THE ROLE OF THE CLERGYMAN IN BERE

Results of a survey of a Church of England Diocese

How good are the clergy at coping with the bereaved? Do they understand what grief is, what it means to grieve for a loved one? Does their interpretation of what a funeral service is for, correspond with that of the bereaved? Do they give support to those who mourn, before, during, and after the funeral service?

In 1982 I tried to ask these questions through a project, which included reading the relevant research on the subject of bereavement; interviewing 16 widows who had lost their spouse some 9 months before; and through analysing the results of a lengthy questionnaire, which had gone out to all 179 incumbents (those in charge of a parish), in a single Church of England diocese. In all 119 clergy returned their completed questionnaire, which gave a 66.5% sample from which to draw information.

My interest had been aroused in the subject after reading Geoffrey Gorer's book **"Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain"**, which recounted his research, conducted in 1963.[1] In that book he came to the conclusion that most funerals were presided over by a christian minister, yet their involvement seemed to have little if any significance for the bereaved. The Minister seemed simply to be a "technician" who missed a major opportunity for charity in his contact with the bereaved.

The result of that project was a paper of some 10,000 words in which I attempted to draw conclusions from the material, whilst trying not to make sweeping claims based on a small number of personal interviews, and those 119 questionnaires. Allowing for the small sample, some of the information seems quite interesting.

FREQUENCY OF FUNERALS

The answers to the questionnaire suggest that the involvement of the clergy with the bereaved is not a side line, not an occasional event, in the midst of more frequent work. Most clergy will face a funeral every nine days, and every seventeen days will be faced with a newly widowed person. These figures are arrived at by averaging out the total number of funerals led by the 119 clergy, which means that some will have less whilst others will have more Yet when we consider that 71% of the clergy in this sample dealt with thirty or more funerals each year, we cannot but deduce that this is a major part of the clergyman's job, and of course one which gives him an equally major opportunity for expressing Christian care.

CLERGY UNDERSTANDING OF GRIEF

To talk in terms of opportunity, we have to presuppose that the clergy know what they are dealing with, when they come into contact with the bereaved. Expressing Christian care, or "charity" as Gorer puts it, means meeting people where they are, understanding what it is they are going through, and what might help them to work with and through their grief. The questionnaire asked many questions to try and draw out what level of understanding the clergy have. There is always a problem with questionnaires in that those completing them may well have a great deal of understanding, yet fail to communicate it in the way they respond. Making such allowances are fair, yet only 60% of the sample gave any real indication that they understood what grief is. This group communicated that grief is a multi-faceted condition. It is a process through which people move. Grief is expressed personally, and its expression differs according to circumstances, yet a broad pattern can be described. Thus Parkes[2] description can talk of alarm or panic; searching; mitigation; anger and guilt; and gaining a new identity; whilst other reseachers will explain similar findings using different labels. The labels do not remove the personal expression, but rather give an understanding that grief is a process within which the bereaved work with powerful emotions. The process is painful, but purposeful, as new identities are forged.

The other 40% demonstrated no such understanding. Within this group the suggestion that there is no discernable pattern to grief, came across strongly. That we all express the loss of a loved one in different ways, but come to terms quickly with our new situation. If this really is a true reflection of a significant group of the clergy, then it is no wonder that Gorer should find the clergy's involvement as of little significance.

HOME VISITS BY THE CLERGY

If the involvement of the clergy in the leading of funeral services, is an opportunity to give care, support, and help, then there needs to be contact with the newly bereaved. For the care to be seen to be significant, it cannot simply be at the door of a church or crematorium, immediately prior to a service. Thus visiting at home would seem to be essential. The clergy were asked, did they in fact visit, and almost all said yes, 95% before the funeral service. The purpose of that visit was seen as a means of giving support to the newly bereaved, and in particular giving them an opportunity to talk with someone "outside" the immediate family. In the 16 personal interviews with the bereaved a similar pattern emerged, with all but two having had the opportunity of contact with the clergy before the funeral, contact which on the whole was valued, and was seen as supportive.

After the funeral, however, visits from the clergy declined quite dramatically in the questionnaire, very dramatically for the 16 personal interviews. In the questionnaire 68% of the clergy said they visited once after the funeral, and 21% made subsequent visits. With the 16 widows, only two received any further visits, and amazingly within the 14 who did not, were two widows who attended church regularly.

Research suggests that the bereaved are well supported by family and friends prior to a funeral. Most are given opportunity to grieve, and to talk about how they feel. Yet after the funeral, that support falls away for most. Of the 16 widows, only four felt that they could talk about their feelings of grief to someone who would willingly listen. The two who had subsequent contact with their clergyman spoke very warmly of the support they had received, and of the opportunity to get "things off my chest". Although the sample here is small, the feelings of isolation expressed find an echo in much of the research literature. As the title of the first chapter of "Death comes Home" by Simon Stephens[3] aptly puts it—"Into the Wilderness".

AVEMENT by Paul Longbottom

CLERGY AND THEIR FUNERAL SERVICES

Various questions were posed in the questionnaire, in order to try and discover what the clergy felt they were trying to do within the services they led. They were asked about the main purpose of a funeral. Whether they read a passage from the Bible and how they chose it, whether they gave a talk, and what the main theme of the talk was. From all the questions, it would appear that the majority of the clergy are trying to comfort the bereaved, by drawing their attention to some "spiritual truth" through which the Christian message could bring comfort. Thus the Bible readings were about the resurrection, Christian hope, life after death, or the like, and the talk majored on this "spiritual" comfort.

As to the main purpose of the funeral, it was "to express the love of God to the bereaved" again giving comfort through "spiritual truth". 95% thought that the purpose of a funeral was to convey the love of God, whilst only 11% thought that praising the qualities of the deceased was an important part of the funeral.

The personal interview with the 16 widows suggested that this stress by the clergy effectively puts a barrier between them and those whom they attempt to minister to. For when asked what they remembered about the funeral—a large number of questions were asked about the service—only mention of the deceased was remembered. Those carefully chosen readings, those comfort carrying talks were not remembered. But mention of the loved one was. 10 remembered the Minister speaking of the qualities or "goodness" of the deceased. One remembered that "he used my husband's name a couple of times". One even remembered a personal reference, even though it was a negative one, "I did not know this man". And one remembered nothing, except that he, the vicar, "looked young and nervous". One remembered nothing at all, "it was of no consequence". All these comments, added to our knowledge of the early stages of bereavement, when for a large number, numbness is the order of the day, would suggest that care is not expressed in the way the clergy expect. That spiritual truths should be part of the funeral, I would be the first to agree. The resurrection, hope in the future, a belief in life after death, are all powerful messages. But I would suggest that the evidence tells us that these are not the major carriers of comfort. It is putting value on the life that has gone, in terms of reflecting back to the bereaved the qualities they admired and valued in him or her which reached through to the bereaved. It is this reference to the personal which pierces the consciousness of the bereaved, and I would suggest, helps to build up a relationship within which the speaking about Christian truths may well LATER find a place.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLERGY UNDERSTANDING

There is strong evidence that clergy are today given more help at their theological colleges, with regard to such subjects as the care of the bereaved. The literature which has been made available over the past 10 to 15 years, along with a greater interest of colleges in the hospice movement, has meant that our younger clergy have probably more understanding from their ordination, than those of us who were ordained 10, 20, 30 or more years ago. Yet those of us who were not equipped at college with understanding about the bereaved, do have the opportunity to read, attend courses, learn from our experience and so on.

But do we? One question which surprised me by its results was: "Have you read any book which has helped you understand bereavement?" And, "If yes, please give titles". In retrospect it might have been better to omit the word "book", and ask if the clergy have been helped in any way. Yet inspite of this, some clergy said "yes" because they had been on a course; or "yes", they had read periodicals: These on top of those who named the book or books they had read. Yet added together, only 52% had been helped by something they had read. 48% answered "No". I must say I found that staggering. A part of the clergyman's work, which he is faced with every 9 days, and so many have never read anything which has helped their understanding. Hopefully this response is not a true one. Hopefully a significant number have read in newspapers, in books, in talks with friends, in their own family relationships something which has taught them about bereavement and how those experiencing it can be supported.

However, even trying to treat this response with as much charity as possible, it must raise questions about the ongoing training of the clergy, and how their ministry, and the understanding which is brought to that ministry, is developed.



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BEREAVEMENT A CLERGY OPPORTUNITY

It is always easier to isolate groups within any profession, for the purpose of criticising their knowledge and understanding, and how this affects the way they approach this or that task. It is somewhat harder to suggest positive ways of improvement.

That the clergy are presented with an opportunity in their contact with the bereaved would seem to me to be beyond doubt. They preside over the vast majority of the gatherings which mark the end of life. The questionnaire suggests that at least 60% of those questioned are aware of the opportunity presented to them, and are seeking actively to care for those with whom they come into contact. But what of the rest? How might they respond with more positiveness?

I would suggest three areas for thought:

First, that the clergy should see themselves as a **visual support** for the bereaved. There is much evidence, that inspite of secularisation, inspite of the decline in church attendance, the clergyman still commands the respect of the majority of people. He is seen as a person who represents ideals and qualities which are good. He believes things which others have difficulty in believing, and is thus a comforting person to have around. He represents something far bigger than himself. As someone put it "he is the carrier of other people's longings". Because of all this, he is welcome in almost every home. He does not have to explain why he has come, he is simply invited in. Even in homes where the bereaved are being "protected" from callers for fear of upsetting them, the clergyman gains entry. And in

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those homes where the bereaved are being prevented from talking about their feelings, the clergyman is allowed to speak, and to draw the painful speech of the bereaved. However uncomfortable this makes the clergyman feel, as he continues to struggle to get off the pedestals others have placed him on, it is nevertheless an opportunity to reach the bereaved, and to give them positive and valuable care.

Second, the clergy should see themselves as the **carriers of understanding.** It is one thing being given the opportunity to minister to the bereaved, it is quite another ministering in effective and appropriate ways. Without an understanding of how he feels when confronted by intense emotion. Without understanding how he feels when he is placed in a position where he "can't do anything", and feels impotent to help. Without such understanding, he will find it difficult to minister both to the bereaved, and to those around them. He first then needs to carry understanding about himself and the way he feels, and be comfortable within that understanding.

But of course, second he needs to carry understanding about bereavement itself, about its intensity, about its loneliness, about its changing patterns. One of the most life giving bits of information that can be given is the reassurance that I am NORMAL, when I think my feelings are totally peculiar to me. When I am filled with rational or irrational anger; when I am consumed with guilt; when I seek out places of significance to me and the person I have lost; when I hear the voice of the dead—to be faced with someone who understands, and who can reassure me that it is all quite normal, gives me the permission to grieve, the assurance that all is well.

Thirdly, the clergy ought to see themselves as **resource leaders.** I have suggested that the clergy do not visit enough, and even place the priority on a visit when the bereaved are receiving a great deal of support from family and friends. If they are faced with a funeral every 9 days, they cannot visit all the bereaved with much regularity. Yet the clergy in my survey, (119 of them), had between them 167 assistant ministers of various types, who were rarely if ever used in the support of the bereaved. They also have congregations of varying sizes, within which will be people who already understand the needs of the bereaved, not to mention those who could be taught how to give support. If the clergy saw themselves as the leaders of very large packs, then the bereaved would gain, more positively than they do at present, from the involvement of the clergy.

1 Death, Grief & Mourning in Contemporary Britain. G. Gorer. Cresset Press 1965.
2 Bereavement: studies of grief in adult life. C. M. Parkes. Pelican 1975.
3 Death Comes Home. Simon Stephens. Mowbrays 1972. paperback.

PAUL LONGBOTTOM

COURSES

The Age Concern Training Department will be offering two residential training courses on death and bereavement this year. **Voluntary Support for Terminally Ill Elderly People in the Community** is a workshop to increase knowledge and report on new developments in the voluntary care of terminally ill elderly patients. The course is held from 1st to 3rd December.

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