

Interviews with religious ministers

The interviews with religious ministers revealed that they are sharply aware of a decline in their status over the last two decades as the default leaders of funeral services. They identified a range of changes in how funerals are enacted. These include the shift from funerals being God-centred to being person-centred, including in funerals they lead as religious ministers. Within this, they recognised the increasing diversity of forms and places in which memorial events might take place rather than them being located in a church or chapel and following a liturgical structure. Whilst many of them did not see the increase in choice as a bad thing per se, they did express some concerns about an increasing lack of aftercare as well as an increase in what they saw as ambiguous and complicated forms of grief for people where religious or spiritual rites and rituals were not part of marking the passing of a loved one.

They also identified a shift in focus from the hereafter to the here and now. Whilst they did acknowledge a focus on the afterlife in some sense in everyday funerals, this tended to focus on how the deceased person might still be in the world with the people who have lost them, rather than on them being in the Christian idea of heaven, or a time or place outside of the world as it is. Examples of symbols or rituals of this 'here and now' afterlife that they had experience of involved butterflies, robins, wind, angel anniversaries, and the release of balloons.

The religious ministers also recognized a shift in control from the clergy to the funeral director in supporting people to make their initial choices about funerals. They felt that these initial choices were over-simplified including in whether people wanted a religious or secular funeral, with these binaries not representing the nuance and complexity of what a service might involve, as well as the range of denominations and traditions not being well articulated when opting for a religious service. This demonstrates that the ministers did not see themselves as operating only from the fully religious binary.

Rapid change and deformalisation of traditional practices

Religious ministers reflected on how they observed and experienced wider social and technological changes to funerals. The first changes they observed were *social* shifts with the pronounced move away, over the past 20 years, from a 'one-size fits all' ritual where the main focus is the on the commendation of the soul in its onward journey to God. Instead, they felt the focus is now more on a celebration of the life of the deceased (though our other interviews suggest the idea of a 'celebration' is not always well received, as outlined above). This has led to the demand for greater personalisation and choice regarding the structure and content of the event which the religious ministers have had to become much more aware of.

There has been a massive shift from the idea of a 'funeral' to the ideas of celebration, thanksgiving and legacy. This has led to a huge growth in remembering and personal remembering spaces. We no longer have a strong underpinning theology of an afterlife – all we have left to talk about as our legacy is our family. (Minister 3)

The second changes that the ministers observed were *technical* shifts which, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted in the growth of hybrid services and the enhanced use of digital media such as music and video clips. Similar to the celebrants and arrangers, they felt this has obviated the need for organists to lead communal hymn singing and has blended secular and religious choices of music. Included in this technical shift has been the expansion in the means by which bodies are disposed. For example, the sharp rise in direct cremations. The rise of this practice alongside other recent forms of bodily disposal such as water resomation and woodland burials are all creating a momentum around greater choice, individualisation and personalisation.

There was a recognition that these changes combined were leading to a large *cultural* shift in terms of the decline in a collective memory of 'institutionally religious' funeral services and a recognition that the churches needed to 'up their game' if they were to be seen as credible providers in this new funeral industry landscape.

People still see the church operating in very fixed boundaries and there is an assumption that I can't or won't deliver a non-religious funeral. (Minister 4)

I think the churches are at fault for not getting the message out there that they are interested in relating to these new changes. Or else the field is being dominated by the loudest voices that are more defined by dogma. (Minister 7)

We need to look closely at the changing nature of what we do and look at the culture that we are in now. We are in danger of being left flatfooted and ill-prepared for change. (Minister 5)

A confused vacuum and the rise of market forces

There was a general perception amongst the religious ministers that the rapid shift towards deformalisation had created considerable confusion, and that new norms and expectations around the conducting of funeral events had yet to emerge. A key area of confusion was over a basic understanding of the words religion and spirituality. People were put off by the word 'religious' but neither was there a complete confidence in the term 'spiritual'. This meant that many people perhaps wanting some sort of comfort or reassurance at a time of grief may be in danger of missing out on that because of this lack of connection to and confusion over terms. Many reported that despite this, a sense of wanting to believe in some sort of afterlife remains strong and needs to be recognised in some way.

Yes, funerals are more focussed on celebration of someone's life and there is the need to tell anecdotes of the history of the person who has died. We are sitting more lightly to the religious context but that is not the same as saying that people have walked away from spiritual content because they haven't. I believe that is a continued resurgence in owning a spiritual side but not a resurgence in traditional Christian belief. (Minister 2)

This lack of a coherent narrative around the meaning of death and therefore a rite that expressed it was also leading, in the eyes of many ministers, to a rise of market forces. This was

creating demand for more and more choice to the point where for some, there was now an over-abundance of choice and a hyper-individualisation that was eroding some of the more communal or public aspects of bereavement – in other words, an unhealthy commodification of death and grief. They also recognised that in this new space, the traditional power of the clergy person to shape and deliver funeral rites had been superseded by the funeral arranger and the independent celebrant who are now the chief arbiters of how religious or spiritual content is mediated in funeral events. One minister explained ‘I now have to fight for the religious space. You can’t assume that people look to you anymore. I feel that I have to prove my worth. Nothing can be taken for granted’ (Minister 1).

Place of death in Western society

In line with the above analysis, there was a common perception amongst ministers that the place of death in Western society was radically changing. They felt that death is increasingly seen as an inconvenience to people’s busy and complex lives and there appears to be an unhealthy desire to manage away the messiness of death and the aftermath of grief. They understood this as being seen primarily in the rise of funeral events where the body is not present (for example, in the rise of direct cremations and their heavy advertising including the pitch that the dead don’t want to ‘cause a fuss’ for the living). There was concern expressed that these new trends will later lead to high instances of complex or unresolved grief. Many ministers now saw their role as working with any grain expressing the hope for a continuing existence for the soul or an afterlife (expressed in things like angel anniversaries) in a highly bespoke and individualised way.

We are transparent about who we are. First question – ‘Where do you imagine your mum or dad to be – where are they’ – and if they express an element of an afterlife – angels etc – we say to them – ‘we are going to give you comfort in that’ and we build the content of the funeral around their understanding of what happens when you die. (Minister 3)

Bad choices made on the basis of a lack of understanding

Religious ministers observed that the ways in which issues of religion and belief were handled in the funeral process were too binary – i.e., totally religious or totally secular which created a lack of nuance and sensitivity at a critical time. There was therefore a strong possibility that people could be ‘shortchanged’ in their real wishes and desires. There was a perception that a lack of confidence in understanding terms like religion or spirituality was also leading to a lack of confidence from families asking for religious content in the first place. One minister reflected, for example, that ‘As soon as the answer is “No” to did your mum go to church every Sunday – it kicks in and goes down the secular route and Funeral Directors - they are offering a choice to the family and [assuming] the family has ruled out a church’ (Minister 5).

The place of institutional religion in the new funerals 'market'

The range of responses from ministers to the sharp rise of a 'secular market' in funerals was mixed. Some sensed their religious institutions were veering between being overly defensive (i.e. banning the use of unsanctioned forms of service) to being overly complacent in the wake of the seismic cultural shifts that were occurring. Some even reported that colleagues had lost interest in conducting funerals and no longer saw it as a missional priority. Many respondents saw the new funerals landscape as an opportunity to re-imagine what religious content might look like and several pointed out that they sensed a counter-factual demand for more material and ritualistic expressions of death and bereavement – what one participant summarised as 'tactile church'. By this, they meant sacred spaces, candles, rosaries, home vigils and ceremonial disposal of ashes, home visits and a script for the families.

We offer to provide rosaries at the coffin and vigils in the house. We offer the chance to come to the cathedral for a memorial service. We will light a candle on the morning of your mum's funeral and send a picture of it. What we are not saying is 'Why weren't you at the church last week?' (Minister 3)

Ministers also saw an important role for the church in offering consistent follow-up care for the bereaved and providing them the space and opportunity for community support as a response to the 'hyper-individualisation' of current trends. One reflected 'We have to be mindful of our local community – and how we engage with people. If people have a good relationship with the local church, it is an obvious place to go when someone dies – so hard work is building community in local schools and care homes' (Minister 2). They also suggested that the way clergy and licensed lay ministers are trained needs substantial reconfiguration in the light of the rapid social and cultural changes outlined above.