Some ministers provide the bereaved with a booklet of 20 or so popular hymns in advance of a funeral, and this can be helpful. Churches with good sound-systems can offer a bereaved family additional flexibility in the choice of music - something that is taken for granted in crematoria.

Some bereaved people fear to voice their preferred choice of music, lest it be scorned by the vicar, and, as a result, opt for a "non-religious" funeral conducted by a secular celebrant as the easiest way out. Not all pop music will be suitable in the context of a Christian funeral, but generosity is more likely to win us friends than what may be perceived as snobbishness. We need to draw people in with their choice of music.

UNLIKE crematoria, where the slot allowed for a funeral is limited and seating is restricted, our churches offer huge flexibility. We have more space available, and can allow the service more time; but we are often shy advocates of what our buildings can offer. When a funeral takes place entirely at the crematorium, a family can ask for a longer slot than is customary, and this can be arranged by negotiation, but it is likely to incur additional charges.

A church equipped with modern technology and overhead projection can display photos of the deceased. Obviously this will not be appropriate in every context, but sometimes it can be very moving. Orders of service, carrying a photo of the deceased, can help to personalise a funeral. It can also carry information about church services on the back cover, with contact details, and a brief statement about Christian belief. These things add value to the "church experience".

THE majority of the population today instinctively turn to the internet for information, including what to do in the face of death. Parishes that have good websites are immediately at an advantage. Sites need to carry basic information about what options are available when planning a funeral; whom to contact; and what Christians believe.

A concerted charm-offensive with undertakers will also pay huge dividends. Whether clergy like it or not, funeral directors will always be the first port of call of the bereaved, and we need them on our side. They are the gate-keepers, and have enormous influence on a bereaved family. There are few better ways of ensuring that Anglican funerals come our way than in making friends with the undertakers.

A good funeral is a good advert for the Church. The reverse is also true. In the current free-for-all funeral market we need to raise our game, and be known for the quality with which we conduct funerals, and for the care that we extend to the bereaved. We need to have greater confidence in our ministry, and beat the secularists at their own game.

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