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.

Robert Weiss, PhD
USA

Participation in funerals: Two points of view



Revd Jim Boyd

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

Revd Jim Boyd
Retired Minister of the Presbyterian Church and practical theology teacher, Belfast, N.Ireland

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.

- attempt to raise thought above the facile or banal, and to revere this mystery.

Evaluating the funeral

Below are some criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a funeral service:

- is there acceptance of this death as final, with reverent disposal of the body and no playing down the significance of what is being done?
- are the needs of the mourners, especially those most closely related to the deceased, kept to the forefront? Has there been an atmosphere of calm, without undue haste and rush?
- is due attention given to the normal feelings and emotional condition of those who may, by misguided advice and prescription, be under sedation or otherwise shielded from this experience in its depth and reality? Are children able to participate as fully as possible? Are the elderly also provided for, as their feelings may be most intense?
- has adequate care been taken by those arranging the worship service to have a personal, and not a detached, 'professional' participation?
- has the service enhanced a sense of unity, in place of the dividedness and distance brought about by death, the great separator?

WHY THE NEED FOR CARE AND CAUTION?

The rapidly growing custom of having one or more members of the immediate family read a lesson, poem, prayer, or otherwise take a prominent part in the liturgy creates an expectation that may bring a burden of dread, fear and guilt, which ought not to be allowed to interfere with the therapeutic, wholesome experience proper to a family at worship in traumatic circumstances. The dynamics of the situation may include some or all of the following features:

- a tide of sympathy rising from the congregation as a close relative proceeds to face them and read from unfamiliar text;
- embarrassment has been mounting in that individual participant, as well as in others in the immediate circle;
- in any family, over the years, a 'pecking order' is established. Together with this, there may be some competitiveness giving rise to jealousies if one or other seems to be favoured;
- one person may agree, 'just to show a brave face' or 'not to let dad down'. If that person should fail by being overcome with emotion, the consequent sense of guilt and unworthiness compounds the grief and may upset the mourning process;
- refusal, although from proper and realistic foresight, of what might be regarded as a duty, may result in a sense of guilt afterwards;
- people may be quite composed during the days between death and funeral, but, in the service, surprising and frightening feelings may move anyone, including one due to take a lead in the course of the service; and
- following a death, people often find themselves in a daze, confused and disorganised, and this adds to apprehension when faced with a request to take part at a specified point in what seems a complicated liturgy.

Is this one service better left in the hands of the 'expert'? Quite apart from this analysis of the funeral situation, those who conduct such worship should ask whether the family's and others' needs will not be more satisfactorily met by having 'expert' leadership through which each part of the service may be fully heard by those present, without the upsurge of unnecessary apprehension and conflicting thoughts.

What I have written may appear exaggerated and would certainly need research. It would be useful to register readers' experiences so that such a practice may be given proper attention and not be allowed to grow just through 'popular request' with a high risk factor undetected.

We announce with sadness that the Revd Jim Boyd died on 27 May 1994, and are grateful to Mrs Mary Boyd, his widow, for permission to publish this article – Editors.



Tony Walter

2. Actions speak louder than words

Tony Walter, PhD

Freelance writer and lecturer in sociology, UK

The British funeral is frequently anticipated to be, and experienced as, an ordeal. All cultures regulate the expression of emotion in funerals. Some cultures require ritual wailing (usually by women), others (such as strict Islam) ban it. Among white English (less so in some other segments of the British population), the rule is keep a stiff upper lip.

THE ONUS OF TRADITION

Funerals always strive to maintain cultural values in the face of the great destroyer. Among some white English, for example, close relatives are permitted to wipe their eyes surreptitiously, quiver or sniff just enough to show all present that they do actually care. This is not easy to achieve, hence the ordeal. Hence, the 'wasn't she brave?' at the end of the service, meaning the widow did not break down even though she was deeply affected.

Like it or not, this is the emotional trial of our funerals. To require one or more of those facing this trial also to soldier through a reading, especially if they are unused to reading in public, is

unlikely to help anyone, as the Revd Jim Boyd's article stated so well.

Making services more personal

If it is true that an increasing number of funerals include members of the immediate family helping to lead the service, I can think of three reasons for this development:

- the tendency over the past two decades for greater lay participation in leading regular Sunday worship. This could spill over into funerals of regular churchgoers, most noticeable perhaps among Catholics and in Northern Ireland, where churchgoing is common;
- the growing disillusion with 'production line' crematorium funerals has fuelled a demand for more personal funerals; and
- the publicity given to those who dispense with the services of an undertaker and arrange some or all of the funeral themselves has caused other people to review their own involvement in funerals.

Many funerals create a sense of unreality, because mourners are reduced from a congregation (congregated for a common purpose) to a bemused audience watching an incomprehensible show put on by more, or often less, expert clergy. Especially where the priest does not know the congregation, the Revd Jim Boyd's 'expert leadership' is all too often hard to achieve.

In *Funerals and How to Improve Them*[1], I give examples of ways in which the service can become real, and this can often involve participation by mourners. But two important features of helpful participation should be noted.

Firstly, actions work better than words. Even though weeping, you can still: place a flower on a coffin; kiss the corpse (as Orthodox Christians do); or fill in a grave (as West Indians do). You cannot easily read a lesson, poem or prayer when choked with tears. So long as ritual actions are appropriate to family, community and religion, they can make the funeral real without adding to the ordeal. I wonder if the problem for Protestants, and some secularists, is that they rely too much on words, and have lost touch with liturgical actions? (Incidentally, the Anglican funeral rite is essentially the Catholic requiem mass but with the mass omitted, that is, with the actions omitted, leaving only words.)

Secondly, if mourners are to speak, they should preferably not be close family. A nephew might read a poem; at a child's funeral, a teacher might read a lesson. Such people can speak on behalf of close kin. The problem with the kinds of participation that the Revd Jim Boyd has found so excruciating is that they involve close kin speaking in public.

Bruce Read's stimulating book *The Dynamics of Religion*[2] argued that regular Sunday worship involves ritualised dependency on the worship leader. Untrained lay participation in leading services can undermine this, because one cannot relax into dependency. Holy Communion, by contrast, is a communal and personal action that ritualises both participation and dependency. Though not addressed to funerals, Read's book provides a useful frame for understanding the dynamics that the Revd Jim Boyd describes.

Nevertheless, some funerals have worked well with the spoken words of close kin. I am tempted to suggest that this is fine so long as it really is the preferred style. I am wary, however, of anyone in the funeral business who claims to give people freedom of choice. Traditions build up, people want to do 'the right thing', so when offered various options they look around to see what others have selected and their choices become patterned and less than free. It is even more important, therefore, that we develop rituals and traditions of participation that really work.

References

1 Walters T. Funerals and How to Improve Them. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990.* See also Walter T. Settling the Spirit. *Bereavement Care* 1991; **10**(1): 4–5.
2 Read B. The Dynamics of Religion. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978.

* Funerals and How to Improve Them is available from Cruse – Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. £9.95 + £1.75 p&p.

'Dear Mum . . .'

An adult daughter's anger triggered by her father's death

Anon.

'Dear Mum, You will not like what I am writing in this letter but I feel that what I have to say must be said. I have an anger, a fury, boiling inside me all the time and, unless I get it out, I feel I must explode. To begin with, I want to say that I know that you were the best mother you knew how to be, that when you were bringing us up you were going through very difficult and stressful times, and that you have been generous with me on many occasions. However, it is also true to say that you were very cruel and even vindictive to me while I was growing up. Although I don't believe that your cruelty was