EDITORIAL

This issue contains a most valuable interchange on funeral practices, including whether the funeral service should be provided solely by the minister. As a sociologist, I see a funeral as a ceremony through which family and friends acknowledge the loss of someone they loved and share with each other the recognition that their lives are now diminished. A traditional religious service provided solely by a minister may give comfort because it fosters a sense of connection to the supernatural. It may also reassure those attending that the ceremony is appropriate and proper, just because it is traditional.

Nevertheless, for some, such a funeral is cold and distant, especially if the service is conducted by a minister who does not really know the person who died. They would prefer a funeral in which family, friends or their representative can directly declare their love, respect and grief.

Whether a funeral should include participation by family or friends is a question that should be resolved in consultation with those members of the bereaved family whose lives were most affected by the death. A clergyman or other family *counsellor* can best serve a bereaved family by helping that family choose – or devise – the ceremony that best meets their needs.

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Participation in funerals: Two points of view



Revd Jim Boyd

1. Should close relatives be expected to take an active part?

Revd Jim Boyd
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There has been a welcome trend in most churches to encourage members to play a variety of parts alongside or in place of professional ministers. Why not also at funerals? Those responsible for arranging the content of funeral services need to think carefully about the function of the service and to guide families accordingly, while taking into account some wishes that they may express. It may be time to sound a note of caution.

THE FUNCTION OF THE FUNERAL SERVICE

Before the practice of allowing members of the immediate family to take a larger part in funerals becomes widely accepted, and therefore expected of people, it should surely be evaluated. Let us begin by considering the functions of the funeral service, which I would suggest are to:

- enable the bereaved to enter into the worship of God at a significant moment for them;
- help the bereaved to begin the necessary processes of realising and healing the hurt, and mourning in a real, personal, intimate way;
- celebrate the presence of the Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, as the source of all comfort for the grieving, who yearn for eternal hope and wider horizons;
- reflect aspects of the life of the deceased person and stimulate memories of him or her as a loved relative, neighbour, colleague and comrade in church and community;
- provide a ritualized 'letting go' in the commendation and committal of remains, while offering a bridge over the frightening gulf between life and death; and

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the traditional Irish 'wake', family and friends of the deceased participated in a ritual that allowed for the expression of a wide range of emotions. However, the 'wake' is dying out, and most current rites in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom allow for little active participation or emotional expression. We invited Tony Walter, author of *Funerals and How to Improve Them*[1], to answer the following queries raised by the Revd Jim Boyd, a former minister of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast.