

Where have all the funerals gone?

The Archbishops' Council announcement of its research project into funerals is to be welcomed, but Jeremy Brooks wonders if it is too little too late.

The recent announcement by the Archbishops' Council that it is setting up a research project into funerals and baptisms conducted by the Church of England is to be welcomed. There has long been concern in parishes that numbers of baptisms and weddings have declined significantly, and the press release proclaims buoyantly what a difference the Weddings Project has made. As far as funerals are concerned, commentators have always been confident that the Church of England has been able to hang on to this role and that we still dispatch the majority of the population, even if our role in 'hatching and matching' has become more marginal.

However, the reality is far from this and I fear that the Church of England has been sleeping whilst massive changes in the ways funerals are conducted have taken place. The Statistics Department at Church House has only kept statistics of how many funerals are conducted by its ministers since 2000, but there has been a downward trend since then – from 46% in 2000 down to 38% in 2009, the last year for which statistics are available. This figure which in 2009 represented some 176600 funerals was fairly evenly divided between services conducted wholly at the crematorium or cemetery, and those where was a church service first. At the General Synod debate in 1998 on funerals, it was estimated that Church of England ministers carried out 70% of all funerals: these statistics suggest something has gone seriously wrong since then.

Of course, the Church of England statistics take no account of other Christian denominations, and similarly, it is unsurprising that in dioceses where there are large Asian communities, such as Bradford, the figure is down to 26%. It is also important to recognise the role of retired clergy who conduct large numbers of funerals at crematoria and no record goes back to diocese of this. But the downward trend is unmistakable. In conversation with my local crematorium – in leafy Amersham, Buckinghamshire - the officials there estimated that only 1/3 of all services are conducted by Christian ministers.

So who are taking the rest? Humanist funerals still only account for about 1% of all services taken, but now civil celebrants are conducting many of them. The Government White Paper of 2003 entitled *Civil Registration: Vital Change* allowed more people, including local registrars, to conduct civil ceremonies. Some civil celebrants are members of the Institute of Civil Funerals, which regulates and provides training for them, but many are not. Their services are undoubtedly popular, not least because they will allow religious items such as the Lord's Prayer or religious music to be played. So people who are 'not very religious' feel more comfortable with civil celebrants because they can still say the Lord's Prayer, but don't have to have all the other religious bits.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with competition, and when individual celebrants provide an excellent service, families will go back to them when the next loved one dies. Any parish priest who conducts a large funeral ministry will report of a similar phenomenon of repeat business – families who come back for the next deceased relative, because a good job was done the first time round. I have benefited enormously from the contact I have had with bereaved families: in my previous parish, where we had an excellent bereavement support group as well as a thriving funeral ministry, more people joined my congregation following a bereavement than at any other time.

So what should be done? I think the challenges for the church are several.

1. Start at theological college. When I was training we had a short course for 3 days at the end of three years training on how to conduct a funeral. That was it. It was a great shock to get out into the parish and discover that we spent more time taking funerals than anything else. Recent conversations with curates and theological students do not suggest much has changed.
2. Educate clergy and the church more widely on the doctrine underpinning funerals. This may sound very patronising, but I wonder how bold we are in proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection in our funeral ministry. At the 1998 General Synod debate, Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, Chair of the Churches' Funerals Group commented afterwards 'We have just spent 40 minutes debating the Churches' funeral ministry. Yet not one speaker has spoken of the central Christian contribution to funerals, our Lord's resurrection from the dead.' If we do not recognise the distinctive contribution we have to make at this time, why should we expect people to use our services in preference to the other range of choices?
3. Establish stronger links with local undertakers. Clergy often complain that funerals are arranged without reference to them and they are simply expected to fit in at the appropriate time. Whilst this may be true, little understanding is offered on the difficulties the undertaker faces, with a bereaved family sat on the other side of the desk, hoping that the vicar will return his call within a sensible time frame. There is so much choice now on who to use, and there is no reason why the undertakers should wait for a crematorium or cemetery slot in the hope that the vicar will be available. Undertakers traditionally give the local clergy a bottle of wine or spirits as a Christmas gift: do any of us return the favour? In our deanery, following a research project by a local priest, the Revd Angela Thompson in which she talked with all the local undertakers and all the local incumbents, we are hoping to set up an on-call funeral ministry group, which will be more responsive to the undertakers in agreeing to take funerals.
4. Celebrate the pastoral care that churches offer the bereaved. Many churches offer excellent bereavement support and annual services at All Souls are often well attended. These are distinctive features that civil celebrants cannot emulate. How can we make more of them?

The figures from the Research and Statistics Department suggest we no longer do any more funerals than we do weddings or baptisms. This is greatly to be lamented. We should surely hope that it is a recent enough phenomenon to be able to reverse this. The research project set up by the Archbishops' Council is to be welcomed in this: how can we all ensure that we make the necessary changes to make a difference?

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