

A FUNERAL RESOURCE BOOK

BY REV. ALEX. B. NOBLE

POSSIBLE TITLES: A Funeral Resource Book
Funerals
A Funeral Handbook
Comforting Those Who Mourn
Dust to Dust to Resurrection
Conducting Funerals
Pastoral Care of the Bereaved
"In Sure and Certain Hope of Resurrection."
Good News in the Face of Bad News
The Art of Funerals

DEDICATION:

I dedicate this book to my five congregations so far, namely:
ST. MARK'S PARISH CHURCH, RAPLOCH, STIRLING
DUNBAR PARISH CHURCH.
FYVIE PARISH CHURCH
ROTHIENORMAN PARISH CHURCH
SALTCOATS NORTH PARISH CHURCH
They have been the people among whom I have learned the art of
conducting funerals and giving pastoral care to the bereaved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

The Rev. Alex. B. Noble was born on 23 May 1955 in Fraserburgh, Scotland and brought up in the twin Aberdeenshire fishing villages of Cairnbulg and Inverallochy. His father, George S. Noble was a fish market auctioneer and businessman who became minister of Newarthill Parish Church near Motherwell for twenty eight years.

The author graduated M.A. (in English and History) from Glasgow University in 1976, then B.D. (Honours in Systematic Theology) from Aberdeen University in 1979. After completing a Th.M. degree at Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA he served as an Assistant Minister in St.Ninian's Parish Church, Corstorphine, Edinburgh. Alex. Noble was ordained as a Church of Scotland minister on 6th. January 1982 and inducted as minister of St.Mark's Parish Church, Raploch, Stirling for over eleven years. After six years as minister of Dunbar Parish Church in East Lothian, he became minister of the linked charges of Fyvie Parish Church and Rothienorman Parish Church in rural Aberdeenshire. His present charge is Saltcoats North Parish Church in Ayrshire. In 1991 he married Patricia West from Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire who was a college lecturer in Business Studies.

In his twenty years as a parish minister in various types of charges ranging from city to urban priority area to small town to rural villages and farms, the author has conducted well over 600 funerals. Visits before and after funerals mean that bereavement and death have been a daily part of his life and ministry and a particular interest within his general vocation. In 1999 his first book, entitled "Sunshine Through Shadows" was published by the Saint Andrew Press. It is a companion volume to this one in that it is written mainly for those who are bereaved and in grief while this one is written especially for those who seek to comfort them.

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A. THE FUNERAL SERVICE.

1. ARRANGEMENTS

From the point of view of the minister or anyone who is conducting a funeral, in any capacity, the funeral begins as soon as the telephone rings or the doorbell chimes. (No wonder then that ministers sometimes get a phobia about ringing bells)! Ideally there is a relationship with the deceased and some members of their family before the death, but unfortunately often there is not.

The door or phone bell rings and in an instant, life is changed! You may be washing the dog or playing with the baby; having a domestic row or be engaged in creative writing; perhaps watching your favourite television programme or absorbed in a pet project, but someone else's tragedy is your interruption. "Interruption" of course is not a healthy way to look at it. This is what we are called by God to do and it is our great desire and privilege to bring comfort to those who mourn (see Isaiah 61.1-3). Still, there is no getting away from the fact that in the twinkling of an eye you have to "go up the gears" and operate in a pastoral way (like it or not at this particular moment). This may incur the wrath of the dog, the children, your spouse or simply other aspects of your complex self other than the zealous workaholic!

I was trained to always drop everything (within reason) and immediately run round and visit the bereaved family. I never really got a good explanation of what might be considered "within reason" nor indeed "beyond reason". That is the big question; that is the question which, if answered incorrectly, can cause immense personal stress and considerable marital strain even to the extent of divorce! We wear more than one hat and we have responsibilities in more than one direction, so we have to deal with the call for our services with more sophistication than simply always sublimating all things to rushing round to visit the funeral house.

The other side of this coin is that quite often it turns out that the bereaved family does not want you round immediately. The death may just have occurred and they want to buy breathing space before meeting you or indeed

anyone. They may not know you and so they will have the stress of relating with a stranger at a time when they do not feel up to such an exercise of social skills. Even if they do know you, they may not want to answer a lot of questions. Furthermore, you represent the funeral of their loved one and the stark reality of death which are the very two things which a large part of them is busily trying to deny and block out. Often they are already out and about registering the death, buying black ties, closing bank accounts etc. All of this is stressful, especially within hours of the death, and so they have to psyche themselves up for it. Your unannounced arrival means that they have to psyche themselves up all over again. (Usually they can't settle until they have registered the death).

For all these reasons there is much wisdom in thinking twice before rushing round to the bereaved family. I usually now telephone people first to introduce myself and ask when it would be most convenient for me to call round. I specifically mention the possibility of coming round right away (if that is at all possible for me to do) but then leave them to make the choice. More often than not we fix up an appointment later that same day but not right away. This also has the advantage that the chief mourners can gather the wider family (if they wish) so that they can all meet the minister and be involved in any family discussions. Conversely it also gives them time to get rid of any family or visitors whom they do not want involved! Sometimes when I telephone, the mourners express their preference for meeting me at my manse rather than in their own home, so I now offer them this choice. This can be because of noisy dogs or children or certain members of the family or friends who might cause embarrassment. For all these reasons the phone call gives the family and the minister much more flexibility.

"As far as possible" I try to come round immediately. This phrase however has been reinterpreted at every stage in my ministry. As a zealous, young bachelor in my first charge I went round immediately almost without exception. Now, as a zealous, middle-aged married man, I find that there are more exceptions! I still frequently face the phenomenon of "going up the gears" as when you come home from the Sunday School picnic hot, sticky, sunburnt and tired, just dreaming of a long cool drink and calamine lotion, then just as you are putting the car into the garage, someone shouts: "It's the phone for you; it's about a funeral!" You know that you have to quickly leap from plodding mechanically towards that vision of the cool

drink in the fridge, to calming the fevered brow of others with much bigger problems than yours. It is a huge psychological journey but you have to traverse it and do so in only seconds before speaking to the mourners!

As always, your function is both a task one and a relational one and it is primarily relational. On the face of it you are meeting for the task of making practical funeral arrangements. That however is the least of it. There is so much more to the funeral visit than simply agreeing where, when and how to hold the funeral.

Very often the person conducting someone's funeral has never met that person nor indeed the mourning family and friends. Isn't that an amazing fact? Fortunately it does not mean that the funeral is doomed from the outset to being an empty and mediocre exercise. However it does mean that a lot of relating has to be squeezed into a very short time and at a very stressful time. This is quite a challenge! It is a challenge from both sides: the minister faces the prospect of saying meaningful things to people with whom he has little or no pastoral relationship and they are looking for comfort from a relative or absolute stranger. Furthermore, the days following news of a loved one's death and the days leading up to a funeral are not the best times for making new and meaningful relationships. But such is life! And such is death too! I must confess to a sneaking liking for the challenge to my professionalism in all this. I have three days approximately to get to know these mourners and to get to know the deceased retrospectively!

It is not even three days, more like one or two visits. Sometimes I visit only once before the funeral and sometimes I visit twice. There is no scientific reason for the difference; it is more an intuitive thing and above all dependent on practical circumstances. I might visit twice if I know the family very well or if they are core Church people. Conversely it might be because I didn't know them and didn't get enough information from one visit. Sometimes it is because some of the relatives are flying in from far away and would like to meet me and sometimes it is simply because I have less commitments and some time available for a second visit.

During the visit or visits I try to get as much information about the deceased as I can without being seen to be grilling them. The day a loved one dies is not the ideal time to be getting interrogated and not a good day for getting

your facts right. However the more facts I can get the more personal I can make the funeral so it is a case of short-term pain for longer-term gain. After the funeral they see that, but before it they find it hard to understand why you are asking all these questions and in some cases they find it a little distressing. Of course, over the years I have worked at perfecting the technique of the imperceptible inquisition! It is a matter of intuition and professional skill to know just how much questioning they can stand.

You can extract data reasonably imperceptibly by listening very intently to what others say and so avoiding the need for you to be seen asking the questions. You can ask other people besides the immediate family e.g. friends, neighbours, colleagues, Church members, even the undertaker (especially in small communities). You can harness mourners' natural and healthy impulse to speak about their deceased loved one - just start them off and occasionally prod with the right noises and they will reel off endless anecdotes and memories. A room full of mourners will trigger each other off with their respective memories and you can "chair" the discussion with a very light touch.

I make a point of gathering *facts* about the person who has died rather than *value judgements*. Facts are relatively safe while value judgements are very dangerous. I remember attending my own aunt's funeral and feeling very upset (along with the rest of my family) as the pastor painted a picture of her which none of us recognised. It is a very hurtful thing. Even facts can have their complications but on the whole I feel that they are worth the risk. Facts go wrong when people (in grief remember) give you wrong facts (e.g. saying they had five children when in fact they had six). Facts get complicated when for example a person has married twice and one half of the family do not want his first wife mentioned at all! These difficulties can all be overcome with tact and diplomacy and the benefit of giving simple facts which the hearers themselves adorn with their own memories and value judgements is inestimable. The feedback which I have always had is that the prayer in which I give a brief, thumb-nail, outline sketch of the facts of the deceased's life story is the "best bit" of the funeral.

On the other hand, while avoiding value judgements, it is always my aim not only to get facts but also to get inside the late loved-one's personality and inner psychological workings. I try to get a feel for the person so that even in the case of someone whom I have never met, I can match the feeling

of the funeral service to their unique character. This is difficult for me to put into words and even harder for the families to notice and express but I am delighted when I get feed-back which touches on this. For example people have thanked me in the following terms:

"You summed her up to a tee."

"It was as if you had known him all your life!"

"How long did you say you knew them?"

"So and so [the deceased] would have really appreciated that bit you mentioned about the....."

"My mother would really have approved of that service; it just felt so much her style!"

One funeral in particular comes to mind. I think I have only twice ever cracked a joke during a funeral - because it is not really the thing to do 999 times out of a 1,000 - but I did on this occasion. Afterwards the family commented on my joke saying:

"We really appreciated what you said there. Dad would have approved. It was just the sort of thing that he always liked doing in company. He had a great sense of humour and we're sure if he's watching he'll be having a good laugh to himself."

The risk paid off in this case. However the risk is dangerous - you are dealing with the emotions of people when they are at their most vulnerable and when they are beginning to build trust in you and all that you represent (including God Himself)! On the other hand there is always the odd case which is the exception to the rule as in the above example. The point is that I must have been very sure of my reading of the family in order to have taken such a risk. The rule of thumb must be: "If in doubt, don't" but look at the joy and comfort which you can give to families by hitting "just the right note" (as they say) if you can master the skill of reading both the deceased and their family. I say both because the above would not have worked if the family had not inherited their father's sense of humour. It is no good if the deceased would appreciate the funeral service but the living mourners whom you are addressing would not!

The funeral visit (or visits) is therefore not only a time to make arrangements about which hymns to sing. It is also a short but concentrated opportunity to "connect" with strangers or people whom you know only a little and probably never at this depth before. We should go in then with

eyes and ears fully open looking and listening intently like all good counsellors, truly perceiving and rightly discerning. We should treat people as we find them. No, we should do much better than that for we are not likely to find them at their best in the initial stages of grief! Above all, we should go to people with an open heart to love and care and we should try to be an open valve so that their thoughts and feelings can flow upward to God through us (e.g. in prayer) and the love and enabling power of God can be able to freely flow through us to them. Then we can be instruments and channels of God's grace and peace. Funerals are a wonderful opportunity not to preach at people but to give them perhaps their first real experience of the grace of God.

As a parish minister I am often asked to conduct funerals of people who have seldom if ever crossed the thresh-hold of the Church and conduct funerals for people who will probably never cross the thresh-hold again after the service. Sometimes people say:

"These people are only using the Church or even abusing it."

I don't see it that way. People are never likely to want to go to Church and worship God unless they can see a good reason for doing so. First they need a good experience of the grace of God and then they will want to praise and thank him. We preach best by conveying God's love and acceptance and enabling strength.

Sometimes when making the funeral arrangements you begin to wonder:

"Who's funeral is it anyway?"

This is a very good question! Grief only serves to highlight people's normal character traits so sometimes you meet indecisive, tentative people and at other times domineering strong willed people. At times mourners are very deferential and at others quite demanding. Some like to make a drama out of a crisis while others are wanting it all over in three minutes. Even the same individual can be full of ambiguities as when they begin by saying that they want it all to be very short and simple and then go on to inundate you with special requests for little additions. Organists and undertakers have been known to "put in their tuppence worth" and even the deceased can dictate from the grave via their pre-written will or in those famous last words. How often we hear:

"It was his express desire that..."

"It was her dying wish...."

"It was their favourite piece of music..."

Sometimes one member of the family (and not necessarily the nearest and dearest) exerts a disproportionate influence on the rest of the family either because the family is indecisive or because the person is a forceful character.

So it is a very good question: "Who's funeral is it anyway?" Obviously the deceased is a major attraction while various others mentioned above also play leading parts! The person conducting the service clearly has much of the spotlight and the major speaking role. However it should always be remembered, and reminders given if necessary, that **GOD** is the number one! A funeral is after all an act of worship and it is God whom we are worshipping. We thank Him for the life of the deceased; we ask Him to be the Good Shepherd as He promised and lead us "through the valley of the shadow" of grief; and we praise Him for the "sure and certain hope of resurrection" and the hope of Heaven. We sing to Him and pray to Him and listen to His Word. This fundamental point needs to be kept in mind when making arrangements for any funeral service. It Is God's service.

Having said that, I do, like most people, try to accommodate all the competing desires and requests as far as possible. The bounds of course are hard to define but include judgements based on what would God like, is it worship, is it in good taste, in accordance with common sense, appropriate to the deceased, acceptable to most mourners, achievable within the time restraints? It can depend on who exactly is making the special request or on how strongly they want it. Since I try to have unity of theme in every act of worship I prepare, it can depend on whether it fits in with every other part of the service. On balance I think it is worth losing a little control and a little of your own high standards in order to let the immediate family feel that the service is a joint production between them and the minister. This can stress the minister because he or she is used to total control of their services but it does make the funeral service much more effective when people feel participant rather than spectator. For this very reason many ministers are letting go of some of their control of Sunday morning services as well as funerals. Of course the more you let other people have a say the more risk there is of complications and frictions. Personally I like to retain nearly all the control, but I also even enjoy the challenge of co-operating with families and creatively weaving what I say around requests which they have. However I do not like the growing "consumer attitude" which throughout my ministry has been increasing. We live in a materialistic age in which the

prevailing philosophy seems to be "the customer is always right" and "everyone is here to serve the customer" or "you get what you pay for". I refuse payments for funerals partly because I refuse to be tipped. The relationship between minister and mourner is **NOT** about customers paying for services rendered. I am God's man and I do the funeral in service to Him. I serve Him by helping others. However I am not the others' employee.

So, to recap, the initial funeral visit (and sometimes a second visit) is to meet the immediate family of the deceased and express my sympathy. It is to establish a pastoral relationship out of which I speak at the funeral service. The visit furnishes me with a good picture of both the deceased and the family and I glean relevant facts about the person who died - facts which I use in a prayer to guide people's memories as we go through a summary sketch outline of the deceased's life. I also use the new-found knowledge to craft a parable or two to enlighten and comfort the mourners at the funeral. We also discuss the practical funeral arrangements and details of the service, especially the hymns.

2 BEGINNING FUNERALS

First impressions in life are always very important, indeed disproportionately important. This also applies to funerals. The first impression begins even before the first words are said by the person conducting the funeral. Things like the decor, the warmth of welcome, the seating positions, the temperature, lighting, the music or silence, where the minister stands in relation to the mourners (eg. high up "six foot above contradiction" or nearby at a small lectern), whether the minister wears robes or not, eye contact before you begin, the atmosphere etc. - all have an influence upon first impressions and are therefore worth thinking about in detail.

When it comes to communication we generally put too much emphasis on the spoken word and underestimate the importance of all the other aspects which contribute to a complete communication exercise. Experts tell us that only 7% is communicated by the spoken word while 93% has to do with

body posture, hand gestures, facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice and so on. If you go to a concert you will notice that there is much more to the event than simply what the star of the night says or sings. Besides the “star quality” there is the expectancy of the crowd, the appearance of the theatre, its warmth and comfort, the size of the crowd, the shape of the seat and amount of leg room, the warm-up acts etc. The same facts of life hold true whether it is in a concert hall, a cathedral or a crematorium because people use their five senses wherever they go. Often the non-verbal communications are the most vivid in the memory and have the most impact at the time.

Some ministers prefer to mingle with the mourners and greet the chief mourners at the door of the church. I however do not as a rule (although there have been odd exceptions). I pop up in the pulpit or to be more precise at the lectern (because it is nearer to the mourners and therefore more intimate and less “high and mighty”). There is a delicate balance to be kept between being too remote and too near; too formal and too informal; too involved and too detached; too much one of the mourners and too much not one of the mourners. This calls for intuitive decisions and value judgements and such decisions will vary from funeral to funeral. Generally I give my best pastorally before and after the funeral but during it I am performing a particular role which I feel is best served by keeping a little detachment including popping up at the lectern. At the point of the funeral service the mourners are better served by a slightly detached official functionary than someone who is simply another broken-hearted griever. (That is a little over-stated but it draws out the distinction). I have learned one little “trick of the trade”: when I feel a little too detached, I look into the chief mourner’s eyes until I judge that I am filled up enough with emotional involvement! Then I avert my eyes. Conversely, if I feel too emotional I do not focus on the mourners’ eyes but just give them indirect eye contact until I feel detached and strong enough to give them direct eye contact.

I do not lead in the coffin at any time for I see no good reason for doing so. I do not stand as part of the coffin party nor the party of mourners; I am in a unique position and I therefore stand alone reflecting that. When you think about it I am standing there as God’s ambassador representing Him so I stand with the Bible, lectern and the invisible Presence.

3 OPENING SENTENCES

When it comes to opening words I nearly always say:

“The Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

I emphasise the word “peace” and say it slowly, authoritatively, onomatopoeically and with full but gentle eye contact. The fact of starting nearly every funeral this way also means that regular attenders have the comfort of a familiar starting note. There surely can be no better starting note than the catch phrase of Jesus Himself! Jesus was always saying:

“Fear not; it is I, peace be with you.”

He said it for example as He came walking over the water towards the disciples and He said it when He made His Resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room.

I deliberately say: “The peace of THE Lord Jesus Christ” rather than: “The peace of OUR Lord Jesus Christ” because I am very conscious of the fact that many attenders are not worshippers. They did not choose a Christian funeral in a Church but when given hobson’s choice they chose to come rather than be absent. Often you can see them willfully refusing to sing the hymns!

On the other hand I find that it serves me well to make no value judgements except to blindly assume that everyone is Christian. It is not for us to judge other people. Judging is so difficult anyway, and remembering that many people positively disbelieve, while others hesitantly believe and still others are confused about what they do and don’t believe, it pays to speak “a word from the Lord” and forget all about these matters. I never cease to be amazed by how many people profess to be non-believers yet end up giving profuse thanks for unapologetic prayer and preaching!

A case in point comes to mind. Once I was asked a strange request by a widower. I had been asked to conduct his wife’s funeral and had willingly consented. Then he said:

“Minister, do you mind if I ask you a wee favour?”

I said: “No, what is it?”

He replied: “Do you think you could skip the God stuff?”

Seeing me metaphorically “fall off my perch” in a mixture of laughter and surprise he went on to explain that neither he, his wife, nor their family were

“very religious”! I immediately composed myself and said in all sincerity that if he did not want a religious funeral he did not have to have one. I pointed out the not so well known fact that anyone can bury anyone in Scotland. You do not have to have a minister. Indeed there is a growing trend for non-Christian funerals and even funerals which have no spoken words and even nothing at all remotely like a service or remembrance act. I went on to point out that ministers do religious, indeed Christian, services – it comes with the package! Without the Christian Good News of God being with us and His guarantee of resurrection I would have nothing to say. He paused for a moment then said:

“Oh well then, just you do it your usual way.”

I did do it in my usual way and I am pleased to say that before I stepped off the planks over his wife’s grave he came rushing over to me to thank me for the lovely service!

Very quickly in my ministry I came to see that many people come to funerals and feel completely bemused by the whole exercise. They don’t know what a funeral is; why we have them; what they are trying to achieve and basically what they are all about. At other times we would introduce proceedings and explain a little about what is going on. So why not also do that at a funeral? There is a slight danger of being repetitious for regular funeral attenders but even that has the advantage of a familiar comfort. There is a time and place for originality but there is similarly a time and place for familiarity. In grief people like the comfort of familiar things (hence the popularity of singing Psalm 23 to the tune Crimond). So, very often I begin with these words:

“The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

We are gathered here today to mourn the loss and to celebrate the life of _____.

We are here to give thanks to God for his/her life of ___ years and

To commit him/her back into God’s merciful and tender hands.

We are here to comfort one another and to be comforted ourselves.

We are also here to praise and thank God that in the face of the cold, stark mystery of death and the valley of the shadow of grief...the

many

questions on our minds and the mixture of feelings churning around

in

our hearts...there is the Good News of Jesus who said, and still says:

- “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”
- “He who comes to me I will not cast out.”
- “I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”
- “Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy laden,
- and I will give you rest.”

In a world of change and uncertainty ...when you never know what will happen next...one thing is trustworthy and reliable, sure and steadfast, (an anchor to the soul)...and that is a promise of our God Jesus.

So, in our weakness, sorrow and need, let us lay claim to these promises.

On other occasions I like to start with a reading from scripture e.g. Jesus calming the storm or Peter walking on water. The sudden abrupt delving into the Bible is part of the effect. Then I make the obvious connection between the situation then and our situation now.

Sometimes I begin with a parable. At other times I begin with a few sentences about the deceased which then leads on to a parable and the theme of the whole funeral. For instance the person who died may have been a fisherman for many years so I give details and lead on to the famous Yacht illustration followed by a hymn on the nautical theme e.g. “Will your Anchor hold?”

One of the complaints I have heard about funerals in general is that the minister was too quick to give comfort – so quick that there was no time to grieve. He or she rushed in to comfort without acknowledging the grief and giving it room to breathe and express itself. People do need to hear their deepest pains articulated, so as those who conduct funerals, we need to start where people are at and articulate their grief feelings. The ancient Psalmists were psychologically sophisticated and wise enough to realise this. They used “Plaint of the Sufferer Psalms” which eloquently articulate just how mourners are feeling today even though they were written three thousand years ago! Grief is timeless and universal! Psalms 6 and 13 are good examples of these:

Psalm 6 v 2-7 (GN) “I am worn out, O Lord;

Have pity on me!

Give me strength; I am completely exhausted

And my whole being is deeply troubled.

How long, O Lord, will you wait to help me?
 Come and save me, Lord;
 In your mercy rescue me from death.
 I am worn out with grief;
 Every night my bed is damp from my weeping;
 My pillow is soaked with tears.
 I can hardly see; my eyes are so swollen.”

Psalm 13 v 1,2 (GN) “How much longer will you forget me, Lord?
 For ever?
 How much longer will you hide yourself from me?
 How long must I endure trouble?
 How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?”

Psalm 69 v 1-3 (GN) “Save me, O God!
 The water is up to my neck;
 I am sinking in deep mud and there is no solid ground;
 I am out in deep water and the waves are about to
 drown me.
 I am worn out from calling for help,
 And my throat is aching.
 I have strained my eyes looking for your help.”

(See also Psalm 22.1-5; Psalm 102.1-11 and others).

There is also material in “Job” and “Lamentations” in the Old Testament. I usually follow the expression of grief as in *Plaint of the Sufferer Psalms* with comforting passages like Isaiah 61v1 announcing good news to the sufferers.

I say: “....Then along comes Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61, saying:- (cf. Luke 4.18-19)

Isaiah 61 v 1-3 (GN) “The Sovereign Lord has filled me with His Spirit.
 He has chosen me and sent me
 To bring good news to the poor,
 To heal the broken-hearted
 To announce release to captives
 And freedom to those in prison.
 He has sent me to comfort all who mourn
 To give to those who mourn in Zion
 Joy and gladness instead of grief,

A song of praise instead of sorrow.”

Alternatively I might use these words:- (John 10 v 10,11,14,15,27-28)

“Jesus says to us: I have come in order that you might have life -

Life in all its fullness

I am the Good Shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep.

I am the Good Shepherd.

I know my sheep and they know me.

And I am willing to die for them.

My sheep listen to my voice;

I know them and they follow me.

I give them eternal life and they shall never die.

No one can snatch them away from me.”

Here is a sample of excellent opening sentences, all from the Good News version of the Bible:-

Psalm 46 v 1 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Psalm 55 v 2a “Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you”

Psalm 121 v 1-8 “I look to the mountains; where will my help come from?

My help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let you fall; your protector is always awake.

The protector of Israel never dozes or sleeps.

The Lord will guard you; He is by your side to protect you...

The Lord will protect you from all danger; He will keep you safe.

He will protect you as you come and go now and for ever.

Psalm 145 v 18 – 19 “The Lord is near to those who call to, who call to Him with sincerity. He supplies the needs of those Who honour Him; He hears their cries and saves them.

Psalm 46 v 10a “Be still and know that I am God”

Isaiah 40 v 31 “Those who trust in the Lord for help will find their trust renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak.”

My own favourite, set-piece opening goes as follows:-
The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

We are gathered here today to mourn the loss and to celebrate the life of John Smith...John...Johnny...Dad, Papa, Great-Grandad.

We are here to give thanks to God for his long life (85, nearly 86 years) and to commit him back to God’s merciful and tender hands.

We are here to comfort one another and to be comforted ourselves.

And we are here to praise and thank God that in the face of the cold, stark mystery of death; the many questions in our heads and the mixture of feelings churning around inside our hearts...in the face of the bad news of death, there is the Good News of Jesus.

It was Jesus who said:

“Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

“He who comes to me I will not cast out.”

“I am with you always even to the close of the age.”

“Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

In a world of change and uncertainty, when you never know what will happen next, one thing is trustworthy and reliable, sure and steadfast (an anchor to the soul) and that is a promise of our God Jesus.

So, in our weakness, sorrow and need, let us now lay claim to His promises.

Let us sing...OR...Let us pray....

Prayer: “Almighty and Everlasting Heavenly Father, who loves us with an everlasting love, and who alone can turn the shadow of death into the morning; help us now to wait upon you with reverent and submissive hearts. In the silence of this hour, speak to us of eternal things; and comfort us with the assurance that neither death nor life nor things present nor things to

come, can separate us from your love which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

4. HYMNS AND MUSIC.

Here is a selection of some of the most popular and suitable hymns. The numbers are from the CH3 Hymnary:

- Hymn 32 Immortal Invisible God only Wise
- Hymn 34 Lord of All Being
- Hymn 72 O God of Bethel
- Hymn 76 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
- Hymn 81 My Faith Looks Up To Thee
- Hymn 83 Rock of Ages
- Hymn 89 Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah
- Hymn 139 I To The Hills Will Lift Mine Eyes
- Hymn 150 When all Thy Mercies
- Hymn 212 I Heard the Voice of Jesus
- Hymn 241 There is a Green Hill
- Hymn 254 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
- Hymn 279 Thine be the Glory
- Hymn 293 The Saviour Died but Rose Again
- Hymn 360 Praise My Soul the King of Heaven
- Hymn 368 Now Thank We All Our God
- Hymn 387 The Lord's My Shepherd
- Hymn 388 The King of Love My Shepherd Is
- Hymn 396 Behold the Amazing Gift of Love
- Hymn 412 Will Your Anchor Hold?
- Hymn 418 Jesus Loves Me
- Hymn 437 Love Divine All Loves Excelling
- Hymn 442 Fight the Good Fight
- Hymn 530 Blest Be the Everlasting God
- Hymn 534 For All the Saints
- Hymn 537 Jerusalem the Golden
- Hymn 611 O God our Help in Ages Past
- Hymn 615 Heavenly Father, Thou Hast Brought Us
- Hymn 649 Saviour Again to Thy Dear Name we Raise
- Hymn 656 Jesus Tender Shepherd Hear Me

Hymn 673 Be Still My Soul
 Hymn 677 O Love That Will not Let Me Go
 Hymn 681 In Heavenly Love Abiding
 Hymn 689 Nearer My God to Thee
 Hymn 695 Abide With Me

Songs of God's People 9 Amazing Grace
 37 Great is Thy Faithfulness
 86 How Great Thou Art
 115 What a Friend We Have in Jesus

For a Child's Funeral: Safe in the Arms of Jesus
 Kum Ba Yah
 He's Got the Whole World in His Hands
 58 If I Come to Jesus

Here are some suggestions for music to be played before or after a funeral:

Any of the above hymns plus any of the following:

Bach: Our Father Who Art in Heaven

Brahms: O Sacred Head Sore Wounded

Handel: I Know that My Redeemer Liveth

Beethoven: Moonlight Sonata

Stainer: God So Loved the World

Hymns and music are not absolutely essential at a funeral but they are just about. There may be small funerals where the handful of mourners would be further upset by embarrassment if asked to sing in effect a quartet! I usually ask mourners in such circumstances what they would like to do. Some are happy to sing, some are content to listen to hymns being played through, some like music but no hymns and some prefer no music whatever. There is no absolute right or wrong and they are the best judges of what will or will not embarrass them. On the other hand, all things being equal, it is good psychology to couch the service in music. Music has always calmed the troubled soul. Music can communicate more than many words. Much of our theology is carried down the ages through hymns. The familiarity of the music and hymns in itself can be a source of stability and comfort. It is no coincidence that the hymnbooks in every crematorium fall open at the words of "The Lord's My Shepherd". Hymns work and work very well.

Whose hymns and music should they be? The minister likes to weave in the hymns and music to fit as a unity with everything else he/she is saying. The organist feels that he/she is a professional and has invaluable experience in these matters and the families (increasingly I find) have strong thoughts on the subject. The deceased also has a say in the matter quite often! I have also had people while they are alive discuss their future funeral with me including the hymns. The answer lies of course in co-operation rather than competition. I notice a growing trend toward the “dictatorship of the deceased” or at least the relatives claiming that it is the deceased’s dying wish. Sometimes I wonder if it is really the deceased’s or their own choice but it is difficult to argue against the deceased’s choice. However I also notice a growing trend towards the deceased and or the families’ choices being ever more removed from traditional church music. I have had requests ranging from “Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring” to Rave or Disco music. I feel that the minister should have the last word on the matter but of course you try to accommodate other people as much as possible. I point out to families that I can easily select hymns to fit what I am saying but on the other hand I am open to any suggestions they may have. I tend to leave the organist to his/her discretion unless the family has a strong preference for particular music which is not inappropriate in my opinion. Of course I have then had to endure some inappropriate music from organists!

There is a trade-off in funeral music between absolute standards of excellence and relationships with the bereaved and the organist. Sometimes you have to compromise on doing things excellently in order to bring comfort to the families who may like something which makes you wince! However the compromising should not be all one way. It would be wrong to give the public everything they want every time and especially when you consider that in grief people’s judgement can be worse than usual! It is interesting to note in the passing that the undertaker has a commercial relationship with the “clients”. They are in a real sense “customers”. However the minister has a different relationship. He/she is not paid by the clients so the relationship is not commercial and they are not “customers”. Therefore it is not simply the case that “the customer is always right” and the “public servant” must be subservient to the public’s every wish.

Various things flow from all this. If there is insufficient numbers to be able to sing hymns, congregations may appreciate the words of hymns being read out. Where hymns are sung, bear in mind things like whether or not it is a

large group or small one (“Thine be the glory” doesn’t sound so good with ten as with a hundred voices). Consider whether the attenders are familiar with Church hymns or not (if not, then stick to the folk religion repertoire (ie. “The Lord’s My Shepherd”, “The Old Rugged Cross”, and “Abide with Me”)! It is also worth considering matching the hymn to the character of the deceased. If the person was very upbeat then sing an upbeat hymn and if a more downbeat person perhaps a more downbeat hymn. Beware of asking five people with no church background at the suicide of a bad-tempered old drunk to sing “Joy, Joy, Joy!”

Ideally we would manage to first and foremost glorify God (the reason why we sing hymns at all) and then we would manage to please all the people all the time. We would also find music and hymns which match the deceased’s character, are within the mourners repertoire, tie in with what we are saying, and have the family’s wholehearted approval! Ideally that is, but funeral music, like much else in life (and death), is a matter of compromise.

In these hymns we are trying to praise God, express grief, celebrate a life, comfort one another and be comforted ourselves and articulate the Good News of resurrection, eternal life and victory over death.

5. PRAYERS.

It has never been a conscious decision but I find that I always automatically pray as one of the mourners i.e. “O Lord comfort us with your presence...” rather than pray from the outside i.e. “O Lord comfort Jean and Jimmy with your presence”. It would be psychologically good for the mourners to hear their names mentioned but of course you cannot mention everyone by name and even more is to be gained by making the whole prayer an articulation of the mourners deepest longings from the mourners point of view. In prayer the minister speaks from within the people and in the scripture reading he speaks from God. Overall, he fulfils a mediatorial role.

It is important that the prayers truly reflect where people are at. It is therefore quite appropriate to pray in “plaint of the sufferer” style like the Psalmist (cf. Psalms 6, or 13) or to lament like the Book of Lamentations in the Bible. At funerals people should be allowed to mourn. Sometimes ministers are too quick to bring in the comfort. You can lose people right at

the start this way and then there is no chance of carrying them from sighing to singing. Remember that not everyone at a funeral has strong faith; indeed it would be fair to say that most people attending funerals have little or no faith. It only takes one person to book the Church for a funeral and all the others are then duty bound to go to Church. (Often reluctant recruits are not slow to show me that they did not choose the venue. For example they determinedly do not sing nor even hold the hymnbook). In some cases they do not approve of who the minister is or of the way in which he conducts funerals. Anyway, in face of a very mixed audience, the best way to trawl along the bottom and scoop up everyone into worship which begins with mourning and ends in comfort is to pray in such a way that you so precisely articulate their feelings that their ears prick up and with greater or less enthusiasm they consent to go with your flow. Of course there is the further complication that often the chief mourners stress to the minister that they do not want a “mournful” service but more of a “celebration”. They are sometimes saying this as part of their suppression strategy and because of their natural reluctance to enter the valley of the shadow of death and grief. (The minister then feels pressured from both sides to articulate grief and to suppress grief)!

Prayer is perhaps the best way of couching everything going on in worship. Perhaps more than anything else, prayer can square the circle and allow people to both articulate grief and celebrate, even simultaneously. Sometimes we can lose sight of the fact that a funeral is a worship service and one that worships God the Creator rather than worships the deceased creature. Prayer puts God firmly at the centre.

Unfortunately God can sometimes get marginalised in non-worship ceremonies, which feature secular music and long eulogies praising the deceased rather than God. This of course usually comes from the lack of Church background in the attenders. Sometimes however, God also seems to get marginalised even in funerals involving Church people! Even very religious jargon can sometimes fail to hide the fact that God is playing a minor role in our drama. However prayer addressed to God can help everyone to feel that God is in our midst and centre-stage at that. One of the functions of a worship service on a Sunday, or as a funeral, is to highlight the vertical dimension in our world of horizontal inter-actions. It is comforting to know that eternity is in time and that invisible things are here among the visible.

Ad Lib prayers can be the best at articulating precisely how this particular group of people are feeling but of course there is always the corresponding risk that you can get it wrong. Set, written prayers can sound much drier, formal and impersonal but they can also be more thought-out, crafted and since we are all “Jock Tamsin’s bairns” they can still be very poignant in every case. If you use the same formal prayer regularly at funerals you may be thought of as lazy or unimaginative but it can also be received as giving the security and comfort of the familiar. (No one objects to the reading of Psalm 23 at just about every funeral).

There can be a short formal prayer at the beginning or perhaps an ad-lib expression of grief prayer. Later I have a longer prayer expressing our needs and asking God to fulfil His gracious promises. This then leads into giving detailed thanks for the life of the deceased. I prefer going over the life of the person who died in the context of prayer rather than as a eulogy. For one thing it allows people to shed a discreet tear under cover of eyes being closed for prayer. It also means that God is being praised throughout for every stage of the deceased’s life rather than giving a long speech about how great our friend was and perhaps (and only perhaps) finishing with a “thanks be to God” for their life. Funerals are after all services to worship God not meetings of the mutual appreciation society. In going over the life of the person who died I mention basic facts and try to avoid value judgements while the listeners fill in the blanks with years’ worth of memories. I say only a little but they hear a lot more than is said. They have to work hard and the value of the exercise is largely in the strength of hearers’ imaginations and fluency of their memory recall. I punctuate the basic facts with silences to give them time to think and remember. I get my facts from the immediate family – an exercise which in itself brings comfort as they go over their loved one’s life. Near the end I do a final prayer saying to the effect that we commit our friend to God’s care and now we commit ourselves as family and friends to His care also.

I should perhaps give some thoughts on the subject of praying for the dead. Broadly speaking, Roman Catholics do it but Protestants don’t! However life is never as neat and simple as that. Roman Catholics argue from Scripture and Theology that death does not separate us from God nor others. Death is not a chasm but a thin veil. The “deceased” may no longer be running their lap on the track of the relay race of life but they are not far

away in the grandstand cheering us on. We have some sort of communion with the saints. Protestants cannot really disagree with what I have said so far, but they feel that the loved one, the “saint who has gone marching in” is in God’s presence and care to the extent that they do not need our help in the form of prayers. Catholics suggest that perhaps it is more that we need their help! Perhaps they can put in a word for us with God! In that case the Protestant might reply that they would rather deal direct with the Boss than indirectly through their colleague! Prayer of course is not always intercession – us praying for our late loved one or them for us - it can also be spiritual communion with God and others. So what, fellow Protestant, is wrong with a little communion with the saints triumphant as well as militant, invisible as well as visible? We do it at Communion do we not? Why not at other times?

Here is a selection of prayers which I use;-

(1) A Christmas Prayer

“Lord Jesus Christ, baby of Bethlehem and also King of Kings, the one true Living God, make Christmas an experience in our lives.

As you came down to earth – to a stable in Bethlehem - come down to us again, here and now.

As you transformed the shepherds and the wise men, transform us!

Turn our weakness into strength

“ Fear “ courage

“ Doubts “ trust

“ Despair “ hope

“ Restlessness peace

“ Sorrow “ joy

Come into our messy stables, cleanse us, renew us and revive us.”

(2) “Almighty/everlasting Heavenly Father we thank you for leading King David from grief at his son’s death, through the valley of the shadow of death, to the great declaration and personal discovery: “The Lord is my Shepherd”.

We thank you for the fact that you are the same yesterday, today and forever. We thank you that you are our Shepherd too: always have been,

always will be, already are our Shepherd. We thank you that when we feel like little lost sheep dying in the wilderness, you come to us as the Good Shepherd to bear us up in your Everlasting arms. You are indeed our refuge and strength, a very present help in all our troubles.

So we ask you to make Your presence more real to us than all our sorrow. And as we come together in a sense of common loss and personal grief make us to know Your strengthening support. Your compassion and comfort and Your peace which passes understanding. May our fears be dispelled, our loneliness eased, our hurt healed and our hope rekindled.”

(3) A Prayer before a journey to the cemetery or crematorium.

“Almighty God, be with us as we set off on this journey – this journey which is not only measured in miles but also in tears and memories and emotions. As we enter the valley of the shadow of death, be to us our Good Shepherd, as you have promised.

You who are our constant travelling companion through the journey of life, and the One who waits to give us welcome at our journey’s end, take us by the hand and draw us close to Your side so that we may be strong with Your strength and enabled to go on boldly.

Walk with us through the dark night until, hand in hand with You, we see the dawn break. Be with us each day, each step of the way, until we are reunited, face to face, at the dawn of the eternal day. Amen.”

(4) “Almighty/Everlasting Heavenly Father, who loves us with an Everlasting love, and who alone can turn the shadow of death into the morning; help us now to wait upon you; with reverent/submissive hearts.

In the silence of this hour speak to us of eternal things; and comfort us with the assurance that neither death nor life nor things present nor things to come, can separate us from Your love which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

(5) “Almighty/Everlasting God, you are indeed our refuge and strength – a very present help in trouble. You are the same yesterday, today and forever, and of Your love there is no end. We therefore come to you our Heavenly Father as children come to their earthly father, asking You to make Your presence more real to us than our sorrow. And as we come together in a sense of common loss and personal grief, make us to know Your strengthening support, Your compassion and comfort, and Your peace which passes all understanding. May our fears be dispelled, our loneliness eased, our hurt healed and our hope rekindled.

Heavenly Father, may our natural sorrow rest ever more surely in that deep and quiet confidence which knows that death is not the end but rather the completion of our lives.

Heavenly Father, help us to see death for what it really is:

the end of	Poverty	and the beginning of	Riches
-	Frustration		Fulfilment
-	Fear		Tranquility
-	Pain		Joy
-	Weakness		Strength.

(details of deceased)

eg. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks today for the life of _____ . We are grateful for all that _____ means to each one of us gathered here this morning. Today we are sad at the parting and we mourn in our loss but we also rejoice and come into Your house to give thanks. We give You thanks for _____’s life, their inspiration and example and we give You thanks for all the times we have had together; for all the shared experiences we have come through together, and for all the precious memories which we now treasure.

We look back in grateful and affectionate memory upon _____ life:-
 We give you thanks for _____ as a baby.....Born on _____ in _____
 We give you thanks for _____ as a little girl Growing up in _____
 A pupil of _____ school
 We give you thanks for _____ as a teenager Leaving school at the age
 of _____ and starting work as a _____ at _____

We give you thanks for _____ as a young woman, Miss. _____

Meeting and marrying _____ (a _____ from _____)

We thank You for blessing _____ and _____ with ___ years of marriage

till she was widowed in _____

We remember them living at _____ and _____ and _____ from

_____ till _____ and _____ for ___ years and at _____ for the past ___ years.

We especially give thanks for _____ as Mum to _____, _____, and _____;

Granny to 4 grandchildren: _____, _____, _____, and _____

Great Grandmother to _____ and _____

Heavenly Father, we each come today with our own memories and we each give you thanks in our own way for _____

We remember her.....

List: Hobbies –

Membership of organisations

Special claims to fame

Church memberships...”the woman of faith”

We remember _____ in youth and in age; in sickness and in health; in sorrows and in joys.

Lord God, her Creator, we give you thanks for creating the life of _____. Lord God, her Sustainer, we thank you for sustaining her all these ___ years

Lord make it not so much our grief as our joy to release her to you in whose merciful and tender hands we trust that she is safe and secure.”

(6) Pre-Committal Prayer:

“Let us take a moment in silence to reflect upon the life of _____ as we prepare to commit him to God, and to commit ourselves to the loving mercy of God (Pause)

We stand at the very gate of heaven.

We stand at the meeting place of heaven and earth.

We stand at the meeting place of time and eternity.

We do not understand the mystery of life...the mystery of death...nor the mystery of life beyond death...but we praise and thank you for the mystery of your love...your Presence...and your comfort.

You are God. You control the issues of life and death. You are the God of heaven and earth, of time and eternity. You are our God, and in you we trust.”

(7) Post Committal Prayer:

“O Lord our God, as we stand before the cold stark mystery of death, we turn to you, our Heavenly Father, and we look to your Son our Saviour. As we stand before this open grave, our minds go back a long time ago to an empty tomb in Palestine. We give you thanks for overcoming death for us. We thank you that in dying you conquered death, and in rising again you secured

eternal life for all who believe in you. Lord we believe in you, but help us when our faith is weak. We commit _____ into your safe keeping and we commit ourselves to you now. Be near to each one of us personally, and draw us close together as a family and friends until this becomes a time not just of sadness and tears but a time when we experience your presence, your peace and your power more real to us than ever before. We thank you that you, who led out the stars one by one and called them by their names, you are also near to bind up each and every broken heart.”

(8) FUNERAL OF A CRAFTSMAN

“As we gather round the coffin of a master craftsman, our thoughts go back to another master carpenter, to you, The Carpenter of Nazareth.

We remember O God how you came among us, and lived for thirty-three years. Up to the age of thirty, you worked as a village carpenter, You moulded and fashioned and made objects but you also fashioned the lives of people. You advertised your handiwork saying, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light”, and still today you strengthen and support your people in daily living.

So Lord Jesus we commit _____ into your loving and capable hands, and we commit ourselves to you today. We come to your workbench rough hewn with jagged edges and knots; twisted and buckled. O Master Joiner of Nazareth, mould us and shape us and work upon us in the coming days. Bend us, break us, mend us, mould us and make us. Help us feel the touch of the master's hand upon us in the days to come. Amen."

(9) "Lord we thank you for the precious gift of life

Thank you for the loved ones to share it with

Thank you for _____

He/she has fought the fight, run the race.

And we thank you that you have gone to prepare a place for him/her in the grandstand

And that although we lose sight of him/her in the vast crowd, we thank you that you have kept a place beside him/her for us.

Help us today in our grief that we may not stumble and fall."

(10) "Heavenly Father we thank you that you only love as the sun only shines

We thank you for loving _____

You smiled upon him before he was born.

In love you created him.

In love you sustained him.

And yet there are shadows in our lives.

You know that today we are entering the valley of the shadow of death.

Smile upon us we pray.

Grant to us the light of your guidance and shine upon us the warmth of your comfort."

(11) "Lord Jesus, we greet you risen from the dead, triumphant over death.

We bow before you in wonder, love and praise for you have risen like the morning sun after the dark night. With your Resurrection there dawned a new day for each of us and all our loved ones. You give us victory over

death the last enemy. You are the guarantee that _____ will rise to eternal life; and you assure us that we too shall rise from our time of

grief.

Like flowers opening to the sun we open our hearts and souls to you now. Sustain us by the light and warmth of your love so that we might blossom and flourish once again.”

(12) “What is man that you are mindful of him?

Yet you are!

You love us...you make us...you sustain us...you die to save us so who can despise us?

You the almighty judge of all the earth, you identify yourself with us, you call us your brothers and sisters.

You conquered life and death for us, endured the cross for us and left the tomb empty for us.

Our sins have been forgiven. There is life after death in every sense.

Praise be to you O God for your grace and mercy and steadfast love!.”

(13) “Oh Master of the wind and waves, we come to you now like the disciples came to you that night on the sea of Galilee. We turn to you in our distress and we bring to you all that is in our hearts and minds. You know our deepest thoughts and feelings, even if we cannot put them into clever words. You know the questions in our minds today: Why? Why John? Why now? Why in this way?

You know the mixture of feelings swirling around inside us...crashing in upon us like waves beating the shore. Oh Lord, we feel all at sea, caught in a storm, battered and bruised. We are out of our depth and awash with grief. Our eyes are blinded with grief and we are in danger of drowning in overwhelming emotions. O Lord our God, make haste to help us lest we perish! Almighty God, stand up in the midst of our storm today and once again command the wind and waves to be still! Give to your disciples once again the peace that only you can give...the peace which passes all understanding...peace even in the midst of life's storms.

The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

“Be still and know that He is God.”

Praise be to you O God who gives us the victory! Amen.”

6. READINGS.

Rather than use a Bible with multiple markers in various pages, I prefer to have with me a selection of readings typed out on sheets in a loose-leaf folder. This reduces the amount of page turning and the attendant risk of losing the place. This also opens up the possibility of making instant, on-the-spot, selections of passages - which can have certain advantages. It is not an excuse for not thinking of passages in advance! Loose leaf passages can be helpful on those occasions when you suddenly prefer another passage because of who is in the congregation; because the congregation is more or less grief stricken than you expected; because of new, last minute information; or simply because an inspiration comes into your mind even as you are conducting the funeral. No amount of preparation is as good as “doing it for real”. As you stand there, looking into the moist eyes of the bereaved, it is very likely that in the course of true communication you think of something which you might never have thought of in the remoteness of your study.

I also prefer a lot of little passages or quotes from the Bible rather than just one or two longer passages. This is partly because I don't want to miss passages out and partly because it allows the use of several different translations of the Bible in quick succession, but it is really because people have very short concentration spans. This is true generally and certainly when listening to public speaking and especially when people are up to their eyes in grief. So give them headlines rather than small print. It is also general wisdom in public speaking that repetition is the equivalent of bold type in writing, so give a selection of verses which hammer home the same point e.g. “God is our refuge and strength..” followed by “The Lord is my Shepherd..” and “They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength..”

I usually set the selection of passages in context by saying:-

“Let us turn to the Word of God and there find comfort for our souls.”
Having read a selection of short passages on the theme of God's support, I pause and say,

“So today we have two comforts: one is that God Himself promises to be with us and the other is the fact that God promises us resurrection from death and grief. Listen again to the Good News.” Then I read a selection of Resurrection passages.

More often than not I read what I announce as “a glimpse of the life to come from the last book of the Bible” i.e. a selection of verses from Revelation (7v 9-10, 13-17, 21v4, 22 v 1-5 to be precise).

When I say “read” I do not quite read. Reading can be very dry especially if it sounds read and people cannot see your face or eyes because you are looking down. I try to communicate using all aspects of normal communication (except grand gestures). I use facial expression, eye contact, passion in the voice etc. Since the passages are relatively short and very well known, I come close to reciting them. I come close to reciting but do not actually recite because you can look too much the “clever-clogs” or else everyone forgets the message while concentrating on whether or not the messenger will remember all his lines! The main thing is to speak from the heart rather than the page. We are not reading second hand material but sharing with others God’s Word and sharing something which has worked for us in our times of grief. I make no apology for reading energetically and in a spirited way the scriptures. Just because it is a funeral does not mean that the reading of the Bible must be mournful and depressing. On the contrary, because the people are feeling mournful and depressed they need to hear Good News spoken in an encouraging way (but not in an “over-the-top, too “chirpy” way either).

Here is a selection of readings which I would recommend:-

Plaint of the Sufferer Psalms: Psalm 6 v 2-7; Psalm 13 v 1-2; Psalm 69 v 1-3; Psalm 102 v 1-4,9-11. (I usually follow these by saying: “Then along came Jesus (Luke 4.18-19) quoting Isaiah (61 v 1-3) and Jesus comes to us today saying: (Isaiah 61 v 1-3)).

Generally there are two types of passages, both of which bring comfort in their own ways: (a) comforting passages reminding us that God is with us and for us, and (b) assurances of the hope of Resurrection.

(a) Comforting Passages:

Jesus said: “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted” (Matt.5.4 AV)

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” (Matt.11.28 RSV)

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the

midst of them” (Matt.18.20 RSV)

“He who comes to me I will not cast out.” (John 6.37 RSV)

“I am with you always, even to the close of the age.” (Matt.28.20)

“Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also

in

me. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14.27 AV)

-“Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46.10 AV)

-“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46.1 AV)

-“Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you.” (Ps.55.22 RSV)

-“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.” (Psalm 23.1,4 AV)

-“God said to Joshua: ‘Moses my servant is dead, but as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage: be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.’” (Joshua 1.5,9 RSV)

-“Fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand...for I the Lord your God hold your right hand: it is I who say to you ‘Fear not, I will help you.’” (Isaiah 41.10,13,14 RSV)

-“Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. You are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you. Fear not for I am with you.” (Isaiah 43.1-5 RSV)

-“If God is on our side who is against us? He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all; and with this gift how can He fail to lavish upon us all He has to give? It is Christ – Christ who died, and, more than that, was raised from the dead – who is at God’s right hand, and indeed pleads our cause. Then what can separate us from the love of Christ? In spite of all, overwhelming victory is ours through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or in the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – NOTHING in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8.35-39 NEB)

“The Lord is my shepherd;
 I have everything I need.
 He lets me rest in fields of green grass
 And leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
 He gives me new strength.
 He guides me in the right paths,
 As He has promised.
 Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
 I will not be afraid, Lord,
 For you are with me.
 Your shepherd’s rod and staff protect me.
 You prepare a banquet for me,
 Where all my enemies can see me;
 You welcome me as an honoured guest
 And fill my cup to the brim.
 I know that your goodness and love will
 Be with me all my life;
 And your house will be my home as long as I live.”-(Psalm 23 GN.)

“Do not be worried and upset,’ Jesus told them. ‘Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am. You know the way that leads to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?’ Jesus answered him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.’”

(John 14 v 1-7 G.N.)

-“Comfort, Comfort my people, says your God...The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together...All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field...The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it...Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when He blows upon them, and they wither....Why do you say ...”My way is hid from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God”?...Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the Everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary and young men

shall fall exhausted; but they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40 1,5-7,24,27-31RSV)

-“The eternal God is your refuge; and underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Deut.33.27 RSV)

-“God says: ‘Call to me when trouble comes; I will save you, and you will praise me.’” (Psalm 50.15 GN)

-“The Lord is my light and my salvation. In times of trouble He will shelter me; He will keep me safe in His Temple and make me secure on a high rock.” (Psalm 27.1,5 GN)

-“The Lord is near to all who call upon Him.” (Psalm 145.18 GN)

-“The Lord will guide you continually.” (Isaiah 58.11 RSV)

God said to Paul regarding his “thorn in the flesh” illness:

“My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.”

And Paul confirmed this when he admitted:

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” (2Cor.12.9,10 GN)

-“The Lord is near to those who are discouraged;

He saves those who have lost all hope.

The Lord will save His people;

Those who go to Him for protection will be spared.” (Psalm 34.18,22 GN)

-“Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Luke 11.9 GN)

-“Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom.10.13 GN)

-“God keeps His promise, and He will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, He will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.”

(ICor.10.13 GN)

-“Cast all your anxieties upon Him, for He cares for you.” (1Peter 5.7 RSV)

-God has said, “I will never fail you nor forsake you” (Heb.13.5 RSV)

-“Don’t think that the Lord is too weak to save you or too deaf to hear your call for help (Isa.59.1 GN)

-“I lift up my eyes to the mountains;

Where will my help come from?

My help will come from the Lord who made Heaven and Earth.

He will not let you fall;

Your protector is always awake.

The Lord will guard you; He is by your side to protect you.

The sun will not hurt you during the day, nor the moon during the night.

The Lord will protect you from all danger;

He will keep you safe...now and forever. (Psalm 121 GN)

-“Jesus said: “I am the Good Shepherd.

I am the Good Shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep....I am the good shepherd....I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them....My sheep listen to my voice;....I know them and they follow me.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never die. No one can snatch them away from me.” (John10.11,14-15,27-28GN)

-“Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30.5GN)

-“Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm)

-“God says: “I will never fail you nor forsake you.” (Heb.13.5RSV)

-“My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.” (2Cor.12.9GN)

-“For God alone my soul waits in silence, from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation.” (Psalm 62.1-2a RSV)

-“As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God.

I thirst for you, the living God;...Day and night I cry, and tears are my only food;...Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise Him, my saviour and my God.” (Psalm

42.1-3,5GN)

(b) Resurrection Passages.

-“Those of our people who have died will live again!

Their bodies will come back to life.

All those sleeping in their graves

Will wake up and sing for joy.

As the sparkling dew refreshes the earth,

So the Lord will revive those who have long been dead.” (Isaiah 26.19GN)

-Jesus said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, He who believes has eternal life (John 6.47RSV)

-Jesus said: “Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14.19RSV)

-Jesus said: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23.43RSV)

-Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11.25GN)..or..

-Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11.25RSV)

-“Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Because of His great mercy He gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for His people. He keeps them for you in Heaven where they cannot decay or soil or fade away.” (1Pet.1.3-4GN)
 Paul said: “All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of His Resurrection, to share in His sufferings and become like Him in his death in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life.” (Phil.3.10-11GN)
 -“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1Cor.15.14,17-22 RSV)

It is important not to read for too long, for funerals are not times for many words. Grieving people cannot take it all in. There are advantages and disadvantages in reading from any of the various Bible translations or paraphrases. The King James Version is very popular with many people, especially those elderly people who were brought up on it from childhood learning whole passages by heart. It does also have a unique literary quality. Psalm 23 or Isaiah 40 and other famous passages are famous in this version and they can sound much the poorer for being reduced from the poetic heights to the more prosaic everyday speech of some modern translations. On the other hand some Authorised Version passages, outwith the classic passages, sound very alien to our ears today. What modern translations lose in poetry they gain in familiar, up to date vocabulary, idioms and phraseology. People today increasingly are brought up with little or no knowledge of the King James Version nor indeed any version of the Bible!

Furthermore, since the passages read at a funeral have to be understood on one hearing and not studied at leisure, I prefer to use the Good News Bible. This is not to rule out using other translations nor even a mixture of translations. Sometimes I get specific requests for the A.V. and even specific passages from it. There is no problem with this at face value. However I suspect that it sometimes carries with it the hidden agenda of kicking back at me for using modern translations in Church every Sunday.

(They see “their” funeral as a rare opportunity to get me to read from the “proper Bible”) This however is another matter and does not really concern us here.

The reading of Scripture is a very important part of a funeral, arguably the core function of the whole service. What is happening is that a major event in people’s lives has occurred. They are significantly affected and look beyond themselves for help in time of crisis. This world which is so full of all kinds of alluring voices beckoning us to listen to their wisdoms and so find life in all its fullness suddenly goes speechless. All the “oracles” suddenly have nothing to say and wisely say nothing. At times like these people turn to God and seek a word from the Lord as they have done over the centuries and around the world. The one who ministers in God’s name is expected to convey God’s word through the reading of Holy Scripture. There is a valid time and place within a funeral for creative and original inputs but when the storms of life are raging people like to cling to the familiar, sure and steadfast anchors of the soul namely the promises of God as expressed in certain famous passages of Scripture.

7. POEMS.

Poetry can be very helpful at funerals for poems succinctly and eloquently express how we feel. Down through the ages and universally across cultures poetry has articulated the deepest human emotions and the profoundest insights.

The growing trend of non-religious funerals seems to be resulting in a growing use of poetry. I guess that poetry is replacing Scripture. Even in religious funerals poems are sometimes quoted. This may not be the golden age of poetry but poems are still vehicles to express our feelings and philosophies.

Some poems are read badly and some poems are simply bad! (You may remember the classic put-down of a minister: a woman said to him – “you read your prayers; you read them badly; and they were not worth reading!) Sometimes they are sentimental claptrap and sometimes they are theologically heretical; but sometimes they reach the troubled soul and lift the chin from the chest and raise the spirit, renewing vision and hope.

The Psalms in the Old Testament are of course poetry, three thousand year old poetry! True wisdom is surely timeless and their popularity after such a vast number of years is testimony to the fact that some human experiences, like grief, are universal. Psalm 23 is certainly a leading contender for “top of the pops” when it comes to funerals! Even cultures which know almost nothing about shepherding can relate to this Psalm. This particular Psalm is one case when there is much to be said for using either the modern Good News version or the traditional King James version. Compare the relative merits of both:-

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 He leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 For His name's sake.
 Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
 ...death, I will fear no evil:
 For Thou art with me;
 Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence
 of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
 of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
 ever.
 (A.V.)

The Lord is my shepherd;
 ...I have everything I need.
 He lets me rest in fields of green grass
 ...and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
 He gives me new strength.
 He guides me in the right paths,
 ...as He has promised.
 Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
 I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me.
 Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

You prepare a banquet for me,
 where all my enemies can see me;
 you welcome me as an honoured guest
 and fill my cup to the brim.
 I know that your goodness and love will
 be with me all my life;
 and your house will be my home as long as I live.
 (G.N.)

It is amazing how many ways you can rewrite Psalm 23. For example it can be rewritten in terms of the “Pilot Psalm”; the “Lifeboat Psalm” and the “Driver Psalm”.

“The Lord is my Pilot; I shall not drift.
 He lighteth me across the dark waters:
 He steereth me in deep channels.
 He keepeth my log:
 He guideth me by the star of holiness
 For His name’s sake.
 Yea though I sail mid the thunders and tempests of life,
 I will dread no danger: for Thou art near me;
 Thy love and Thy care they shelter me.
 Thou preparest a harbour before me in the homeland of eternity:
 Thou anointest the waves with oil; my ship rideth calmly.
 Surely sunlight and starlight shall favour me on the voyage I take:
 And I will rest in the port of my God for ever.”
 (“The Pilot Psalm” courtesy of the Royal National Mission to Deep
 Sea Fishermen)

It is not difficult to see how, with a little modification, the psalm can apply to various types of seafarers e.g. “The Lord is my Captain..Skipper..Helmsman ..Fisherman” etc. Still on a nautical theme, you could use the following version of Psalm 23 for the funeral of a lifeboatman. (I actually wrote it for the naming ceremony of a brand new lifeboat in Dunbar).

“The Lord is my lifeboat, I shall not drown.
 He rescues me from the wild seas:
 He bears me home to the safe haven.
 He restores my soul: and sets my feet upon a firm rock

For His name's sake.
 Even though I sail through the storms and gales of the deep ocean,
 I will fear no harm:
 For you are with me; your chart and compass steer me.
 You plot the way home for me through the raging waves:
 You calm my trembling heart; my joy runs over.
 Truly sacrificial love protects me all the days of my life.
 And I will rest in the harbour of the Lord for ever."

By extension the psalm can be further modified as for example: "The Lord is my Driver...Bus Driver, Lorry Driver, Train Driver, Taxi Driver" etc.

"The Lord is my Driver, I shall not crash.
 He drives me along the dark roads;
 He steers me in safe ways.
 He keeps my log.
 He leads me in the paths of goodness for His name's sake.
 Yea though I drive through the thunders and storms of life
 I will fear no danger, for you are with me.
 Your love and your care, they protect me.
 You prepare a homecoming for me in the homeland of eternity.
 You bless me on my way; my lorry rides smoothly.
 Surely sunlight and starlight shall favour me on the journey I make,
 And I shall rest in the depot of my God for ever."

As you can imagine, I wrote this for the funeral of a long distance lorry driver. The word "depot" in the last line could be changed to "terminus" or "garage" or "taxi rank" depending on the circumstances.

More recently I rewrote Psalm 23 for a golfer's funeral: "The Golfer's Psalm"

"The Lord is my caddie and coach, I shall not bogey.
 He accompanies me throughout the golf course;
 He prompts me with good advice.
 He marks my scorecard.
 He points me to the right pin placements for His name's sake.
 Yea though I hook and shank through the fairways and rough
 I will fear no bunkers, for you are with me.
 Your love and your care comfort me.
 You prepare a reception for me in the 19th. hole heavenly clubhouse.
 You bless me on my course; my trolley runs smoothly.

Surely birdies and eagles will help me in the score I make
And I shall rest in the clubhouse of my God for ever. Amen.

Plaint of the Sufferer Psalms are also tremendous poetry for funerals. See examples of these under the heading "Prayer".

Just as the Psalms are ancient poems, prayers and hymns all rolled into one, so the more modern hymnbooks also provide us with material which is simultaneously song, prayer and poetry. For example:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee..

Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high;
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide,
O receive my soul at last!

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, ah! Leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me!
All my trust on Thee is stay'd,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of Thy wing!

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord,
With me abide:.....
...I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness:
Where is death's sting, where, grave, thy victory?

I triumph still if thou abide with me.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
 I rest my weary soul in thee:....
 ...O Cross that liftest up my head,
 I dare not ask to fly from thee:
 I lay in dust life's glory dead,
 And from the ground there blossoms red
 Life that shall endless be.

Lord of all being, throned afar,
 Thy glory flames from sun and star;
 Centre and soul of every sphere,
 Yet to each loving heart how near!

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
 Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
 Leave to thy God to order and provide;
 In every change he faithful will remain.
 Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
 Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul; thy god doth undertake
 To guide the future as He has the past.
 Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
 All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
 Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
 His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Be still, my soul; the hour is hastening on
 When we shall be forever with the Lord,
 When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
 Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
 Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
 All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

In heavenly love abiding,
 No change my heart shall fear;
 And safe is such confiding,
 For nothing changes here.
 The storm may roar without me,
 My heart may low be laid;
 But God is round about me,
 And can I be dismayed?

Wherever he may guide me,
 No want shall turn me back;
 My shepherd is beside me,
 And nothing can I lack.
 His wisdom ever waketh,
 His sight is never dim;
 He knows the way he taketh,
 And I will walk with him.

My faith looks up to Thee,
 Thou Lamb of Calvary,
 Saviour divine!
 Now hear me while I pray,
 Take all my guilt away,
 O let me from this day
 Be wholly Thine!

While life's dark maze I tread,
 And griefs around me spread,
 Be Thou my guide;
 Bid darkness turn to day,
 Wipe sorrow's tears away,
 Nor let me ever stray
 From Thee aside.

When ends life's transient dream,
 When death's cold, sullen stream
 Shall o'er me roll;

Blest Saviour, then in love,
 Fear and distrust remove;
 O bear me safe above,
 A ransomed soul!

Jesus, Saviour, pilot me
 Over life's tempestuous sea;
 Unknown waves before me roll,
 Hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
 Chart and compass come from thee;
 Jesus, Saviour, pilot me.

When at last I near the shore,
 And the fearful breakers roar
 'Twixt me and the peaceful rest,
 Then, while leaning on thy breast,
 May I hear thee say to me,
 "Fear not, I will pilot thee."

O God, our help in ages past,
 Our hope for years to come,
 Our shelter from the stormy blast,
 And our eternal home:

Beneath the shadow of Thy throne
 Thy saints have dwelt secure;
 Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
 And our defence is sure.

O God, our help in ages past
 Our hope for years to come;
 Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
 And our eternal home!

One poem which in my opinion shows both the best and worst of poetry is "DEATH" by Canon Scott Holland. I do use it and it is very popular, but I also omit certain lines. The parts I omit are marked by brackets [].

Death is nothing at all
 I have only slipped away into the next room.
 I am I and you are you.
 Whatever we were to each other, that we still are.
 Call me by my old familiar name,
 [Speak to me in the easy way which you always used,
 Put no difference into your tone,]
 Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow,
 Laugh as we always laughed
 At the little jokes we enjoyed together.
 [Play,] smile, think of me, [pray for me,]
 Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.
 Let it be spoken without effort,
 Without the ghost of a shadow on it.
 [Life means all it ever meant,
 It is the same as it ever was,
 There is absolutely unbroken continuity.
 What is this death, but a negligible accident,]
 Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?
 I am waiting for you for an interval, some where very near,
 [Just around the corner;
 All is well.]

Some people may hesitate to quote only selected parts of a poem but I do not personally see any difficulty with that. We sometimes cut verses in hymns and we only read selected verses of Scripture. I suppose it would start to become an issue if the parts you selected gave a very different and distorted message from that of the whole poem.

Another poem which has some merit but which, on the whole, is perhaps best left on the shelf is “Love is Love’s Own Reward”. The author is unknown.

“I’ll lend you for a little while a child of mine,” God said.
 “For you to cherish while he lives
 and mourn for when he’s dead.
 It may be six or seven years or only two or three,
 But will you, till I call him home, look after him for me?

He'll bring his love to gladden you
 and should his stay be brief,
 you'll have a host of memories as solace
 for your grief.
 I cannot promise he will stay
 Since all from earth return,
 But there are lessons taught below
 I want this child to learn.
 I've looked the wide world over in my search
 For teachers true,
 And from the throng that crowds life's land
 At last I've chosen you.
 Now will you give him all your love
 Nor think your labour vain,
 And turn against me when I come
 To take him back again."

One poem which I wholeheartedly endorse is the one written by a Stirling coalminer, Billy Morton , just before his own death in 1990. You can imagine the powerful effect which it had when I read it out at his own funeral.

There is no night
 Without a dawning;
 No winter without a spring.
 And beyond death's dark horizon
 Our hearts once more will sing;
 For those who leave us for a while
 Have only gone away
 Out of a restless, careworn world
 Into a brighter day;
 Where there will be no partings
 And time is not counted by years
 Where there are no trials or troubles
 No worries, no cares, no tears.

You can also imagine the impact at the funeral when I read out a poem especially written for the occasion by a child, thirteen year old Leanne

Brown from Edmonton, Canada. She wrote it for her uncle Sam Neilson when she heard that he was seriously ill. As she completed the last two lines the telephone rang to tell her that her uncle Sam had just died in Stirling.

Uncle Sam had a heart of gold.
The chauffeur of the family
In charge of the road.

This problem is familiar
Especially to me.
Lung cancer has again
Touched my family.

My grandpa was first
Which was so hard to bear.
Now it's uncle Sam
Life seems so unfair.

The battle is rough
But he's hanging on
It's an awful tough fight
God please help him win.

He's known as the "Rock"
To the Neilson clan
Which proves he's strong
My dear uncle Sam.

The rock has weakened
As simple as that.
The chauffeur's retired
He's hung up his hat.

Written with love
From your niece Leanne
God bless you and keep you
My dear uncle Sam.

One source of funeral poems is sympathy cards or other little cards. For example....

The Weaver.

Man's life is laid in a loom of time
To a pattern he does not see
While the weaver works and the shuttles fly
Till the end of eternity

Some shuttles are filled with silver thread
And some with threads of gold
While often but the darker hue
Is all that they may hold

But the weaver watches with skilful eye
Each shuttle fly to and fro
And sees the pattern so deftly wrought
As the loom works sure and slow

God surely planned that pattern
Each thread – the dark and the fair
Was chosen by his Master skill
And placed in the web with care

He only knows the beauty
And guides the shuttles which hold
The threads so unattractive
As well as the threads of gold

Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the pattern
And explain the reason why

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skilful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern he has planned

(Unknown)

Here is another version of the same:

The Weaver.

My life is but a weaving
 Between my Lord and me;
 I may not choose the colours,
 He knows what they should be;
 For He can view the pattern
 Upon the upper side,
 While I can see it only
 On this side, the under side.

Sometimes He weaveth sorrow,
 Which seems strange to me;
 But I will trust His judgement,
 And work as faithfully;
 'Tis He who fills the shuttle,
 He knows just what is best,
 So I shall weave in earnest
 And leave with Him the rest.

Not till the loom is silent
 And the shuttles cease to fly
 Shall God unroll the canvas
 And explain the reason why-
 The dark threads are as needful
 In the weaver's skilful hand
 As the threads of gold and silver
 In the pattern He has planned.

(Anonymous)

Here is a further selection of some good funeral poems.

THE THOROUGHBRED.

We come into this life all naked and bare.

We go through this life with worry and care,
 We go from this life, we know not where,
 But if you are a thoroughbred here,
 You will be a thoroughbred there.

Anonymous

BABY SLEEPS.

The baby wept;
 The mother took it from the nurse's arms
 And hushed its fears, and soothed its vain alarms,
 And baby slept.

Again it weeps,
 And God doth take it from the mother's arms,
 From present griefs, and future unknown harms,
 And baby sleeps.

Samuel Hinds

WELL DONE.

Servant of God, well done!
 Rest from thy loved employ:
 The battle fought, the victory won,
 Enter thy Master's joy.
 The pains of death are past,
 Labour and sorrow cease,
 And Life's long warfare closed at last,
 Thy soul is found in peace.

James Montgomery

SEEDS.

We drop a seed into the ground,

A tiny, shapeless thing, shrivelled and dry,
 And, in the fullness of its time, is seen
 A form of peerless beauty, robed and crowned
 Beyond the pride of any earthly queen,
 Instinct with loveliness, and sweet and rare,
 The perfect emblem of its Maker's care.

This from a shrivelled seed? –
 -Then may man hope indeed!

For man is but the seed of what he shall be,
 When, in the fullness of his perfecting,
 He drops the husk and cleaves his upward way,
 Through earth's retardings and the clinging clay,
 Into the sunshine of God's perfect day.
 No fetters then! No bonds of time or space!
 But powers as ample as the boundless grace
 That suffered man, and death, and yet in tenderness,
 Set wide the door, and passed Himself before-
 As He had promised – to prepare a place.

We know not what we shall be –only this –
 That we shall be made like Him – as He is.

John Oxenham

GOD.

There is an eye that never sleeps
 Beneath the wing of night;
 There is an ear that never shuts
 When sinks the beams of light.

There is an arm that never tires
 When human strength gives way;
 There is a love that never fails
 When earthly loves decay.

That Eye unseen o'er watcheth all;

That Arm upholds the sky;
 That Ear doth hear the sparrows call;
 That Love is ever nigh.

James CowdenWallace

WHEN SORROW COMES.

When sorrow comes, as come it must,
 In God a man must put his trust.
 There is no power in mortal speech
 The anguish of his soul to reach,
 No voice, however sweet and low,
 Can comfort him or ease the blow.

He cannot from his fellow men
 Take strength that will sustain him then.
 With all that kindly hands will do,
 And all that love may offer, too,
 He must believe throughout the test
 That God has willed it for the best.

We who would be his friends are dumb;
 Words from our lips but feebly come;
 We feel, as we extend our hands,
 That one Power only understands
 And truly knows the reason why
 So beautiful a soul must die.

We realize how helpless then
 Are all the gifts of mortal men.
 No words which we have power to say
 Can take the sting of grief away –
 That Power which marks the sparrow's fall
 Must comfort and sustain us all.

When sorrow comes, as come it must,
 In God a man must place his trust.
 With all the wealth which he may own,

He cannot meet the test alone,
 And only he may stand serene
 Who has a faith on which to lean.

Edgar A. Guest

WHY SHOULD WE WEEP FOR THOSE WHO DIE.

Why should we weep for those who die?
 They fall – their dust returns to dust;
 Their souls shall live eternally
 Within the mansions of the just.

They die to live – they sink to rise,
 They leave this wretched mortal shore;
 But brighter suns and bluer skies
 Shall smile on them for evermore.

Why should we sorrow for the dead?
 Our life on earth is but a span;
 They tread the path that all must tread,
 They die the common death of man....

....The fairest flower on earth must fade,
 The brightest hopes on earth must die:
 Why should we mourn that man was made
 To droop on earth, but dwell on high?

The soul, th' eternal soul, must reign
 In words devoid of pain and strife;
 Then why should mortal man complain
 Of death, which leads to happier life?

Charles Tennyson-Turner

From IN MEMORIAM.

I hold it true, whate'er befall;

I feel it when I sorrow most;
 'Tis better to have loved and lost
 Than never to have loved at all.

Alfred Tennyson

From FAITH.

My faith looks up to Thee,
 Thou Lamb of Calvary,
 Saviour divine!
 Now hear me while I pray,
 Take all my guilt away,
 O let me from this day
 Be wholly Thine!

While life's dark maze I tread,
 And griefs around me spread,
 Be Thou my guide;
 Bid darkness turn to day,
 Wipe sorrow's tears away,
 Nor let me ever stray
 From Thee aside.

When ends life's transient dream,
 When death's cold, sullen, stream
 Shall o'er me roll;
 Blest Saviour, then in love,
 Fear and distrust remove;
 O bear me safe above,
 A ransomed soul!

Ray Palmer

From JESUS, SAVIOUR, PILOT ME.

Jesus, Saviour, pilot me

Over life's tempestuous sea;
 Unknown waves before me roll,
 Hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
 Chart and compass come from thee;
 Jesus, Saviour, pilot me.

When at last I near the shore,
 And the fearful breakers roar
 'Twixt me and the peaceful rest,
 Then, while leaning on thy breast,
 May I hear thee say to me,
 "Fear not, I will pilot thee."

From NOW THE LABOURER'S TASK IS O'ER.

...."Earth to earth, and dust to dust,"
 Calmly now the words we say;
 Left behind, we wait in trust
 For the resurrection day.
 Father, in Thy gracious keeping
 Leave we now Thy servant sleeping.

8. PARABLES.

God can communicate through the familiar (or not so familiar) passages of Holy Scripture but He also speaks His Word to us through His ministers. There is a time and place within a funeral for the original, creative, new words of the human agent through which God can whisper comfort to our souls.

Jesus in His wisdom used parables a lot because they are very powerful. They convey a lot in only a few words. Funerals are not really times for many words and "a picture paints a thousand words" as they say, so use verbal pictures. People quickly forget prosaic, propositional statements but they remember a picture which they can take away and chew over at their leisure. Thus Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd" rather than simply "I care for you". The more I conduct funerals the more I am convinced that

the way we cope with death is determined very much by the mental picture we have of death. We all have a picture, sometimes very consciously, sometimes it has to be dug up from the sub-conscious but either way we live and die by our pictures. A common picture is that life and death is like walking along a cliff edge till you fall over the cliff edge into oblivion! There is not much comfort in this all too common understanding. However death looks and feels a whole lot different if we picture it as, for example, the cocoon phase between being caterpillars tied to this earth and butterflies free to range the heavens!

While people in grief cling to familiar comforts such as Psalm 23 they do also appreciate novel and creative touches also. The familiar certainties should be the cake and the new, original material more the icing, but there is a place for the latter alongside the former. People like to hear about the deceased and their unique life and they like parables about their loved one as well as parables about God. Thus funerals of shepherds follow the shepherding metaphor and funerals of fishermen follow a nautical theme. Obviously some people's lives and work lend themselves more than others to parable making. However I never cease to be amazed at how there can be a parable in every single case. The parable may arise out of their work, their hobbies, the way they died, the season of the year in which they died, something they used to say or do etc.

One of the reasons why I am writing this book (and its predecessor) is because I found that people would sometimes ask me for a copy of the parable which had been so personal and applicable to their loved one.

This book is in fact a sequel to my earlier book, entitled "Sunshine Through Shadows" which consists entirely of a collection of funeral parables. I shall include a few new parables here as examples of what I mean, but for a greater variety of parables please see that book.

"HOME FROM HOME"

The last time I saw Davina she was in the Bayswell Hospital She was not well at the time but she was quite happy with the care and attention she was receiving. I remember commenting about her room and how beautiful it was – just like "home from home"! She pointed out that it was indeed more

of “a home from home” than I was thinking! For example, the lovely big reclining chair which she was sitting in was in fact her own chair brought into the hospital and the pictures on the wall were in fact her own pictures also. (Obviously hospitals are not what they used to be)! There was carpet on the floor and she was sitting watching her own portable television which had also been brought from home! No one wants to go into hospital, but now that she was there Davina was determined to make the most of it!

Having exchanged her room in Waverley Terrace for a room in Bayswell Hospital...Davina has now exchanged her hospital room for yet another room – another room in a place where people are again hesitant to go, but well cared for when they do go: Jesus said:

“In my Father’s house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for Davina Bruce And if I go and prepare a place for Davina I will come back and take her to myself so that where I am, Davina may be also.”

KEEPING APPOINTMENTS.

One thing about George which you may not all know is that he faithfully kept a diary. Entries in it included things like: “Planted barley today”...followed by “Stephanie got married” (yes, in the same succinct, factual way of recording things!) I wonder what George would put in his diary for this week? Perhaps something like: “Died and went to Heaven”.

We all have diaries and appointments to keep. Sometimes life seems too full of appointments! Funerals always remind us that we each have an appointment with the King of Glory...one we must keep...one which we cannot cancel nor postpone! Listen to this poem written by a fellow student with me (and now a minister). It is based on Hebrews 9 v 27 “It is appointed unto men once to die”:

“APPOINTMENTS”

“Perhaps you keep a diary
To know what’s coming next
Who you’re greeting, when you’re meeting
Life has to be compressed

Each minute is important
 A day's worth must be stressed
 So many schemes, so many dreams
 A diary or a mess.

“It is appointed unto men once to die.”

But, reflect upon a graveyard
 And try this simple test
 One date alone's important and that's by His appointment
 The rest is but the rest.”

Rev. John Purves

We are standing here in Rathen Cemetery. It has not been a cemetery for very long. Before that it was a farm – George's farm! George used to regularly plough this very field! It was a regular appointment. The seasons rolled on relentlessly and in due course, at the appointed time, George ploughed and George harvested. Today we reflect upon the fact that over seventy years ago God planted a seed in George's mother's womb and now on time, at the appointed time, God reaps His harvest.

FACETS OF THE DIAMOND.

Funerals are amazing things in many ways! For one thing, your past catches you up! Just look around at all the people here today at Bill's funeral or should I say Will's or Billy's funeral! Some of you called him one name, some of you another...which illustrates the point that the people who gather for a funeral are many and varied but all united by a common grief. Each funeral constituency is a unique combination of people. We shall never again all sit together in this particular combination!

Although we are here now because we each knew Bill..Will..Billy..we don't all know each other. This is true in any funeral, but perhaps more true today than in most cases.

William Jones is like a diamond with many facets. He is a gem of a man and has always had many aspects to his character. He has always had a rich life with many interests and activities. None of us knew all the facets of the diamond which was Bill, but each one of us knew one or two.

Only one person knew every facet of Bill's character – and that is God! Indeed it was God the Creator who gave us the gem himself. God sustained him all these years; God died on the Cross for him and God loved him. Now, today, God gathers another jewel for His crown.

When we reflect on Bill's life, five facets seem to stand out and all of them are inter-connected:

- He was a soldier in the army during the Second World War.
- He was a shopkeeper in the Main Street.
- He was an active citizen involved with Rotary, the Golf Club and Christian Aid.
- He was a very committed Church member serving as Beadle, Elder, Lay Preacher and Sunday School teacher.
- He was a family man, married 52 years to Margaret, father of Arnold and Stephanie and grandfather to five children.

What connects all five facets is his relationship with God and his deep faith. His discipleship of Jesus made Bill, Bill. It motivated and influenced all that he was and did as a soldier, shopkeeper, citizen, Churchman, and family man.

So, in the midst of grief we rejoice to know that God knows Bill and that Bill knows God (and today Bill knows God better than ever as he meets Him face to face)!

WATER BUGS AND DRAGONFLIES.

Many water bugs lived in a pond. They were very happy except for one thing – every so often one of the water bugs would climb up the water leaves and never be seen again. They sorely missed their friends.

Eventually the water bugs held a special meeting which came to the decision that whichever one of them was the next to disappear, they would

come back and explain what was happening. They all faithfully promised to do this.

Not long afterwards, one of the water bugs got the urge to climb up the water leaves. He climbed slowly up till he broke through the surface of the water. Then, something amazing happened! His skin began to crack open and he began to grow wings! In a very short space of time, he became a dragonfly with wings! He hardly recognised himself!

He enjoyed flying around like a test pilot finding out the full range of his flying skills, when suddenly, he remembered his promise. So he flew down to go back into the pond. It was then that he got his second big shock of the day. Every time he dived down to the water, he just bounced off the surface! Try as he may, he just could not penetrate beneath the surface! Eventually, after banging his head several times, he had to give up, and he came to the conclusion that he would just have to wait till his friends climbed the water leaves and joined him as fellow dragonflies. However the good news was that there was life beyond the pond – a very wonderful life indeed!

(From “Pathways of Belief” a children’s T.V. programme)

MOTOR RACING.

Kate liked to watch motor racing on television, both racing cars and motorcycles. In earlier years, she rode as pillion passenger on John’s motorbike; in more recent years she contained her enthusiasm to merely spectating and cheering on her son Shaun on his motorbike. As a mother, she was of course protective, and worried about the dangers to Shaun’s health but as an enthusiast she leant into every corner and chicane with him (in spirit). In other words she liked the thrills but worried about the spills!

Since the whole family is interested in motorbikes, I want to share with you a parable or picture based on Hebrews 12 v 1,2....but translated into motorcycling terms.

Life is like a motorcycle race! Sometimes it feels that hectic, doesn’t it? And by the time it is finished it seems to have just flown by all too quickly!

Picture the scene – motorcycles are racing round the track...the grandstand is crowded with eagerly cheering people. Kate is called in for a pit-stop; her engine has run out of steam...for her the race is all over. So, she goes up into the grandstand and cheers us on as we continue speeding on our way, cheering lest we give up or fall or fail.

Hebrews 12.1,2 (paraphrased) says: “Since we are surrounded by so great a grandstand of loved ones who have gone before us, let us race the race which is set before us, looking to Jesus on whom our faith depends from beginning to end.”

Kate did not just ride pillion passenger with husband John; Kate also rode pillion passenger with her God, Jesus. And it is into His tender embrace that we commit Kate today. And it is to Him that we ourselves turn for comfort and strength today.

THE HOME-MAKER.

May was above all a family woman and a home-maker. She just loved to have the immediate or even the extended family round to the house - either regularly on a Saturday or on special occasions like Christmas. She loved to bake scones for them and to cook home-made broth.

So we give thanks to God today for May the family woman: wife to Bill for fifty five years; mum to Annie and Alex.; Nana to Stuart and Alison and Great Grandma to Laura, Lisa and Karen.

May started work in the late 1930's, as a young teenager, in domestic service. She worked in several homes of the “well to do” as a maid, cleaning and cooking. When May got married to Bill and started a family she brought all her professional skills to bear on her home-making.

In all this, May shares a lot in common with God Himself for the Bible tells us that God too is a family God and a home-maker God!

God, the Creator of the world, created May and gave her a life, a home and a family, and in turn May created a home for us.

God, the Sustainer of the world, provided, protected, comforted, challenged, guided and led May who in turn did all these things for us.

God, the great Fixer of things when they go wrong, advised, counselled and comforted May, and in turn May advised, counselled and comforted us.

And God is still, today, home making:

“I go to prepare a place for May, and when I go and prepare a place for May, I will come again and will take May to myself, that where I am, May be also.” (John 14.2-3RSV).

Today, May is caught up into the biggest family of them all. Today, May has been invited round to God’s place to join with the rest of God’s extended family and to enjoy His hospitality:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..” (Rev.7.9RSV)

What a wonderful picture of what is happening today!

THE FOUR SEASONS.

We stand today at the grave of Patricia. This is probably not the first time we have come to Fyvie cemetery and this is probably not the last time either! We find ourselves coming back again and again, season after season. Has it ever struck you how each season is very appropriate, in its own way, to what we are doing today?

When we come here in the Spring, everything in the cemetery seems to cry out: “Resurrection!” as we see buds blossoming, grass growing again and trees being re-clothed in their new leaves.

When we come in the Summer, the cemetery loses some of its coldness, we see life in full bloom, and when the distant sun caresses our face, we can believe a little easier in the Heavenly Father who gently soothes our heartaches.

When we come here in the Autumn, the cemetery is a mass of yellow, gold and brown and the falling leaves seem to be a picture of passing loved ones who have come to the end of their time..falling from their perches..gently wafted by the breeze down to their last resting place.

But here we are today, in the dead of winter, laying to rest Patricia. The outlook can seem very cold, stark, gloomy and depressing...the very dead of winter right enough! Winter is the season which best matches our grief and sadness. But winter can also give us encouragement – for it is merely the fallow period of inactivity awaiting the renewed, resurrected life of the spring. Winter also has its own sparkling beauty when everything in the cemetery is coated in a layer of pristine, pure white snow...reminding us of the fact that God can “wash us whiter than snow” as Psalm 51 says. And it is into the merciful and tender hands of Almighty God that we commit Patricia today. We do so in confidence, knowing that the same God who can turn the dead of winter into spring, re-clothing the bare trees, is the same God who can cause the dying sun to rise again in the morning, is the same God who can make Patricia rise again to eternal life and is the same God who can help each one of us to rise again from the valley of the shadow of death and grief.

PEOPLE HAVE A BIG SAY ON WHEN THEY DIE.

I am increasingly of the opinion that people have a big say on when they die! I have seen it so often:-

EG. Mrs Houghton held on till her son (Alistair) got back from the Middle East where he was working.

EG. Bill McGregor was terminally ill in the hospice, but determined not to die till he celebrated his golden wedding anniversary. He died five days after it!

EG. There was a priest who dearly wanted to die in his home village in Wales. He drove himself all the way from Scotland down to Wales...reached his village...parked the car at the sea front where he had often sat and looked out across the bay...and immediately died right there and then!

EG. Mrs. Devine had just two ambitions in her life – one was to reach 100 years old and the other was to outlive her son, Neil whom she thought she looked after. (Truth be told, Neil looked after her). She became 100 and got her message of congratulation from the Queen. Only a few days later Neil (who was 79) took ill and died. The very next day, Mrs. Devine died!

The Bible tells the story of Israel's King Hezekiah who took ill and was dying but God heard his prayer and decided to give him an extension of 15 years of life. The story is in Isaiah chapter 38.

You can see why I am of the opinion that people have a big say on when they die!

Audrey was ill for a prolonged period, hardly eating or drinking for the past few weeks yet she held on to life tenaciously, defying the odds. She faced death square on and worked at preparing her will, tying up loose threads. Last week, for example, she took me aside and whispered: "Will you do my funeral? I want to be buried." When I said "yes" she visibly relaxed. I could see her mind tick off another thing from her mental checklist.

I offered to pray with her and she readily agreed. I held her hand and said a little prayer. She had a very firm grasp of my hand and she had a very firm grasp of her situation! The very next day, she died.

Audrey conveyed, to me at least, that after ninety-six years of full and active life, she was ready to go. These were her exact words in fact. She had a few last minute details to arrange first of all (a bit like going away on holiday)! When all the details were in order, she was ready to let go of this life and embrace her new life "safe in the arms of Jesus".

An embrace or a handshake has always been a symbol of a relationship. Two people reach out to each other and make a physical connection to mirror their spiritual connection as two minds and spirits inter-act. Today at the funeral there will be much handshaking as we convey sympathy and solidarity with one another in our common grief. Be assured that Audrey long ago put her hand into the hand of the Man from Galilee – she was in a deep, personal relationship with Jesus her God. Even more importantly, Jesus held her hand with the unconditional, steadfast love that will not let go. They walked together through this earthly pilgrimage hand in hand inseparably and neither geography, nor history, time nor eternity, not even

death itself will be able to separate Audrey from the love of God in Christ Jesus her Lord.

More than that, be assured that our Heavenly Father holds us by the hand:

“Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God;
 I will strengthen you, I will help you;
 I will uphold you with my victorious right hand...
 ...for I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand;
 It is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’” (Isa.41.10,13RSV)

9. EULOGIES **And PRAYER, including LIFE STORIES.**

All funerals have something to do with praising the deceased, but sometimes funerals have what is called an “eulogy” – an item in the order of service which consists of explicitly praising the person who’s funeral we are attending. The eulogy usually takes the form of a monologue and is usually given by the person conducting the service or by a specially chosen close friend. It can take the form of one or multiple brief contributions. Eulogies can take the form of speeches or reading extracts of what people have written about the deceased or silent reflection on their life or music, symbols or pictures relating to the departed loved one. Eulogies can be written in a bulletin order of service instead of, or as well as, being given verbally.

Distinct from eulogies are tributes by which I mean for example a choir singing at a funeral to honour its conductor who has just died. They might sing one of his own compositions. In a similar vane, someone might recite a poem in honour of the deceased, a poem perhaps written by the person who has died or by the person honouring them. Tributes are often given by one person on behalf of a larger group. Sometimes a floral art club does special arrangements when one of their group dies; sometimes an organisation forms a guard of honour to escort and salute their colleague. Tributes are many and varied and only sometimes take the form of eulogies.

In the future it might become fashionable to use hi-tech audio visual aids and for example, give slides with music or videos or overhead projections

showing the person whom we are all thinking about and mourning. In the case of a terminally ill patient they might even record a message for their own funeral! Am I getting carried away now? Certainly there are drawbacks and dangers in all these developments, but there could also be positive gains if they are done sensitively.

Eulogies could be recorded in advance to allow best friends to get the best of both worlds i.e. give an eulogy but not lose the freedom to mourn because they are preoccupied by their performing the eulogy. The nervous energy expended in standing up in public in a highly emotionally-charged situation can, and indeed does, take away from the full benefit of simply mourning and being a recipient of comfort. It can be done, indeed it is done, all the time, but there is a personal sacrifice involved. That is why we ask undertakers to look after the practical arrangements for us and why we ask ministers to conduct services for us. We could do both things ourselves for there is no law stating that you cannot and that you must involve an undertaker or a minister but we usually prefer to focus on our emotional recovery and we prefer to be ministered to.

“Eulogia” in early times (Eulogium in Latin and Eulogion in Greek; “eu” meaning well and “Logos” meaning a speaking) meant “a blessing” or “something blessed”. Today it usually means a speech or writing in praise of someone. To eulogise is to praise. We can eulogise the living as well as the dead but in everyday usage the word “eulogy” usually conjures up mental pictures of funerals.

Does every funeral have to have an eulogy? Eulogies do have some dangers and drawbacks. They can be done very badly and leave the mourners in a worse state than they started! Many people who are “best friends” are not public speakers. Some of them do not know that fact (if ever) till they are standing at the lectern about to speak! Some do know their limitations but get pushed into agreeing to speak (or even push themselves into it because they would feel guilty if they let their late friend down by not speaking). Some people speak too long, others can be inaudible because they shy away from microphones. Some are indiscreet in what they reveal and some, while saying nothing wrong, trigger disproportionate reactions in the congregation because they inadvertently touch a sore point. The more you say, the more you can put your foot in it! Every value judgement is a potential

miscalculation. Eulogies can be faulted for what they say and for what they leave unsaid. To leave things out can be very offensive and to forget a name can be very hurtful. Often people don't know if they will manage to give an eulogy till they try and unlike some other experiments the consequences can be very serious. They may really hurt the most grieving people and they may seriously hurt their own emotional health if they fail and cannot cope with failing in such circumstances. They may end up kicking themselves for years to come. People generally don't notice but all ministers know that funerals heighten the stakes in public speaking. Generally there are two great fears which speakers have: (a) forgetting your lines and (b) stuttering them. Normally it is slightly embarrassing but usually it is not too consequential and can be shrugged off by a quip like "give me a moment till I get my false teeth in". However you cannot joke your way out in a funeral situation and think of the disproportionate hurt you would cause if at the moment of committal you forgot or stuttered the deceased's name! Professional speakers can give mourners the confidence to relax with regard to managing the act of public speaking while best friends who are particularly unaccustomed and fragile looking can cause the mourners to lose the good of the moment as they concentrate of the death of the living rather than on the life of the dead!

Eulogies by guest appearance also run the risk that there may be a contradiction between what the minister and what the eulogiser says about the deceased. Since we are all complex characters and no one knows all our facets it is quite likely that this might happen. From the point of view of the eulogiser it is emotionally quite taxing to be one minute the mourner receiving comfort and the next the one up front facing the mourners and giving comfort.

Having said all this it is a wonder that anyone sticks their neck out and gives an eulogy! But they do! They do so on the grounds that it is worth the risks.

Eulogies can bring great comfort. They can do so when done well, and I suspect that they can bring great comfort even when the sincerity and affection has to shine through very faltering speech. Surely everyone at a funeral has a basic psychological need to hear things about their loved one, to hear something of his/her story. Surely it would be a sin and a disgrace to strip a funeral of all the personal material which make one person's funeral (and life) unique from another person's. It borders on criminal to go

through a funeral mentioning “the deceased” rather than the person’s name (as I have heard happens). Surely a person’s funeral service should be saturated in the flavour of their unique personality. I don’t just mean giving facts and figures about their life but at a deeper level giving an up-beat person an up-beat funeral and a quiet person a quiet one; a humorous person a touch of humour (not too much of course!); and a devout person a devotional style service etc. In my opinion, the greatest complements which I have received after conducting funerals have been comments like:

“Oh you just summed him up to a tee!”

“She would really have appreciated that service.”

“It sounded as if you had known them all your life.”

“I really liked the bit when you said..... That is what _____ always used to say”.

“Thanks minister, the service was just right for _____”

People find it hard to put into words, but they are registering the fact that they have noticed that the whole service (not just the eulogy) has captured the essence of their loved one. It is quite a skill – a bit like a portrait artist trying to put down on canvass the heart and soul of their subject. This is the challenge which good painters warm to and this is the challenge which good ministers should rise to also. Anybody can paint two eyes, a mouth and a nose but it takes a great artist to draw out the essence of a being.

Whether you have an explicit eulogy item or whether the whole order of service is saturated in the personality of the deceased (or should I say loved one!), it must be remembered that the person who died is NOT the “star of the show.” That may sound surprising. It shouldn’t! Sadly, I fear that too often people do think that the person in the coffin is the lead player in the drama of death. When it comes to funerals, GOD is “the star of the show”! Funerals are acts of worship after all. Well, let me correct myself here. Every funeral is not an act of worship, I know. But they should be! It is a sin –the sin of ingratitude amongst other things – not to praise and thank the Creator for the gift of a life which has touched our lives. Sadly however many people do indeed organise non-worship funerals. Even then I suspect that they still have worship funerals but instead of openly and explicitly praising and thanking God they just sigh an inarticulate unthought-through sigh of gratitude and praise for their loved ones’ life and its meaning to them. In other words it is primitive worship of the unnamed and even unadmitted God. Some funerals replace worship of God with worship of the deceased or worship of family or worship of success by one’s own

achievements (see the funeral of the “self-made man” as if there was such a thing!). Humanist funerals worship mankind rather than God. People of different religions will worship different gods. Some will worship life or lady luck or fate. Some will openly and explicitly and even defiantly worship just about anything else except God! For the purposes of this book we are only concerned with people who want to have God-centred not man-centred funerals.

Funerals consist of praising and thanking God as well as asking God and pouring out our grief to Him. For the most part they are about listening to God and receiving His word of comfort. God is present as the Creator, Provider, Sustainer, Redeemer, Spirit, Good Shepherd, Friend, Enabler, Comforter, Merciful Judge, Controller of the destinies of individuals and nations, our Companion on the journey of life and the One who waits to give us welcome when we arrive at the other side of death. Surely then God’s presence looms over us casting a shadow like a mother hen’s wing. He is the Supreme presence and more than that he is here, now, with us, and for us! If ministers have a duty to keep the life of the deceased before our eyes how much more of a duty do we have to keep God before our eyes!! Ultimate comfort surely lies here – when our two eyes can truly see both our loved one and God together. Oh what comfort when we see it and believe it and feel it - our loved one with all his faults and limitations - and God with all His love and mercy and the loved one couched in the merciful and tender embrace of Almighty God! Now we are on to something infinitely profound, something worth meditating over, but we must push on.

I do not encourage families to have eulogies (for the reasons mentioned earlier) but nor do I forbid eulogies (for the reasons just alluded to). My considered, professional suggestion is to incorporate all the advantages of an eulogy while not risking some of the disadvantages, by couching the eulogy in prayer. I have done this all my ministerial career and I really believe it is the best of all worlds. Prayer ensures that God is the rightful “star of the show” and the focus of attention. God is being addressed rather than the mourners. People are more free to shed a tear under the cover of everyone having their eyes closed. (In a culture like ours where people tend to hold in emotions to their detriment, it is good to help people to shed a discreet tear). The context is gratitude rather than a lament. The minister doing it weaves it seamlessly into the whole service. It avoids arguments as to who should do it and avoids some of the mistakes made by grieving

friends who are not used to public speaking or at least public speaking in these particular circumstances. Perhaps the main reason for couching the eulogy within prayer is that it enables the speaker to decrease while allowing the hearers to increase. Instead of the speaker being the object of attention – the one we all look at and listen to and the one doing all the work while we spectate; the eyes are closed, the same voice speaks, our imaginations concentrate on the life of the deceased, and we, as hearers, work hard to bring memories to bear. We give ourselves a mental slide show as the minister prompts us with simple facts. For example, he says: “we remember John as a boy living in the High Street”; immediately everyone’s minds rush to fill up with memories from that time and place. A lot more is heard than is said. The hearers are working harder than the speaker. This is generally true in communication but it works to great advantage especially here. The minister of course has to keep his part simple and give pauses which the hearers fill up with memories. You will notice that the minister is not standing facing the mourners and addressing them; he is rather standing behind or below or in the midst giving them prompts.

It is important to give clear, simple facts rather than value judgements. Don’t take that away from the mourners – they can make their own value judgements. It is also wise counsel to a minister not to take the risk of incurring grief anger (not just ordinary anger) by getting your value judgement wrong. (Wrong of course being different from the value judgement of your hearer)! Facts can be difficult enough but value judgements are simply a minefield of no win scenarios. Making value judgements is a perfectly natural impulse and a funeral service is bound to (and indeed should) encourage the mourners to form opinions about their late loved one. But it is not the minister’s business! And as a minister I am very grateful for that! People often say to me that it must be more difficult conducting the funeral of someone I have never met than of someone whom I knew quite well. There is some truth in this but basically it is not the problem they imagine precisely because I do not have to go around making pronouncements by way of value judgements. (Just in passing, I might point out that one of the hardest funerals to do is where you do know the person and you know that he had a bad character. It is easier when you don’t know that or when you know that he had a good character).

So the minister gets the people to do the work and he gives them the structure within which to operate. Funerals are a happy balance of familiar material and original creative material. The parish minister often worries about having to conduct hundreds of funerals amongst the same people. How can they say the same thing in an infinite variety of ways? What if they repeat themselves and say things for the umpteenth time till their parishioners start hinting that they change track! The prayerful eulogy meets all these fears because it strikes a happy balance. You use a familiar structure but fill it with the unique content relative to the particular character who died. Your “regular customers” have the comforting security of the familiar pattern so they know what is coming next but they also have this part of the service more than any other part, made to measure their unique loved one. This is an interesting thought – that the comfort derived in any one funeral may be drawn from many funerals which have preceded it.

Here is the general structure of my eulogy prayer. Obviously there are many, many variations on the theme, but this is the basic structure:

“Heavenly Father, we give you thanks today for the life of JOHN SMITH. We are grateful for all that John means to each one of us gathered here this morning.

We remember John as a friend and neighbour, as a colleague and family man - especially as a brother, husband, father, grandfather and even great-grandfather.

Today we mourn in our loss and we are sad at the parting but we also come rejoicing in his life, giving thanks for his inspiration and example and we are grateful for all the times we have had with John, all the shared experiences we have come through together, and now all the precious memories which we can treasure.

So, even now, we look back in grateful and affectionate memory upon John’s life:-

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for a little baby, born on the fourth of July in 1935 in Edinburgh.....the son of a coal miner....one of nine children (with five brothers and three sisters).....

We give you thanks for a young boy growing up in Edinburgh, in the Morningside area....going to the primary and secondary schools there...a member of the Scouts and the Sunday School.....

We give thanks for the teenager leaving school at the age of fifteen and going to work as a plumber in Leith.

We also remember John working as a groundsman at a hospital in Crammond and as a handyman at the new shopping centre in Murrayfield.

We give thanks for the young man meeting Audrey West and getting married in Edinburgh on 18th. August 1955. Heavenly Father, we thank you for blessing John and Audrey with over forty years of marriage.

We think of them getting their first house in Corstorphine, Edinburgh.

Living for a time in Glasgow, Dundee then Aberdeen and for the past twelve years in Dunbar.

We especially give thanks for “Dad” to George and Andrew and Averil; and “Papa” to Stephen, Gordon, Elaine and Ken; and “great grandad” to eleven children.

Heavenly Father, we each come today with our own thoughts and memories and we each give you thanks in our own way. We think of John....

- as a young man playing football, tennis and golf
- walking for miles along the beach with his dog “Scottie”
- Member of the Boys Brigade (as boy and man)
- A keen bowler and gardener
- A man of faith: member of St.Andrew’s Church and St.Mary’s Church active as an elder, Sunday School Teacher and Choir member

We remember John in youth and in age; in sickness and in health; in sorrows and in joys.

Lord God His Creator, we thank you for creating the life of John Smith.

Lord God His Sustainer, we thank you for sustaining him all these 72 (nearly 73) years.

Oh Lord, make it not so much our grief as our joy to release him to you now for in your merciful and tender hands we believe that John is safe and secure.

These things we pray in Jesus’ name Amen.

10. SILENCE.

Silence is often feared but it can be a tremendous comfort. Obviously those who are used to silence will get more out of it than those who are not.

Those who are not used to silence (and that seems to be most people these days) may even find it distressing or at least have the discomfort of unfamiliarity.

Quakers, Roman Catholics and generally meditative people find great solace in silence. They appreciate less words and more space for reflection. However, many other people come to funerals not wanting to be still and hear inner voices; not wanting to think. One woman told me that she was too scared to listen to a word I was saying in case it caused her to burst into tears. She was so up tight that she would not even listen to comforting words! Once again it is the age-old dilemma of trying to please all the people at least some of the time!

One way of squaring the circle might be to tailor fit the amount of silence and words to match the particular congregation and their particular mood that day. However you never know who will turn up; you usually do not know most of those who do come; and even if you know the mourners, how can you know exactly how they are feeling at that precise moment? On the other hand, God surely knows and God is supposed to be inspiring His conductor of funerals so maybe we have to go on a wing and a prayer a bit and be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. There is a lot of truth in this although this should not be a cop-out from thinking analytically about the subject of silence.

Funerals usually occur in the very earliest days of grief when we are feeling shock, denial, numbness and a mixture of powerful emotions till we hardly know what we are feeling. We may be full of questions (indeed we will be full of one question in particular: WHY?) but really it is not a good time to be analytical, philosophical and clever with many words. Rather it is a time to be hugged tight, to batten down the hatches in order to ride out the emotional storm and to “let go and let God”. (This is not my phrase but isn't it very evocative)? So funerals are not times for many words and clever thoughts.

It is no wonder that in the face of the mysteries of life, death and life beyond death; in the face of the ceaseless “whys” and in the midst of violent emotions, all the clamouring voices of the world fall silent. When someone

dies, where are all the advertisers and gurus and experts who had been promising the answer to everything you ever needed and even the answer to questions you never thought of asking? They fall silent because in the face of death and mortality they have nothing worthwhile to say.

It is then that the hungry sheep look up hoping to be fed by the Good Shepherd. It is instinctive to cry: “Oh God, help me! Speak to me! Speak to my great need! Speak words of comfort but really give me more than mere words!” What we seek is not clever theories but reassuring certainties and God’s comforting presence with all the blessings that come from having God Himself with us. Ministers in God’s Name have a Gospel (Good News) for the people – there is food to nourish the sheepish and frightened flock. We must not fail the people nor fail the Good Shepherd whom we work for, by failing to convey “a word from the Lord”. In the Old Testament, people used to approach the prophets saying: “Is there a word from the Lord for us today?” It is the same situation at modern funerals. Ultimately the word is not all about words but words are necessary to convey to the people the two main points, namely (a) the reassurance that God is with us and for us giving us His peace and strength beyond our own strength and (b) the guarantee of resurrection to eternal life of our late loved one and our resurrection from the valley of the shadow of grief. Somehow then we have to let God speak to the hearts and minds and wills of the congregation without using a multiplicity of words to do it.

So, too few words can make the audience uncomfortable and too many words can also do them a great disservice. Those who are uncomfortable with silence fear nothingness but if you can use guided silence and give their minds something to think about in the silence they will be much less uncomfortable. Parables are also good for making a few words go a long way in communicating. They make the hearer work hard at filling in the gaps and completing the story. The happy compromise therefore is to do what Jesus did and tell parables which they can take home and chew over at their leisure. Brief parables please those who want words and those who want an economy of words. See therefore the chapter on parables (I.8).

You can also have silence from words while playing soft music in the background. Once again it gives enough silence for the silence lovers and enough noise for those who would otherwise be uncomfortable with total silence.

It is also a helpful compromise to use a succession of brief, well guided silences rather than one prolonged silence. So, handled tactfully, silence can be used profitably.

All things considered silence is worth persevering with and experimenting with because people really do like to have their own thoughts; it is impossible to articulate everyone's thoughts and feelings; and it allows God's still small voice to speak directly to people's hearts.

I remember visiting the Grand Canyon in the United States and being struck by the silence of it and the silence of the tourists looking into it. The Canyon itself is a magnificent work of nature, truly one of the wonders of the world and much better in reality than in any pre-publicity. It is a mile deep, ten miles across, but over two hundred miles to drive round. As you gaze into it the silence shouts at you if you pardon the expression. It is difficult to explain, but anyone who has been there will know what I am trying to say. Even more amazing however is the effect of the Canyon upon the tourists. They tend to rush up to the edge in a state of excitement, cameras at the ready, eating snacks, shouting and laughing and generally making a fair degree of noise. Suddenly they see the Canyon and instantly it takes their breath away. They physically stop in their tracks and stand in reverent awe and wonder, speechless and silent. This happened over and over again. Death is such a canyon. As one of the truly great mysteries of life, death stops us in our tracks and reduces us to reverential, awed silence. (There is the odd exception who, like one woman I heard at the Canyon say: "Och it's just another hole!" No doubt there is the odd exception out there who sees death as trivial and insignificant).

Silence together is different from individual silence or even a bunch of individuals all having individual silence side by side at the same time. If the person conducting the funeral guides the silence then people can experience

corporate silence. This may include a vast diversity of particular thoughts and memories but it will also have a warm feeling of togetherness about it. Indeed the minister risks dividing the audience every time he or she selects some facts and details to mention and not some others but silence is free from that risk. In other words, silence can unify a congregation where words can send them off on varied tangents of thought.

Silence is not just the absence of noise or absence of words. Silence should never be empty like a vacuum. Rather it should be a rich, meaningful silence. Experts tell us that communication consists of much more than words. Indeed words communicate only about 7% of what we are trying to get across. So, silence from words simply makes room for other things such as feelings and mental pictures.

Silence has also a timeless quality. In silence time seems to stand still in a very lovely way. One of my pet hates is being rushed at the crematorium. Nowadays crematoria are so busy that they resemble airport terminals – in this case with take-offs every twenty minutes from twin runways side by side! It seems ridiculous and even irreverent that we should hurry the moment when we pass from time into eternity!

I tend to use silence in one of two parts of the funeral service, either in the form of thirty seconds silence just before the committal or to punctuate the various details in the prayer about the deceased's life.

11. THE COMMITTAL.

Committals can take place in cemeteries or in crematoria i.e. outdoors or indoors. It is important to remember that there is only one funeral even though it very often involves two venues. There is an interruption to the flow of the one funeral service as we make our way from church, parlour or home to the graveside or crematoria. (Given our climate, it is unusual to

hold the whole service outdoors and the cremation service can be so pressurised for time that it is advisable not to try to squeeze the whole service into twenty minutes). Often people will attend only one of the venues and this puts pressure on ministers to try to give half-time attenders whole services while not appearing to repeat ourselves.

At the graveside (following the service in church, parlour or home) I usually allow the undertaker to organise the lowering of the coffin right away. When the cord bearers step back, I step forward and the undertaker asks the people to draw nearer. Then I begin with scripture readings and a parable followed by the act of committal. It is all fairly brief and even briefer if the weather is bad or the mourners particularly frail.

There is the odd time when I speak first before the coffin is laid to rest e.g. when speaking about the similarity of our situation to that of the paralysed man being lowered to the feet of Jesus by his friends. Most of the time however I prefer to let the undertaker take the responsibility of gathering the people, settling them down, focussing the minds by way of the activity of lowering the coffin and then when all is primed I step forward. Otherwise I would find myself speaking while stragglers are still arriving and the mourners had not yet attuned themselves to the moment. In that situation some of what I was saying would be lost. It also has the slight advantage of making the minister look brief! The lowering time is attributed to the undertaker not the minister!

Often (but not always), I begin the Act of Committal by saying:

“Let us take a moment in silence to reflect upon the life of _____
as we prepare to commit him/her to God and as we commit ourselves
to
the loving mercy of God...” (Pause)

“We stand at the very gate of Heaven, at the meeting place of Heaven and Earth, time and eternity, things visible and things invisible. We confess O God that we do not understand the mystery of life, the mystery of death, nor the mystery of life beyond death. But we praise and thank you for the mystery of your love, your presence with us, your comfort and peace. You

are God. You control the issues of life and death. You are the God of Heaven and Earth, time and eternity. You are our God and in you we trust."

The above prayer is inspired by the story of Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28 v 10-19 where Jacob realises he is in the presence of God and names the place Beth-el (Hebrew for "house of God" or "gate of Heaven"). It is crucial to make people aware that God is in the midst. God's presence is our comfort and a passing from time to eternity is a very holy matter. The aim is to inspire awe and worship. Remember that the congregation usually contains people who would not be in a worship situation except for the fact that someone has arranged the funeral to be in church with a minister. It is a big enough challenge trying to lead regular worshippers into awe and wonder, comfort and peace but an even bigger challenge when it is non-Church people at a busy crematorium or in a cemetery with distracting sights and sounds.

People often say to me that it must be difficult to conduct the funeral of a non-believer. Indeed some ministers even try to not conduct such funerals. Personally I would conduct anyone's funeral. I do not have a problem in this area. As far as I am concerned I do not know and I do not need to know the inner workings of people's beliefs. It is not for me, nor anyone, to judge another person. God alone is judge. Many a person who has said "Lord, Lord" as Jesus Himself pointed out will be underneath a hypocrite and destined for hell. On the other hand we all know people who make no profession of faith with their lips but who would surprise us if they did not end up in Heaven. I just relax in a blissful ignorance in this respect. What I have to do however (whether popular or not) is to remind everyone that all the issues belong to God, that we are all accountable to Him and that He is wise and merciful and trustworthy. All this the prayer seeks to do in a few words.

I then go on to say:

"God so loved Patricia Noble that He gave His only Son, so that Patricia who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (i.e. John 3.16)

“Jesus said: ‘In my Father’s house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for Patricia Noble and if I go and prepare a place for Patricia I will come back and take her to myself so that where I am Patricia may be also.’ (ie. John 14.2,3)

(Notice how much more powerful it sounds when you insert the loved one’s personal name! This is not doing a disservice to the text; on the contrary it is spelling out what the text is trying to say. “Whosoever” in John 3.16 means you, me, Patricia, everyone.

“Christ Jesus says: “Fear not. I am the first and the last. I am He who lived and died and am alive for evermore.” (Rev.1.17)

“Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of those who sleep.”

“Jesus says: ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though He were dead, yet shall He live; and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.’ (John 11.25 RSV)

Recently I have been omitting the last line of that paradox because it is too complex to the ear and at such an emotionally charged moment it is unhelpful to confuse with paradoxically profundities. I always however quote the first part: “I am the Resurrection...yet shall he live;”

“Forasmuch as it has pleased Almighty God to receive to Himself the soul of our sister here departed....PATRICIA ANNE NOBLE... we commit her body to the earth (or to be dissolved) earth to earth, dust to dust (or ashes to ashes, dust to dust)....In the sure and certain hope of Resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The word “forasmuch” is admittedly a bit of a mouthful and sounds a little archaic but I feel it plays a very important role psychologically. The chief mourners in particular and all the people at the funeral have been bracing themselves for the heart of the service, the reason we are all here, the committal of their loved one into God’s loving care. Often they are so upset

that they hear only a fraction of the service. This is the word which signals to any distracted mind that we are now getting down to business. It acts upon wandering minds like the school bell does to meandering children and calls them to attention. It also sounds very official and psychologically people like the committal to be “done right and proper”, officially. It is also a word which is almost exclusively used in this context. When else would you hear it? And conversely, it is almost always used at committals so it is a vital cog in the wheel. It also has the advantage of priming the grave digger to be ready to throw in his handful of earth when the minister comes to the words “earth to earth”.

You may have already detected at this point a slight change in the wording from what you normally hear at funerals. I have changed:

“...has pleased Almighty God to TAKE to Himself...”

to “...has pleased Almighty God to RECEIVE to Himself...”

The former I have always found to be offensive and bad theology. It conjures up a picture in my mind of God ping-ponging individual autumnal leaves off their perch one by one. I don't think God sits there causing car accidents, suicides, still births etc. He has created a world in which these things can happen and he allows them to happen. He is in overall control and can be questioned as to His allowing of these things. However I do not believe that He picks people off one by one in this crude way. “Receives” is therefore a gentler, more passive and theologically more acceptable word. See how even one word can make a lot of difference!

At the committal I feel that it is very important to use the deceased's full name. People like things to be done officially and properly and using the full name serves that purpose. At births, marriages and deaths people like using full names. This is true even if they have used pseudonyms all their life. Often people are known by their nicknames or by abbreviations of their names. In some cases I will add the nickname or abbreviated form after the full name e.g. Patricia Anne Noble...Pat... There are some cases in which the deceased or the family or both have been embarrassed by their name all their life. I remember Faye turned out to have been baptised “Euphemia” and had never used her full name, such was her abhorrence of it. In these rarer cases I am guided by the family's wishes. The bottom line on this point is that it does not legally have to be the full name; I just use the

full name for psychological reasons to bring comfort. If using the name brings strong discomfort then it is counter-productive and I desist.

Sometimes I go on to say the following (although I have been saying it less in recent times):

“I heard a voice from Heaven saying: ‘Happy are those who die in the faith of Christ for they shall find rest from all their labours.’”

I certainly omit the rest of the quotation: “and the record of their deeds shall follow them” not because it is false but because it can misleadingly sound like promoting the doctrine of works righteousness (i.e. that we get to Heaven by our own achievement). It does not mean that of course but there is no time to stop and explain that it does not mean that.

Whether it is at the crematorium or outdoors at the cemetery, I try to say the words of committal slightly louder, slower and more authoritatively than the rest of the service. This is the sound equivalent of the literary device of highlighting. Speakers often repeat a sentence to emphasise it whereas a newspaper uses headline size print to emphasise things. The committal is the core of the service and should be highlighted. However you are not allowed to repeat the sentence in this case so the other way to promote the words of committal is by volume, speed and tone. People psychologically need to hear the words, they need to hear them “said right” and they need to feel that everything is decent and in order. In most conversational speech there is quite a lot of stuttering and punctuating with “er..um..” and so on, but you greatly hurt mourners if you get your lines wrong at the committal – and especially if you get the name of their loved one wrong in any way. Mourners may forget everything you say at a funeral but they will probably carry to their grave the echoes of your words of committal of their nearest and dearest. I don’t think it is overstating it to say that speaking words of committal is akin to engraving words on a gold plaque – that is, any mistakes are costly! You are etching your words on their memories and writing on a very sensitised surface!

Even one’s body language should be thought about. It is surely self-evident, is it not, that the minister should face the coffin when saying the words of committal? In that case it is essential to memorise the words

(since you cannot look two directions at the same time). What is particularly bad is to interrupt the flow of your committal to look back at your notes to make sure that you have got the name of the deceased right. It looks to the people as if you have forgotten their name. Even worse of course is to try to be clever and then actually forget their name. So there is no choice but to memorise and to successfully memorise! (The name of the deceased is usually engraved on a plaque on the coffin so that can be helpful. However it is amazing just how often the cords thrown into the grave, randomly, seem to land on the plaque obscuring the name)! (Such is life, I mean, death)!

While I say most of the words of committal looking at the coffin, there comes a point where I pause momentarily, then very deliberately turn to the mourners and with strong eye contact announce:

“...in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The aim is to give the mourners the maximum benefit of the good news.

Different parts of the country have different customs but I quite like the practice of the gravedigger throwing in some earth at the time when I say:

“...earth to earth.....dust to dust...”

It is good practice to respect local customs as far as possible and it is wise counsel to think carefully before introducing new customs, but where it is possible I think it is a good idea to include this symbolic act. The gravedigger probably feels more involved this way and will appreciate the honour. It will increase the meaningfulness of his job of digging holes in the ground. He is arguably better placed to do the action than the grieving family – he is objectively detached; his hands are already dirty; it is his job literally as well as symbolically; using him saves family arguments as to who might do it; and he can be trained to always do it down-wind! On the other hand I personally would not worry if family members wanted to do it. However I would like to insist that only one person do it. It is only a small, symbolic gesture after all and it would get out of hand if all the mourners formed a queue so that each could throw in a handful of soil!

When it comes to crematoria you practically end up with no choice as to whether it is a conveyor belt system, doors close, coffins get lowered or nothing visible happens. Each crematorium has its own way of working but in my experience none of them has a choice of ways to do it.

Sometimes the person who died belongs to an organisation such as the Orange Order, the Masons, the British Legion, the Armed Forces etc. and because of that the families ask for some extra ceremonial at the committal. The first thing I do is ascertain whether the immediate mourners really want it or whether they are being pressurised into it either by other people or by their own desire to do the right thing. These internal and external pressures are often quite strong and you often discover that they personally do not want “all that fuss”. The easy way out for them is to say:

“we asked the minister but he refused”.

Ministers often suffer from people blaming them in order to save themselves from criticism. Given that the mourners are particularly fragile at the time, ministers are often tempted to be rescuers and allow themselves to be the one to take the flack. However it is not good for people to go around rescuing and taking flack inappropriately and if the minister is discredited it directly undermines his/her ability to comfort on the day. I therefore discuss the matter with the immediate family and empower them to make the decision and to defend their own decision. I find that usually they do not want the extra ceremonial. Families are vulnerable and naturally very conservative at this point. They do not want to do anything “wrong” nor do they warm to the prospect of facing criticism from those who would criticise their handling of the ceremonial. (You can be sure that there will always be two camps –those for and those against the bright idea, whatever it is). Families on balance usually take the quiet life option and do nothing out of the ordinary.

On such occasions as I have had extra ceremonials they have amounted to things like draping the coffin in the Union Jack flag or having a flag bearer at the back of the church (because he was a member of the British Legion). Sometimes a piper will pipe the cortege into the cemetery and sometimes the coffin will be carried by representatives of an organisation.

What I insist on is that I should be fully involved in any thinking on these matters. I remember being caught out by surprise at a graveside when after the benediction a mourner in the crowd suddenly played tape music from a portable, battery operated tape recorder. The music was Johnny Cash singing a very sentimental country and western type song. It surprised most people and completely altered the mood I had so carefully crafted. Gravesides are no places for surprises; on the contrary people need to feel the security of familiarity and be able to have confidence in the minister that he is competent and in charge. Seeing him/her shocked upsets the mourners disproportionately.

Following the words of committal, I go on to say a prayer as follows:
 “O Lord our God, as we stand before the cold, stark, mystery of death we thank you for the good news of Jesus. We thank you for the fact that by your own death and resurrection you have secured a way for _____ and each of us to rise to eternal life. So it is in confidence that we commit _____ to your safekeeping now. Oh Lord we believe in you, but help us when our faith is weak. We also commit ourselves to you now; help us in our time of mourning, be near us, comfort and support us. Be near to each one of us personally and draw us close together so that this becomes not only a time of sadness and tears, but also a time when we feel closer to you and one another than ever before. Grant to us a real sense of your presence and with that may we come to know your peace which passes all understanding and your power beyond our own power. We thank you that you who led out the stars one by one and called them all by their names, you are also near to bind up each and every broken heart.”

12. BENEDICTIONS.

The service ends with the benediction. Benedictions are not prayers as people seem to assume. They are blessings. The word “benediction” comes from two Latin words: “bene” meaning well and “dicere” meaning to say, hence “blessing”. So you do not need to close your eyes! You may wish to bow your head however when you consider that the blessing is not from the

minister but from God Himself personally. Throughout the service the minister has been acting as God's spokesperson. God blesses the people individually and corporately through the minister. The minister's uplifted hands during the benediction, which sometimes remind you of someone getting shot or surrendering (!), are meant to be reaching out as if to be placed on people's heads in a corporate way. It is as if God was standing there right in front of the congregation and reaching out to place His hands on people's heads in order to convey a blessing. In this way, the minister's outstretched arms come to act as a kind of lightening conductor bearing God's grace from Heaven to Earth.

Here is a selection of blessings. There are many more in fact but I tend to use the first two in nearly every case (and usually the first one at the first venue and the second one at the end of the committal):-

“And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding be upon your hearts and minds today, and each day forward, one day at a time, now and forever. Amen”

“And now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, grant you His peace now and evermore.” Amen. (cf. Heb. 13 v 20f)

In both cases “God” can be extended to: “God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”.

“The blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all now and evermore. Amen”

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God (the Father), and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit Be with you all. Amen” 2Cor. 13.13

“The wisdom of the Wonderful Counsellor guide you; the strength of the Mighty God uphold you; the love of the Everlasting Father enfold you and the peace of the Prince of Peace be upon you. Amen.”

“May the Lord (or better, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) give you light to guide you, courage to support you, and love to unite you, now and for evermore. Amen.”

“May the road rise before you; may the wind be always at your back; may the sun shine warm upon your face; may the rains fall gently on your fields; and may God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) hold you in the hollow of His hand till we meet again. Amen.”

“And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, from this day forward, now and for ever. Amen”

The Aaronic blessing (Num.6 v 22-26):

“May the Lord bless you and take care of you;
May the Lord be kind and gracious to you;
May the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace. Amen”

“May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in Him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 15 v 13)

“May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.”
1Cor. 1 v 3)

“May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord give you grace, mercy and peace.” (1Tim.1 v 2)

I am quite happy to use the same benedictions. In grief people cling to the comfort and security of familiar words. There is no need for originality here. On the other hand there is no harm in changing the benedictions either. You have to work out the balance of originality and familiarity over the whole funeral.

When I say the word peace I say it onomatopoeically i.e. stress the sound of peassssssse. The benediction is best done from memory to allow you strong, direct eye contact for the effect of maximum comfort. It can also help to step out from the pulpit or lectern and closer to the mourners before you pronounce the benediction. This of course depends on the layout of the

situation. Be careful not to travel too far nor too close to the mourners in case you intimidate and frighten them. There is a delicate balance between being close in a friendly, intimate way and being close in a threatening, uncomfortable way. You have to intuit just where to stand at.

13 PARTICULAR TYPES OF FUNERALS.

No two funerals are the same, because no two people are the same. We are each unique and thank God for that! Accordingly every funeral is a unique circumstance. However, for our purposes, let us categorise a little and think of various types of circumstances and funerals. For example there are funerals of still birth babies, toddlers, children, teenagers, young adults, middle aged and elderly. There are funerals of people who have drowned, committed suicide, been murdered, had a tragic accident, taken drugs, been terminally ill and so on. Sometimes the same family has multiple tragedies and sometimes they come in quick succession!

As a typical parish minister I have experienced ALL of the above types of funerals. It shows you the width of experience in everyday parish work! At this point in writing this book I got the impulse to check back over all the funerals which I have conducted and I was surprised myself at how many types of funerals there can be! Consider this variety from just my own limited experience:-

- Father and son in quick succession
- Husband, wife and husband's brother in six months
- Two children from the same family in two consecutive years
- A still birth funeral for a couple for whom this was their fourth still birth
- Funeral of the third brother to die in only nine weeks
- Funeral of a five day old baby (the third baby in the same family to die)
- Funerals of babies: 20 hours old; 2 days old, 3 days old; cot death 4 weeks old; 6 weeks old.
- Seven and a half year old boy who fell into a sludge tank at an abattoir (the story was on the national news)

- Young man shot dead in Africa while sitting in the back seat of a car with his wife (like President Kennedy's assassination). I first heard of it on national T.V. news
- Brother and sister died within twelve days
- A woman who had lived with her partner for fourteen years asked me to marry her because she had been diagnosed to be terminally ill from cancer. I married her in February and buried her in March. (She said she had always meant to get around to getting married and her illness focussed her mind. I suggested that she see it as a retrospective or back-dated wedding).
- Small attendances at funerals e.g. I have had five (none of whom had known the deceased more than six months) and even two! (The two were the baby's mother and her friend; not even the father)! My father, who is also a minister, even had a funeral where there were no mourners at all!
- Funeral where a large number of the mourners were mentally disabled
- Twelve year old severely mentally and physically disabled girl.
- Twenty-seven year old after two and a half years of cancer.
- Husband and wife seven days apart.
- Murders
- Suicides
- Drug victims
- Two thirty one year olds in the same week
- "Paupers' funerals"
- Long term terminally ill e.g. forty two year old man who had had both legs amputated in a vain attempt to stop the spread of cancer
- A man who had been seventy four years in a mental hospital
- I buried a man whose sister was buried the same day at another funeral
- A mother who died aged 100 the day after her son's funeral (thus fulfilling her two ambitions i.e. to reach 100 and outlive her son).
- The man who was diagnosed terminally ill and who by an act of great will
- outlived doctors' estimates of life expectancy till a few days after his Golden Wedding.
- A young man, murder victim, stabbed to death in his own bed. After waiting eleven days for the funeral his mother took a major stroke just half an hour before the funeral service.
- My 500th. funeral was special: a lady aged 106 and a ½.
- I have taken a funeral service while suffering the full effects of a migraine headache. I even had to wear sunglasses at the crematorium to protect my eyes from the light! In similar circumstances I have also had to ask a neighbouring minister to deputise for me just minutes before a funeral.

- I did a “double funeral” in the sense of conducting a service at the old people’s home for two residents who had died. I did one committal and another minister did the other.
 - I have scattered ashes at sea from a lifeboat in Dunbar and at the Wallace Monument in Stirling.
 - In Jamaica I conducted the second half of a funeral at a moments notice when the minister suddenly announced that he was going elsewhere to conduct another funeral. All he gave me was the deceased’s name. At the committal in the churchyard, the coffin stuck half way down the bricked-up grave. One of the mourners jumped on to the coffin and jammed it down unceremoniously! Then they sang happy choruses at the graveside for half an hour.
 - On the other hand I arrived at a grave in Scotland to discover it had not been dug...a small administrative error! The undertaker said: “we all make mistakes; it is just that when I make one it, it is a big one! Do you think you can “entertain the troops” till we get it dug?”
- What a rich and varied experience death can be as well as life!

There can be variations in circumstances (see above); variations in attendance (both numbers and types); variations in venues and variations in content. It is also fascinating to watch the various types of people attending funerals.

Obviously all kinds of people attend even just one funeral. However funerals can be coloured by particular types of people. Whole families can have distinctive characteristics. I remember one family who sounded like a comedians’ convention at the funeral tea after the service. A passer-by would never have thought that it was a funeral occasion. They were belly-laughing and joking . At first glance it looked disrespectful, but on closer analysis I realised that humour was the family’s way of coping with big things in their life. It was just their style. Some other families like to make a drama out of a crisis and they really enjoy the emotional outbursts and theatricals. Still other families are administrative organisers ploughing themselves into making arrangements far more than is strictly required. Some are very demanding, some are very inhibited. Some are angry people others guilt-laden. The types and combinations of types produce fascinating fodder for people watchers! Ministers should watch and not just out of academic interest but with a view to ministering to them. The art of ministering is the skill of incarnating, of getting alongside every type and

walking with them at their speed in their direction and in their style. Put another way, as the Bible says, “laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep”. Be all things to all men as Paul says. This is what helps you to stay fresh and real even after five hundred funerals or three funerals already that week!

There are also variations in venues. Funerals may take place in Church, crematoria, cemeteries, private homes, institutions, parlours. I have even conducted one outdoors in someone’s garden (because there were too many mourners for the house). Ashes can be scattered or buried. There is no absolute right or wrong in choosing venues; it is simply a matter of personal preference.

Local customs and traditions can also vary from area to area and from generation to generation. For example, I was brought up in Aberdeenshire where it was common to have funerals in people’s homes with the coffin lying open for three days and during the service. In Stirling and Dunbar I have noticed this practice happens very seldom. Even in Aberdeenshire practices vary from coast to country and from generation to generation. These things are not absolutely right and wrong, simply choices which individuals, families and communities may make.

There can be variations in funerals if the military, or the British Legion, or the Masonic Order or some group get involved. There can be flags draped over the coffin, guards of honour, representatives carrying the coffin etc. I try to minimise this without going as far as outright banning. Why? Because they can detract from the focus upon God.

Clearly the varying factors mentioned above result in varying content within the funeral services. To some extent all funerals are the same at core i.e. two things are communicated: (a) God is with us and (b) God guarantees resurrection. What varies is the peripheral trimmings. The cake is the same but the icing is decorated differently. While this is largely true, the differences do sometimes go deeper than that.

Funeral services should have both secure, comforting, timeless familiarity and also creative, original elements unique to the deceased. A fisherman's funeral will take a nautical theme and a shepherd's a pastoral theme. The ambiance and feel of the funeral of a five year old killed by a passing bus will be different from that of a ninety-five year old who died peacefully in their sleep after a full and happy life. The funeral of a larger than life extravert character should feel different from that of a quiet, behind the scenes, private person. You should also be able to spot a significant difference between a congregation of mourners who truly believe in resurrection to eternal life and a congregation for whom it is not a living, vital conviction.

With regard to the latter point, I do not conduct two types of funerals: first class and second class, believers and non-believers. Who am I to judge? In this respect I do try to treat everyone the same. I assume that everyone is a believer. Many professing believers do not really believe but who am I to know where and when this is the case. Many professing non-believers look very much like believers in practice. I cannot tell nor do I need to. On those occasions when a person's profession and practice declare loud and clear that they are believers I am even more happy of course to point to or at least leave it to their own witness.

Although every funeral is unique and each one has different circumstances and varying practices, when it comes to the actual order of service or the essential Gospel or even the material used they can all be remarkably similar. In every funeral there are the twin messages of God being with us and resurrection. In very different cases we still sing hymns, say prayers, read the Bible and listen to the minister say a few words and think about the deceased.

My general framework or order of service (which does allow for minor variations) is this:

Opening Sentence
Statement of Purpose
Prayer
Hymn

Lessons: God is with us selection and a Resurrection selection
 Thought/Parable/Talk and/or Eulogy
 Prayer including Life Story of the Deceased
 The Committal
 Prayer
 Hymn
 Benediction

Into this general framework you can fit nearly every funeral. The only time I do anything significantly different is in the case of children – funerals of still -births, new born or toddlers. Here is some specific material for this particular type of funeral. Basically it is the same framework but it includes children's hymns and more time is spent on the opening statements:

FUNERAL OF A BABY.

We are gathered here today to mourn the loss of Alexander Buchan Noble, born at Fraserburgh's Thomas Walker Hospital at 5.15am. on Wednesday 23rd. of May, 1955.

Our sadness is made worse by the fact that birth and death have been so closely intertwined.

Alex. did not get much of a chance to live. Yet Alex. has lived in our hearts for the past nine months in all the preparations and excitement. And Alex. will live in our thoughts and feelings for a long time to come.

So we come into the house of God today not sure whether to blame God and question His love or whether to doubt that He exists at all or whether to ask for His help to get through our grief. Perhaps we feel a mixture of all three!

We feel like putting God in the witness box and making Him give account of His actions (or should that be inactions?). Then we feel guilty for speaking to God in this tone of voice.

But all the great men and women of faith have addressed God in these terms.

e.g. Jeremiah: “Oh God you have deceived me.” (Jer.19.27)

e.g. Elijah: “Let me lie down and die. You are like a dried up brook;
you promise water but do not deliver.”

e.g. Jesus Himself summed up all our deepest questions and grievances,
when He said: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
(Matt.28.46)

And what is God’s answer? No clever theories. Nothing to instantly solve
all life’s mysteries. But something more, deeper, more wonderful and
amazing. He offers Himself to us saying:

“Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will
give you rest.”

“He who comes to me I will not cast out.”

“I am with you always.”

“Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

He gives us more than just words of comfort. He actually comes alongside
us. He shares our sorrows. He stands in our shoes till His feet hurt. He
gets crucified alongside us, shoulder to shoulder.

The God who came down to Earth two thousand years ago (to Bethlehem)
and who got involved in all life’s sorrows...still comes down to our messy
stables and still suffers along with us. When we feel crucified by life and
look around for Him, we discover that He is the one on the cross in the
middle!

He who made Alex. and prepared the way for him, who shared the
excitement leading up to his birth, who shared the hopes and dreams, plans
and schemes for him...He too weeps with us.

He does not give us answers to the mystery WHY it has happened..
But He offers His companionship and His help with HOW to cope.
He will bring us through the dark night until the dawn breaks and walk with
us along the dark tunnel till we begin to see some light at the other end.

Sing: Kum ba Yah (Be with us Lord)

Today we are tempted to ask why?

Why this little baby boy, Alex. Buchan Noble should come into the world, suffer so much and then die so soon.

The answer is shrouded in the mystery of suffering and death. But this much we can know:

Because Alex. lived, there is now more love in the world than before.

Because Alex. lived, many of us have learned to treasure life more, our own and that of others.

God in His providence and love receives him into His presence now, but his memory will continue to bless us.

Thanks Alex., we are glad that you are a part of our lives.

Because Alex. lived, we have precious memories, memories which many other people do not have because of childlessness, abortion, still births and cot deaths.

Because Alex. lived, we have the hope of resurrection to eternal life and the possibility of the whole family being once again re-united, never to part again.

Let us pray:

“Heavenly Father, as we stand before the cold, stark mystery of death, our hearts are naturally very sad and we deeply mourn the loss of Alex. Noble. Almighty God, there are times when words fail us, times when grief overtakes us, and we have no clever answers. And such a time is now. What we need is not clever theories but your comforting presence, your strength beyond our own strength. We need YOU. Be near us right now we pray. Especially bless George and Mary, his sister Audrey and the wider family and friends. Give each one of us and all of us together a real sense of your presence, your comfort and that peace which only you can give..peace in the midst of life’s storms, peace which passes all understanding. Soothe our aching hearts and calm our troubled minds. We cannot see it at the moment, but we believe that you are too wise to make a mistake and too loving to be cruel. So we bring to you all our tears and sorrows, our fears and doubts, all our unanswered questions. Lord we bring Alex. to you so that he may rest “safe in the arms of Jesus.” Alex. was a gift from you and he belongs to you and now he returns to you. If Alex. may not enjoy life on Earth, may he be born into Heaven and enjoy life there. Amen.

14 SCATTERING OR BURYING ASHES.

Sometimes, but not always, mourners like to take their loved one's ashes and scatter or bury them somewhere. They can be left at the crematorium for the staff there to dispose of them. They can be kept in a casket in the cupboard!

They can also be laid just under the surface of turf on a family grave. Whatever is done must have the approval of the local authorities. Some authorities are stricter than others but in some areas you cannot even scatter the ashes to the wind without a local authority person being there and prior permission being sought and granted.

Burying ashes may seem like wanting to eat your cake and have it – getting both a cremation and a burial. But why not? It is surely good psychologically to have a site where you can go to mourn the loss of your loved one. The same need is there whether or not the person was buried or cremated. Often the family prefers burial but the deceased left instructions in their will to have them cremated. This way everyone is satisfied. Scattering has much the same logic but prefers a location to a particular piece of ground. I have scattered ashes at Stirling's Wallace Monument because the family could just look out of their window at anytime and see the large building on the hill just outside town and associate it with the scattering and by association with the life of their loved one. They could not see a grave from their window.

Usually (but not always) it involves just a handful of mourners and is on a much smaller scale than a funeral. I remember doing one which looked very much like a funeral in terms of numbers and how much I said. You cannot do a second funeral but on this occasion the person had been cremated at a service in the south of England while there was a large contingent of family and friends living in Scotland who had been unable to get to the funeral because of the distance. In effect it was their funeral (if not the deceased's)!

My normal practice is as follows:-

Opening Sentences: "The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."
"I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?"

My help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and earth"...(the hills and all)!

We are gathered here today, in the presence of God, as family and friends of:

JOHN BLOGGS SMITH.....JOHN...DAD...PAPA..
to scatter/bury his ashes.

We gather here because John's family have lived in this town for many generations and here lie the bodies and ashes of many Smiths down the years.

We gather now not just because it is the day and time most convenient to us all but also because it is amazingly John's birthday today!

Just before we scatter/bury his ashes, let us take a moment to reflect upon the life of JOHN and to thank God for all that he means to each one of us. Let us pray:

"Heavenly Father, we thank you for creating the life of John Smith. We thank you for sustaining him all these 75 years. We thank you for all the times we have had together, the many shared experiences which we have come through and now for the happy memories which we treasure. We give you thanks for the little baby born on 16th. March 1925 in Fraserburgh...the son of a fisherman...with two brothers (Jim and Rob) and one sister Annie. We give you thanks for the little boy growing up in Fraserburgh a pupil of the primary school and high school...going to Sunday School...playing down by the harbour. Heavenly father we give you thanks for the teenager leaving school at the age of sixteen and going to work on his dad's fishing boat the "Crystal River". We thank you for the young man who met Patricia Jones a nurse, and we think of them getting married in Fraserburgh on August 18th. 1945. We thank you for blessing John and Patricia with fifty five years of marriage. Today we especially give thanks for "Dad" to Gilbert and George, and "Papa" to Alex. and Audrey. We remember John as a sailor in the Royal Navy during the war serving in the North Sea and Atlantic. We remember him as a fisherman and in later life as a fish salesman for Walkers. We remember him living in Fraserburgh, St.Combs and for the past thirty five years in Inverallochy. Heavenly Father, we each come today with our own thoughts and memories and we each give thanks in our own way. We picture John playing bowls, writing novels, worshipping every Sunday morning in Inverallochy Church, teaching his beloved children in the Sunday School, taking an active part in the

community social events, walking his dog “Scottie” and enjoying family gatherings at which he served his homemade soup. We remember John in youth and in age, in sickness and in health, in sorrows and in joys. Lord God his Creator, we thank you for creating the life of John Bloggs; Lord God his Sustainer, we thank you for sustaining him all these seventy five years. Oh Lord make it not so much our grief as our joy to release John to you for in your tender and merciful hands we trust that he is safe and secure and enjoying eternal life. These things we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Gilbert, as eldest son, [or whoever the family nominates], will you now please come forward and on behalf of us all lay John’s ashes to rest.

Jesus says: “Fear not. I am the first and the last. I am He who lived
And died and am alive for evermore.”

“I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me,
even though he die, yet shall he live.”

FOR AS MUCH AS IT HAS PLEASED ALMIGHTY GOD TO RECEIVE TO HIMSELF THE SOUL OF OUR BROTHER HERE DEPARTED: JOHN BLOGGS SMITH, WE SCATTER/BURY HIS ASHES FOR, AS SCRIPTURE SAYS, “WE ARE DUST AND TO DUST WE SHALL RETURN.” BUT WE DO THIS IN THE SURE AND CERTAIN HOPE OF RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

Reading: Listen again to the Word of God: e.g.

“God said to Joshua: Moses my servant is dead, but as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1.2,5,6,9 RSV)

Prayer: Let us pray:

“Heavenly Father, help us to be still and know that you are God. You are the One true and living God...perfect and holy...merciful and gracious...the same yesterday, today and forever. All the issues of life and death and life beyond death belong to you. Almighty God, tender loving Heavenly Father, we turn to you in our sadness and need. Reassure us of your continuing presence with us. Make your presence more real to us than all our sorrow. As we stand together in a sense of common loss and personal grief, help us

to know your strengthening support, your compassion and comfort . . . and that peace which you promise to give us – the peace which passes all understanding. May our fears be dispelled, our loneliness eased, our hurt healed and our hope rekindled. Lord Jesus we thank you that in dying you conquered death and in rising you secured eternal life for all who believe. So Lord, we commit John to your safekeeping; help us in our time of mourning and make this a time not just of sadness and grief but a time when we feel your presence, power and peace more than ever before. Amen.

Benediction: “And now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding be upon your hearts and minds this day and each day forward, one day at a time.”

PART B PASTORAL CARE.

1. Before the Funeral.

Most of what I want to say about this has already been said in the opening pages of this book i.e. the section entitled “Arrangements”. However there is more to pastoral care than making arrangements!

The key to pastoral care is getting to know the people you are entrusted with. I nearly said “dealing with” but the right word is “entrusted”. We as ministers are called by God to serve in His name, to be His hands and feet and voice, His ambassadors, His representatives. He calls us just as He called Simon Peter and He commands us, like Peter, to “take care of his sheep”. He entrusts them to us. (Surely that is why we wear “dog collars” for we are the sheep dogs used by the Good Shepherd to care for His lambs and sheep)!

We are also given trust by the grieving family. It is a very precious thing, perhaps the most precious thing about ministry, that people turn to you in their vulnerabilities and trust you with their fragile lives. This trust is a great honour and responsibility. Another fascinating thing is to find supposedly un-churched, non-believers, giving you as much trust as core congregational worshippers! All kinds of people with all kinds of beliefs and at all kinds of stages of development, from all walks of life, strangers and friends, they all turn to you in their distress and look for help.

It is so easy to hurt people in their fragility, so easy to say and do “the wrong thing”, so hard to find the “right” words or do the “right” thing. That many people think we have a very difficult job, one which they could never contemplate doing. They are right but then we who are called by God have God to help us and the rewards are so great. What satisfaction in being able to convey the peace of God to people in the tempests of life! There is perhaps more job satisfaction in comforting the bereaved than in any other aspect of parish ministry life.

It goes even deeper than that. Strictly speaking I should not have said that “God helps us”; I should have said rather that God is the One who comforts and we share in His ministry to His people. He is the One who is the one true Minister; we have roles within that ministry. This is a very important point. As ministers we should be aware of the difference and see God as being in control and see ourselves as merely assistant ministers. Hopefully, sooner or later, explicitly or implicitly we can convey this to the people. We personally have nothing to say. We speak a word from God. We are the signposts, He is the One we point to. He alone can resurrect the dead and He alone is the Good Shepherd who walks through the valleys with us.

This is good news for everyone including the minister for it takes away some of the stress we have. It is reassuring to know that God will give us the words to say, God will guide us as to what to do, and God will make up for any deficiencies in our words and behaviour. In other words, it is not all down to us!

One of the great skills is the ability to sit down and shut up and beyond that to give people the time of day, indeed real quality time and concentrated listening. The Samaritans used to have an instructional poster for their volunteers which said: “Don’t just say something, sit there!” It is so easy to rush in and talk nervously because we cannot cope with silence and emotion. Note: “because WE cannot cope”. It is not only the mourners who have difficulties; we the pastors can find it all embarrassing and awkward. However any good counsellor knows that what people really need and want is someone to listen to them, that is listening in the deepest sense.

Sit facing the person or persons, not round the side of their vision but in full vision. Give them strong but gentle eye contact. Prompt them to open up

and say whatever they want to say. Usually people in distress don't need too much prompting if they can discern that this person will not cut them off but really listen to what they have to say.

Sometimes you are faced with a room full of people, dogs and cats with door bells ringing and phones chirping, not to mention relatives unaccustomed to death who cannot stop chattering! Sometimes you are trying to communicate through the haze not only of grief shock but also the clouding of the mind by vallium, alcohol or cigarette smoke. Ministers rarely have the luxury of defined counselling sessions. In the face of distractions try to keep focussed on the speaker and gently lead them back to where they had stopped when they had been interrupted. It can help the family a lot to draw the whole group into listening to the speaker and get the whole body of people to think corporately. For example I encourage the gathered family group to jointly give me an outline sketch of the deceased's life. We then have a shared experience in which we all contribute and it helps everyone to listen together. By the time we are finished I end up having a prayer in which I do not pray for THEM, the family, but US the mourners. We are now bonded together, on the same side.

When going over the life of the deceased it would suit me best to get the life story in sequence but as I said, the primary function at this time is not "making arrangements" but counselling, listening, sharing, bonding. I try my best to discern the chronological sequence as I take notes but often have to settle for just writing down the details in the order I get them and then trying to unravel it all when I get back home. In such cases especially, I try to write out the unravelled version immediately, before I forget what they said.

More often than not I bring the visit to a climax by offering to pray. I try not to be pushy for I know that while prayer is a very special comfort to those who pray regularly, it can be a source of embarrassment and discomfort to those who seldom or never pray. However I continue to be amazed at how prayer can really genuinely comfort people who are not accustomed to praying. I am sure that they get a pleasant surprise themselves. When I tentatively offer they often show mild surprise followed by grunts to the effect "please yourself" or "okay then, if you like". Afterwards they are clearly moved (often to tears) but also deeply appreciative. When I pray I try to make it as natural and relaxed as possible.

I offer it gently and just at the appropriate lull in the conversation. I make minimum fuss to the extent that I do not move a muscle to change my seating position. I do not change my tone of voice – it is still conversational, only we are talking explicitly to God our Heavenly Father. I do not mention God throughout the prayer for I am not in the habit of mentioning people's names as I converse with them. He is addressed as our Heavenly Father at the beginning and thereafter I just speak in a reverent but conversational way. The prayer sums up what we have just been saying and even uses particular phrases which have recurred in the course of our dialogues. I pray ad lib (although truth be told, praying in the similar circumstance time after time I end up praying much the same thing for the same reasons). My prayer goes something like this:

“Heavenly Father we come before you this afternoon in our grief. We come to you in our sadness and weakness and confusion...with all kinds of questions buzzing around in our heads and all kinds of feelings churning inside us till we hardly know what we are feeling.

We come before you in our shock and emptiness. We thank you that at times like these we can turn to you our Heavenly Father and we thank you that we don't have to be clever and put things into fancy words, for you are God and you know how we feel. So we just open our hearts to you now and ask you to look tenderly upon us and draw close to us. Hold us by the hand and hug us close. Walk with us through the dark night and be to us as you have promised our Father. As we stand sheepishly gazing into the valley of the shadow of death and grief, be to us our Good Shepherd as you have promised.

We thank you for your support and presence with us at this time and we thank you for the support of family and friends. We pray for your blessing on all who are mourning with us near and far...especially on Sheila in Australia and we pray that she will get a quick and safe journey home before Saturday.

We also thank you for all the happy memories which came to mind just now as we looked back over Mary's long and full life. We are sad at the parting but we are also glad for all the years we have had together, all the shared experiences (the ups and the downs), and we rejoice and thank you for all the precious memories which we can now treasure.

We thank you for the great hope of resurrection and eternal life in the face of death. We thank you that Mary faces no more suffering in hospital wards but instead may find “rest from all her labours” and see you face to face in that place where you “wipe away every tear from their eyes and death is no more”. We look forward to the time when we can meet Mary once again face to face, never more to be parted. But until then we ask you to be with us and help us through each day, one day at a time, especially on Saturday at the funeral but also in the days ahead. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

In other words, I mention: (1) how we are feeling, (2) God is with us and for us, (3) the support of family and friends, (4) happy memories of our loved one, (5) resurrection, and (6) ask for help in the days to come.

I stay only a couple of minutes more and then take my leave. I wait till they recover from the emotion of the prayer but go before the conversation picks up on a new cycle of chit-chat. You just have to intuit and feel when it is the right time to go. Sometimes your movement in preparation for leaving e.g. sitting at the edge of the seat, triggers people to open up far more than hitherto. In these cases you have to stay a bit longer. Mind you, since it is a well known phenomenon for clients to clam up until the moment that you appear to be leaving, ministers (myself included) often pretend to be leaving earlier in the conversation to see if it triggers the response of opening them up. So I may have already done this! Usually however, people do speak fluently about their loved one and their feelings and after the prayer I usually take my leave. It is good to bring the visit to the climax of prayer – i.e. focussed quality time together and in the full awareness of the presence of God.

At this point there is a great temptation as you look into the helpless tear-stained eyes to promise to come back and visit before the funeral. I try at this point not to promise to do that. The worst thing is to promise and then not fulfil the promise. I may get the chance to come back – in which case it is a pleasant surprise and seen as going the extra mile – but I may be unable to get back within the next couple of days before the funeral because ministers’ schedules are full of unexpected interruptions. So it is better not to promise. Where I can, I do like to visit again, especially the evening before the funeral (which by all accounts seems to be the lowest point).

The telephone is also a great means of pastoral care. If you cannot visit the mourners, you can phone them (especially the night before the funeral). They appreciate the fact that you are thinking about them.

As the officiating minister I do not send sympathy cards. This is for much the same reason that I do not send Christmas or Easter cards to the congregation, namely that it is not really practical to send everyone a card and I do not want to send to some and not to others. You might think that it was practical to send cards to the bereaved families even if you do large numbers of funerals in a year. However, consider the further issues which this raises. You may know the son or daughter better than the widow so should you send one card to the widow and another to the son you know so well? By extension, it soon becomes more than one card per family. What about the daughter in Australia unable to come to the funeral? What if the deceased had married twice and had two widows and two families? What does it mean if they know that you routinely send cards to all your funeral families.

It would be a lot of extra work, another layer of bureaucracy, and what if you forgot to send a card on the odd occasion – it could be a source of hurt. I am not saying it is wrong to send cards but for me the balance tips in favour of not sending cards. The exception to this is that I sometimes write a comforting letter to the daughter in Australia who cannot attend her father's funeral. This is universally received as a pleasant surprise.

On that theme I have been known to send a distant relative an extract from the funeral – particularly my specific comments about the deceased and the parable(s) which I used in the funeral. I have also gone to a housebound old person who for reasons of infirmity could not attend the funeral of their son or daughter and given a summary version of the funeral just for them. I remember a lady in Dunbar who was physically unable to attend her daughter's funeral down in England so at the precise time of the funeral I sat with her and a friend in her house and we did our own "funeral". That way we felt very close in spirit to the rest of the family down in England at "the funeral proper."

After the funeral visit I telephone the undertaker to inform him/her of the hymns if we need them printed. I also telephone the organist giving the details of the funeral and the hymns and the church officer regarding which hymnbooks, if any, will be required.. I also phone the Church elder to let

them know that someone has died in their district. All pastoral care is not done by the minister. It should not and simply cannot be done by one person. This is where each congregation has to find ways of expressing the love of God to people in need. On Sunday we send flowers from the Church to the bereaved family. The person delivering the flowers may also visit depending on the circumstances. During the Sunday service we specifically pray in the intercessions not only for “all who are bereaved” but for “the bereaved family and friends of Joe Bloggs” (and maybe even mention which street they lived on. I don’t labour the point because some families may not be very keen on everyone knowing of their business, and because this might be the first time that someone in the congregation who was close to the deceased hears of their death. You do not want to distress the congregation too much. So the balance of considerations leads me to just factually mention it in the prayers of intercession. I much prefer this to announcing a death in the intimations. On the very rare occasions when a family ask me to intimate a funeral in the course of a Church service I still do it in the prayer. I just add a few words:

“We pray for the bereaved, especially the family and friends of Joe Bloggs whose funeral is tomorrow here in Church at two p.m.” People prefer to be hit with bad news under cover of prayer when all eyes are shut. Regular worshippers also know to brace themselves at this point in the service for intercessions which may be announcing a death.

The Church of Jesus Christ ministers in His name, He is the Minister, His is the ministry of comfort, but we each fulfil our little roles in His service. So the comfort and love of God is communicated through the minister, the elder, the organist, the flower deliverer, neighbours and the undertakers. In Dunbar I had the privilege of working closely with John Bald the local undertaker but also a very committed Christian. Undertakers are generally very caring and see their job as a caring profession, a vocation; but John added to that his deep Christian faith and truly ministered to the bereaved as well as serving their needs. At committals in cemeteries, when some undertakers would say “cord number one...cord number two...” John would say “Jimmy would you take the first cord?...Bert the second one is for you...” I could also say to John at the last minute “Plan B” which was our code for “I would like on this occasion to say a few words before the coffin is lowered into the grave”. This allowed me to speak about the paralysed man incident in Mark chapter two and draw out the parallels with the current situation, climaxing in my saying: “...so today we invite the friends

of Mary West to come forward and lower her to the feet of Jesus in the hope that He will raise Mary at the last from the paralysis of death to eternal life”.

2. Pastoral Care During the Funeral.

Many people seem to think of the minister as only concerned with the task of conducting the funeral. This however reduces you to a glorified (or in some cases not so glorified) “jack in the box”. They have little or no dealings with you but contact you when their loved one dies and they ask you to “do” the service. The very word “do” betrays the fact that they see things in task terms rather than in relational terms. They have little contact with you before or during the funeral and then you have little or no contact with them after the funeral, until the next loved one dies. This situation is very common. Personally I have been in this position literally hundreds of times. Parish ministers particularly have a lot of this scenario.

People may reduce your role to minimalist functionary, to merely task dimensions, but it is not a good idea and you do not have to symbiotically go along with it altogether. Indeed I work hard at pastoring throughout the days leading up to a funeral, during it and in the period following it. You might be wondering what can you do pastorally DURING the funeral.

The first glimpse of me that the bereaved family have on the day of the funeral is as I step up to the lectern to conduct the service. Some ministers make a point of welcoming mourners at the door as they arrive. This sounds like a good pastoral idea and if ministers wish to do it, why not. Personally however I do not do it. When mourners gather they are often so frightened and insecure that they just put their head down and rush into a seat. They probably would not notice the minister and they might even find it embarrassing that they just walked past the minister without speaking or acknowledging his presence. It is not really a time for standing chatting. There are also other mourners who hover around at the door of a church or crematorium waiting till the very last moment to go in (perhaps because they do not like the environment inside or because they are puffing their last cigarette!). These types of people do not like the minister hovering about in their proximity. From the minister’s point of view it is good to have peace and quiet in which to gather your own thoughts. A little detachment is necessary for you to conduct the service. I often wondered why I was more

nervous conducting weddings than I was conducting funerals, till I realised that before every wedding I share the vestry with a nervous groom and best man. Their nerves rubbed off on me and were infectious! There is no problem with that from the deceased!

So I appear at the lectern. In my church in Dunbar the pulpit was quite a long way from the nearest people so, for pastoral reasons, I got a member of the congregation to make a portable, adjustable lectern so that I could come much closer to the people. This seemed to meet with universal approval. As I walk in I try to make eye contact with the chief mourners and give them a slightly understated smile. Too much smile and you look like a Cheshire cat and out of step with the whole tenor of the situation. Too little smile and you look cold and disinterested in them. Too short an eye contact and they might miss it; too long and you draw everyone else's attention to what you are doing and to the mourners (who would probably like to be invisible at this moment)! During the opening hymn I look at the chief mourners for as long or as short a time as it takes for me to hit the right balance of involvement and detachment. Sometimes you go in to conduct a funeral and for one reason or another your mind is elsewhere to a large extent. If you look into the widow's eyes it helps you to focus and feel empathetically with the family. Sometimes you go in and you are particularly affected by the emotion of the moment and you need some professional detachment in order to serve the people. In these cases I look much less towards the immediate mourners. It is a matter of intuition and experience to guess when you have got just the right balance of involvement and detachment. "Right" in this case is not just in terms of your own benefit but so that you might all the better minister to the mourners.

During the service I keep an eagle eye on the congregation. The church officer should too of course but sometimes I have to signal (in subtle ways) to the church officer to get a drink of water for the old lady choking over her peppermint, or to bring several hymnbooks for the row on the left who seem to have rushed in without getting any. I also watch in deeper, more intuitive ways to pick up subtle nuances which will then affect what I say and how I say it. You can read audiences and it is fascinating to weigh up the differences in groups of people. I often change my Bible readings depending upon what I pick up consciously or subliminally from the congregation.

Sometimes the chief mourners are comforted by the minister often making direct eye contact with them throughout the service but on other occasions they feel very uncomfortable with the minister always looking at them. Again this is something which you have to be aware of and check for intuitively. Strong but gentle eye contact can be very comforting so it is perhaps worth erring on the side of too much rather than too little. It is also pastorally helpful to speak with a comforting sounding voice. Throughout the service it is good to vary the speed and tone of your voice. Although it is a funeral it should not be morbid nor should it be uniformly mournful. When you say "The Lord is my Shepherd" say it tenderly but also with relish as if you really believed it, knew it from personal experience and are passing on exciting good news; when you say "to mourn the loss" say it mournfully; but when you say "we give thanks for his sense of humour" say it happily, with a smile. Speak with quiet authority. Don't shout nor cajole nor preach at but convey God's love and quiet conviction of resurrection.

At the end of the service, i.e. after the benediction, I immediately move forward and shake hands with the immediate mourners, saying something like "God bless" with full but gentle eye contact and with a firm but gentle handshake. At the same time I invite the front row of mourners (the closest family) to walk out of the church with me. Then the rest of the congregation naturally follow us. This has the practical advantage of letting everyone know what to do next. In grief and confusion and in the face of unfamiliarity with churches or crematoria, people appreciate being literally led by the hand. It is also good throughout to show that they are directly at the forefront of all that is happening.

When we get to the door there is a brief moment of privacy before the rest of the congregation catch up. This is when people quickly wipe away a long-restrained tear. Once again, by intuition and experience, I judge whether to say: "just follow the undertaker out and I will be with you in a moment" or "would you like to stand here and shake hands with the congregation". Many factors come in to this calculation: Does time allow? Are we running late? Is the widow able to cope with this? Is the eldest son able for this? Is it a large or small congregation? Is the weather suitable for standing at the doorway? Are we going on to a burial or cremation where it might be more appropriate to stand shaking hands (families should not have to do it twice over)? Some families like to make a drama out of a crisis. In such a case should you encourage further opportunity for drama? Some

families are split into factions who don't speak to each other. In such a case would it be wise to almost trap them into having to shake hands and say something? People may have come from very far away and would it not be cold and inhospitable for the immediate family not to acknowledge the effort which they have made in coming? Is there a local custom about greeting people after the service? Would the chief mourners draw strength from the exercise or be more likely to be drained? Are we going to have subsequent opportunities for hand-shaking and mingling?

When I moved to Aberdeenshire I discovered the widespread practice of the chief mourners standing in a line at the front door of the church to greet the congregation as they arrived for the funeral. This was very different from the practice I had been accustomed to for all my ministry up till then. I immediately disliked it but quickly realised that it was not up for negotiation so I said little or nothing about it. However as time goes by I am increasingly reinforced in my initial thinking about it and I have long resolved that if ever I write a book about funerals such as this I will take the opportunity to argue against the practice. It is physically and psychologically very hard for the chief mourners to greet people coming to the funeral. It is a long stand, often in a cold entrance; it requires them to face people, remember names and faces, find the right words to say, cope with other people's embarrassment (for they too find it difficult to know what to say and do), cope with other people's tears and surely is not the ideal way to prepare themselves for the coming service. It means that their heads are spinning and their emotions churning so that they are not well placed to focus on the minister's opening words and who knows how long it will be before they gather their composure and can concentrate and focus on the funeral in hand. Surely it is the wrong way round for the chief mourners to be greeting and comforting others - it is the tail wagging the dog - others should be comforting them (or at least not requiring to be comforted at this particular point)! It is also assumed that mourners come into a funeral service from a low point and hopefully in the course of the service are comforted (literally in the original Latin meaning "made stronger"). Maybe then they are better placed to face the rigours of meeting and greeting people but even then nobody would blame them for wanting to run away and hide in a hole!

As minister I always stand at the door and shepherd the flock through the portal. This is especially important when I do not stand to greet people

arriving. After the service I have no other priority than to be a pastoral presence, hovering supportively and ready for any comments, questions, actions and responses. This is probably the only opportunity I can have for close contact with the majority of the people there. I try to stand quite close to the stream of mourners filing past but I try not to stand too close either. I like to stand ready to shake hands if it pleases the people but on the other hand I like them to feel free not to shake my hand also. It can be very time-consuming if everyone in a large congregation shakes your hand. Some people don't like having to shake hands and speak. On the other hand some people are moved by the service and feel strongly that they really must shake the minister's hand as a silent gesture of appreciation. One advantage of hovering with intent but not shaking hands is that an individual can jump out from the pack and take you fractionally aside and talk privately to you. These range from people posing with the minister for self publicity to very moving, sincere, confidences. These latter, momentary counsellings, are well worth missing out on lots of handshakes. It is not an exact science and you have to play it a lot by ear. Apart from my own thoughts on the matter, different congregations on different occasions have different feelings about shaking hands with the minister and the mourners.

Where a family stand to greet people I sometimes stand with them (for moral support), but usually I stand slightly away from them and give them some privacy for family business. (Certainly I never stand with them before a service). If there is a large congregation a bottleneck soon develops so I tend to stand further down the line (back inside the building a bit) so that people do not find themselves standing stationary in a queue and right in front of the minister and therefore under pressure to say something to me. I try to be available but not forceful nor forced upon people because of bottlenecks.

Any minister will tell you that there is a pastoral ministry in mingling so I loiter with the intent of being available to anyone who wishes to speak to me but I do not rush around forcing people into conversations with me. Particularly at the end of a service at a graveside, there is a very precious moment of silence immediately following the benediction. I think it is infinitely precious. If I was the mourner I would like to savour the silent, poignant moment. All too soon people come over and shake hands and engage in conversation and the moment is gone forever. This is my own personality. However there are many like me, so it is worth giving such

personalities their precious meditative moment. I therefore pronounce the benediction and then move very slowly from the grave and stand in respectful silence for a moment or two. Usually the flowers are arranged over the grave and everyone looks at everyone else wondering who will make the first move. This is the one occasion when I try not to give a lead and it buys the precious few seconds for those who want it to have their private moment.

Where possible I accept invitations to come back for a cup of tea after the funeral. This is where the mingling ministry comes into its own. I can act as a master of ceremonies announcing that tea is now served but usually I try to just quietly mingle. These conversations range from very shallow platitudes to some very deep heart to heart counselling sessions. At times like bereavement people can be much more open in their conversation and much more reflective and honest. You generally get deeper pastoral conversations with people at funerals (and in hospital beds) than you do in their homes on an average day. I find the time spent is worth it from a pastoral and indeed a mission perspective. Many people change the rest of their lives in the light of death and many start coming to Church after funerals.

Why should people ever come in from the cold and come to Church to worship God unless they have first got a reason to praise Him? Funerals are wonderful opportunities for the Church (through the minister and also through members) to give people an experience of the grace and love of God.

This is why I never take a fee and why I spend time mingling with people and why I devote so much time and energy into funerals and funeral visits. I want people to receive something for nothing; to experience real love and concern, real welcome and acceptance. Then they will have a good reason to thank God!

I have from time to time thought about the Church going into the business of undertaking and or providing the funeral teas in the church halls. It would make logistical sense and business sense. However, for the above reasons, I prefer the way that the Church keeps out of the commercial aspects and so frees itself from the difficulties of mixing pastoral care and money and frees itself for its whole *raison d'être* of conveying the grace of God through humble loving care.

I do not stay too long at funeral teas because sometimes families and individuals get embarrassed by certain members of their families and how they behave (especially if there is alcohol swilling around). It is also a private, family occasion. While there I sit with the immediate mourners for a while then drift off and mingle around the company. When I vacate the seat next to the chief mourners I usually notice that very quickly others take the chance to come and chat to them. I then find spare seats in which to mingle.

At the beginning I tend not to sit quickly because usually nobody likes to sit next to the minister! It is better to wait and then, using my intuition and discretion, choose who I will sit with. I try not to take centre stage although there is sometimes strong pressure for that to happen. Having been centre stage at the church and then the cemetery it is easy for people to naturally expect you to be the same at the tea. I work hard at not falling into this. However I often find that I have to prompt conversation between people sitting at the same table. Having just come in from a grave they are often quieter than usual. Often they do not know each other and often they abdicate responsibility for conversing to the minister. In such cases I may briefly “chair” the chit-chat but very quickly I get them started and as imperceptibly as possible drift out of the conversation. This may simply be a reflection of my personality as much as sage advice in all circumstances. The best advice is for the minister to be natural, relaxed and human! People generally greatly appreciate a busy professional spending quality time with them and their family. This is its own type of pastoral caring.

3. Pastoral Care After the Funeral.

When the funeral ends the pastoral care is only beginning. All of the above has happened so quickly – within only a few days. Now the valley of the shadow of grief stretches into the future and is measured in terms of months and years not hours and days. The funeral and pastoral care around it can help a lot to promote the longer-term recovery. Conversely they can also significantly hinder the recovery by starting things off on the wrong foot. I don't know how but some people genuinely (and naively) kid themselves on that they have got over the worst of it and are well on the way to normal life now that the funeral is over. Little do they know that what they have so far experienced is only the tip of the iceberg!

Pastoral care never is the sole preserve of the minister, although some ministers and many members of the public seem to think it is. Obviously at the funeral itself the minister comes into his or her own; but it is only for a brief moment that ministers are “relatively indispensable”. Each caring profession has its particular role within the general pastoral caring. At other moments the ambulance driver or the doctor or the undertaker or the counsellor each come into their own importance and “relative indispensability”. Beyond professional services there are family members, good friends, little gestures by relative strangers, caring organisations and their representatives, congregations etc. God’s help also comes through private and group prayer, Bible reading, meditation and so on. So the minister does not have to “do it all” nor should the minister try to do so!

So what resources are there for the pastoral care of anyone bereaved?

“Resources for Anyone Bereaved”

Bible and Prayer

Funeral Director

Minister

Family

Friends

Church Member

Doctor

Counsellor

MacMillan Nurses

Cruse

Books on Bereavement

Video: Surviving Bereavement

Rev Alex B Noble CD: “Bereavement”

Other Bereaved People

Church Organisations and Groups

Church Services

A Bereavement Group

Let's look at them in more detail.

Obviously the role of the minister is not confined to the funeral. I say "obviously" but it is not so obvious to many people, especially in a society which tends not to go to Church, and generally wonders what God, churches, ministers and faith are all about and what relevance they might have. Some people try to tip me like a waiter and think that that is the last they will see of me. This is the "jack-in-the-box, task-orientated, impersonal" model of ministry which is sadly all too common.

Ministry is relational! Relationships do not start and end at the funeral service. Even undertakers still have dealings with clients after the final bill is paid. Even doctors have contact with families after their patient has been buried. Obviously undertakers and doctors can only do a little but ministers are better placed to do even more. They can do more directly themselves and they can arrange for more to be done by others.

Directly there are severe limitations on man-hours. Very quickly the pace of life and the pace of people dying sweep you away so that realistically you can only do a few follow-up visits after a funeral. These visits can be very helpful indeed and by the end of them you can have handed over even the specific mantle of ministerial pastoral care to a range of other people including Church elders, Church members, Church counsellors as well as all the other individuals and agencies who may or may not be so overtly Christian.

It is worth remembering that Christians give Christian service within professions and voluntary bodies which do not fly overt Christian flags. For example a nurse or social worker or Cruise counsellor may well be a Christian giving as much Christian service as the person from the local congregation as such.

The minister should pay at least one or two post funeral calls on the bereaved. In some cases he/she will have an on-going relationship with them anyway (perhaps because they are members of the congregation or are likely to meet on the street or at civic events etc.)

On post-funeral visits I try to discern how they are coping and whether there are any dangerous signals. Grief causes our pendulum to swing to extremes

For example some people go reclusive and dig a metaphorical hole in which to hide from the public; others can't stop talking about their late loved one. Some stay in the house while others are never in. Some move house because the memories are too strong while others change nothing, leaving the comb at the forty five degrees angle "just as she left it" and so set up a shrine. In fact we all can swing in both directions while we have lost our even-keeledness and are off balance. In time we can return to a position of relative equilibrium and balance. It helps people to understand their own peculiar behaviour as being quite normal in such circumstances. In the course of conversation - (and talking with the minister is seen as "chatting" rather than as full blown "counselling" in people's minds)-we get round to suggestions as to where they can get help and support. I mention things like Cruse or some form of counselling, the Church, the Church of Scotland video "Surviving Bereavement" and a little booklet "Living Through Grief" by Harold Bauman (OM Publishing).

We think about which close friends or neighbours or Church members might help. I offer to get someone from the Church to visit them. I invite them to my house to meet with other bereaved people. I also offer myself also pointing out that although I am a busy man, my top priority are the people who phone me and ask me to visit them. After all Jesus Himself said: "Ask and you shall receive!" However I find that people are very independent and "do not want to be a burden" so that they almost never do call. However they feel good just knowing that they can call.

It is at this point that the district elder or other Church representative can pick up the baton of service and allow the minister to move on to new funerals and other bereaved people. The Christian team has an important role to play in supporting the bereaved. Hopefully the elder or Church representative has already a long established relationship with the bereaved person and now, at the time of special need, the benefit is gained from the establishing of the relationship. All Church leaders are not natural experts at bereavement counselling (indeed who is?). Surely then, this argues for them getting some sort of training in this special area of their work. It is not that they are ever expected to be highly trained experts but there is the danger that if they do not have a heightened awareness of the dangers they might rush in and put their foot in it and cause a lot of hurt. They should be encouraged to enter into these difficult situations for they too have had their griefs and have graduated from the school of hard knocks; they can speak as

“we mourners”. On the other hand they should also have a keen awareness of their personal limitations and the fact that no two bereavements are identical so they should hesitate to say “I know how you feel, I remember when I was bereaved, I...etc.” “I-strain” is a terrible affliction!

Church services can also be of help as can being embraced by a caring congregation whether at main diets of public worship or in house groups or Church organisations. Tender loving care is the best medicine ever. The Church services, especially if they are familiar to the bereaved person, bring the comfort of communion with God and others, an opportunity to come out of ourselves in worship, a chance to hear comforting words from God through Scripture and preaching. They can also help to put a new song back on the lips of someone who has lost the will to sing. At the deepest level it is hard to put into words exactly what God does for people, any people but particularly bereaved ones, when He reaches them through public worship. By analogy it is like a child being nurtured at its mother’s breast, or being held in a father’s arms. Anyway, it has proven to work.

Private Bible reading and prayer have also proven to work. It helps if you are familiar with both before the crisis comes but it is not absolutely necessary. It is comforting to have God Himself at the other end of our cries for help on His 24 hour answering service! It is good to be able to open a Bible and hear God say things like: “You are precious in my eyes and honoured and I love you.” “I am with you always.” “I will not fail you or forsake you.” “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” etc.

A bereavement group can also be of great help. Of course it depends largely on who comes to the group and how well it is led. It is good to offer the chance of joining one but it is not something to push people into. You would not want someone to come simply because they “owe you a favour” after burying their loved one recently! There is however a legitimate kind of pushing when it is simply a natural reluctance to meet new people. However that kind of pushing is better left to members of the family or close friends and not the person organising the group. It is very important that they come willingly and also feel free to stop attending if they do not like it. After all the aim is to be of help to the individuals concerned – not an extra burden to them.

These groups should be primarily self-help groups so the good leader will find ways to slip quietly and imperceptibly to the background having facilitated a mutual sharing of experience. It requires great sensitivity and a group consciousness at all times. While one is speaking watch the others to see how they are reacting. Know when to enter the conversation and when to take a back seat. Be flexible and creative and opportunistic. Have material for helpful inputs but use it wisely and sparingly. The atmosphere and relationships are more important than any specific input of theory. On the other hand people do appreciate insights and distilled wisdom from those who have travelled the way before them. They also appreciate theological contributions (if couched in ordinary language) and they like to hear encouraging words from Scripture and the minister. The beauty of these groups is that no two of them are identical (because people are so varied).

It can be good if the people know each other before coming to the group but it can also be a great drawback. The first group which I organised stopped after one night! They said that they appreciated the evening, they valued the contributions of everyone there, they thanked me for my efforts and they assured me that it had helped them a little. However the one reason why they did not want to continue was because they had known each other for decades in our tight-knit community. What can you do? Just keep trying different permutations I suppose!

Sooner or later a person is considered by others and indeed by themselves not as a “bereaved person” but as a “normal” person again (whatever that is)! Since the funeral they have seen themselves and been seen by others to be the bereaved mourner. Eventually they become part of the mainstream of daily life and are accepted for themselves not just as being one label ie. “mourner”. Sooner or later the fact that they have lost their nearest and dearest, while never forgotten, ceases to be the dominating and central thought about themselves. In other words life goes on. Many a mourner has said that for a long time they had been going forward looking over their shoulder to the past. Then, one day, something just “clicks” inside them and they decide that today is the day, this is the start of the rest of my life; from now on I shall look forward, not backwards. The grief is still there, and the absence still hurts but there is also much more to life than the grief and pain.

Now the pastoral care of the bereaved becomes pastoral care of the person.

PART C. ISSUES RELATED TO FUNERALS.

(1) Legalities and Practicalities.

Any person conducting a funeral would be well advised to know something about the legalities and practicalities involved in organising a funeral. This is what the mourners are currently going through on top of all their grief! When they come to arrange the service they may ask some very practical questions about wider funeral arrangements so it would be good from a pastoral angle to be able to reassure them about the following sorts of details. I am very much indebted to a Government booklet entitled “What To Do After A Death” for much of the following information:

If Death Occurs at Home:

1. Contact the family Doctor AT ONCE and especially if the death is sudden or unexpected and if the deceased or their nearest relative wished that the body or organs should be donated for transplant or for medical purposes.
The doctor will then EITHER:
 - (a) issue a certificate of the cause of death which is needed by the registrar (but only if he is satisfied that there are no unusual circumstances). If the body is to be cremated, the doctor will arrange for the signature of a second doctor which is required for the completion of a cremation certificate. Doctors charge fees for providing cremation certificates.

Note on Donating Organs: If the dead person intended to bequeath their Organs for medical research they will probably have discussed it with others but anyway they should have made a written statement to that effect. If the death happens in hospital tell the hospital authorities right away that the body or organs are intended for donation. Even if they were not, the hospital authorities may ask for donation to be considered. They will give guidance on what happens. If the body or organs are to be donated speed is of the essence. For example, eyes have to be removed within six hours; and kidneys must be removed within half an

hour of death (and so usually cannot be used if death happens at home). If the death occurs at home then inform the deceased's doctor right away and he will make the necessary arrangements. Failing that phone directly the Departments of Anatomy at the Universities of Aberdeen, St. Andrew's, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee. Remember that the family (or the Procurator Fiscal in cases which he is investigating) has lawful possession of the body after death and can over-ride the dead person's wishes regarding the disposal of the body.

If the body is to be given for medical teaching purposes, then the medical school which uses it will pay for a simple funeral and make a claim for the death grant. Some medical schools allow the relatives to arrange a private funeral. A body used for teaching or research must be buried or cremated within two years. Before a body can be accepted by a medical school there are several factors which have to be considered such as the place of death, the cause of death, the condition of the body at the time of death and the extent of demand at the medical schools. Bodies are usually refused if there has been a post-mortem or if any major organs have been removed.

OR:

(b) In a few cases the doctor will report the death to the Procurator Fiscal.

One of his jobs is to investigate deaths referred to him by doctors, the police or registrars. He will investigate any deaths which are unexpected, violent, suspicious, not obviously explained, caused by industrial disease or associated in any way with anaesthesia. In furthering his investigation he may interview anyone, call for medical reports and may order a post-mortem. He can also arrange for a fatal accident inquiry to be held if the person died from an accident at work, while in custody, or if the death was sudden, suspicious, unexplained or occurred in circumstances which give rise to serious public concern. A FAI is held in a local sheriff court where the Sheriff presides and the Fiscal examines the witnesses.

The Procurator, when arranging a FAI, gives notice of the date and place to interested parties, especially the deceased's next-of-kin. Relatives can attend the FAI and ask questions of witnesses, or be represented by a solicitor. It may be important to have a solicitor to represent people if

death was caused by a road accident or accident at work, which could lead to a claim for compensation. In certain circumstances, representatives of the dead person may be eligible for legal aid for this. When the Procurator Fiscal completes his investigation, he notifies the Registrar General of his findings.

2. Contact the nearest friend, relative or neighbour –someone to help you to think straight in the middle of a crisis – someone you trust. It helps to have someone hold your hand and go through the dark night together with you. The best friends are those who can LISTEN rather than do all the talking! The Samaritans had a profound poster for their volunteers which said: “Don’t just say something, sit there!” If you have no one then the minister, Church elder or bereavement group can each in their own ways befriend mourners to some extent. The G.P. can also be a friend in bereavement to some extent and he or she can also put mourners in touch with other counsellors and carers (e.g. Cruse, Samaritans, MacMillan Nurses etc.).

3. .Contact the Minister – your own familiar minister or the minister doing pastoral cover while they are away. It is good to have a professional with whom you have a long-standing relationship already; but this cannot always be the case. If you have no relationship with any minister, then the local Parish Minister will be very willing to come. The Church of Scotland has a legal responsibility to minister to every square inch of Scotland and any minister will be very pleased to help anyone in their time of grief. Remember that you do not have to have a minister. There is no legal obligation. In this country you need a minister or registrar to get married but anyone can bury anyone. You do not need to have a service at all! However, all things being equal, it makes sense to receive free help from a professional when it is offered. If you are an atheist or member of a sect or a devotee of some religion and would find the presence of a Christian minister embarrassing and awkward then you can turn to the rabbi, imam or whoever. Even if you want none of them, I would counsel you to turn to a friend or someone to “minister” to your physical, psychological emotional and spiritual needs. In other words, do not try facing grief alone.

If you do turn to a minister of some kind it is good etiquette to ask them for their help. I mean ask them personally and directly by telephone or by

visiting them rather than asking the undertaker or someone to indirectly ask them. Usually when we ask a favour of someone we go to them and ask. When dealing with other professionals such as the undertaker or doctor or registrar we go ourselves to them rather than asking a third person to speak to them on our behalf. (Can you tell this book is written by a minister)?

4. Contact the Police if (and only if) the death is violent, accidental or if there are unusual or suspicious circumstances or if the cause of death is not known for certain. If the Police are called, do not touch or remove anything in the room.

5. Contact the Undertaker who will arrange for the laying out of the body. You can make arrangements for a funeral yourself, but most people go to a funeral director who can take over all the arrangements. When you are in the midst of grief you are not very well placed to do a lot of organising. Undertakers see their role as more than simply looking after a multiplicity of little details; they try to be shoulders to cry on and supports to lean on. Remember not to make the final funeral arrangements until it is clear that the death does not have to be reported to the Procurator Fiscal, since that may affect the date when the funeral can be held. However you should start planning the funeral as soon as possible. In reality the day and time of a funeral depends on a number of people including for example the immediate family, the minister, the undertaker, the availability of the crematorium and so on. Undertakers often have rest rooms where the body can lie till the funeral. On the other hand you may prefer the body to be in the house.

It is general advice to get two estimates from two undertakers. People in grief are usually not interested in such details and even feel a little guilty at introducing a business note into the sensitive matter of burying their loved one. However the high cost of dying, like the high cost of living nowadays, means that like it or not you have to be financially sensible. It is not a mark of love and respect to pay far more than you perhaps can afford in order to “do right by your loved one”. (Money can also get caught up in awkward guilts around marriage arrangements in similar ways). Any funeral director who is a member of the National Association of funeral Directors (NAFD) must give a full estimate when a person first makes enquiries. This estimate will include what is called a “basic simple funeral” as well as any additional services. Remember to check when the bill will have to be paid. A “basic simple funeral” will include a coffin, a hearse and one car. It will not

include things like church or cremation fees, flowers or newspaper notices. If you are not satisfied with the service you get then NAFD have a complaints and arbitration service which you can use.

6. Find out if there is a will, and if so, where it is and who is responsible for dealing with it. It is important to find it at this early stage because it may express a wish for burial or cremation and give other important guidelines.
7. Contact Friends, Neighbours and Family.

If Death Occurs in Hospital;

The Ward Sister or the Police (if the death was accidental) will tell the nearest relative and will arrange a convenient time for them to attend the hospital. There they will be expected to identify the body (if the deceased was not a patient of the hospital); obtain a death certificate and, if necessary, permission for a post-mortem; and take away the dead person's possessions. They should tell the Ward Sister if the body or any organs are to be donated for transplant or medical research purposes. They should also, as above, contact the Minister, the Undertaker, Friends, Neighbours and Family and find out about the will.

The next step is to Register the Death.

---A death must be registered within eight days by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. It is best to register it right away. A death must be registered before a cremation or a burial can take place.

---A death can be registered by any relative of the dead person, any person present at the death, the dead person's executor or other legal representative, the occupier of the premises where the death took place or any other person possessing the information needed for registration.

---A death can be registered in Scotland either in the area where the death took place or in the area of the deceased's home address (whichever is the more convenient).

Take to the Registrar the medical certificate showing the cause of death, any pension book, certificate or document relating to any pension or allowances from public funds, the National Health Service card (if available), the dead person's birth and marriage certificates if available, insurance policies on the life of the dead person or the names of the insurance companies involved and the names of the proposers of the policies.

Tell the Registrar the date, time and place of death; the full name (including maiden name if a woman), occupation and postal address of the dead person and his or her date and place of birth.

If the dead person was married, widowed or divorced, the full name of the husband or wife to whom the deceased was married and the last occupation of the deceased. If they were married more than once then give details of the previous spouses also. The Registrar also wants to know the date of birth of the surviving widow/widower if the dead person was married at the date of death; also the full name and occupation of the dead person's father, and the full name and maiden surname of the dead person's mother; whether the dead person was in receipt of a pension or an allowance from public funds; and the name and address of the deceased's NHS doctor.

The actual death certificate is kept by the Registrar and "an extract of registration" is given out (i.e. a record of the official entry of registration). This extract, (a white sheet known as Form 14), which is free of charge, is required for the funeral to proceed and is taken to the undertaker. A separate, green certificate of registration of death (BD8), which is also free of charge, is given if required for National Insurance purposes. This is taken to the local Social Security Office when claiming death grant and/or widow's benefit. Any extra certificates (i.e. copies of the entry in the Register of Deaths) which may be needed for personal reasons, pension, insurance, savings bank, premium bonds or other purposes are charged for. It is easiest getting multiple copies all at the one time. The Registrar can also give leaflets on state benefits (death grant and widow's benefits including retirement pensions) and income tax for widows.

If the death occurs abroad, or in England, Wales or Northern Ireland then the death is registered according to the local regulations of the country you are in. After getting a certificate of death, the death should be registered with the British Consul, so that a record of the death will be kept in

Scotland. You can get a copy later from the General Register Office for Scotland, New Register House, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT. You can of course arrange for a local burial or cremation and avoid the expense of bringing the body back. However, if you want the deceased to return to Scotland, you need the death certificate and an authorisation for the removal of the body from the country of death. You may also need an authenticated translation of the foreign death certificate.

If a baby is still-born (i.e. born dead after the twenty eighth week of pregnancy), then it should be registered still-born within twenty one days. Registration consists of giving the Registrar a certificate of still-birth signed by the midwife or doctor. If no midwife or doctor was present, the parents can sign a form which they can get from the Registrar.

When it comes to Cremation or Burial, there is no right or wrong; it is simply matter of personal preference. In choosing, several factors need to be borne in mind such as the wishes of the deceased, the wishes of the next-of-kin, the relative costs of burial and cremation; the availability of burial plots or of a crematorium. The dead person's family can legally over-ride the wishes of the deceased person but it is unlikely for psychological reasons to happen – people tend to feel obliged to carry out specific requests made by their loved one before they die. In cases where the Procurator Fiscal is involved, he can over-ride everyone else when it comes to cremation. However they usually are sympathetic to the wishes of families and deceased persons and will only refuse to allow cremation in exceptional circumstances.

No one can be cremated until the cause of death is definitely known. Four forms obtainable from the undertaker or the crematorium have to be completed. They are: (1) an application form signed by the next-of-kin or executor; (2 and 3) two cremation certificates signed by the family doctor and another doctor (who will charge for this); and (4) another certificate signed by the medical referee at the crematorium. The medical referee has the power to refuse cremation, require a post-mortem examination or refer the matter to the Procurator Fiscal. Cremation cannot normally take place till the death has been registered and a certificate of registration of death issued by the Registrar has been produced to the crematorium authorities. If the death has been referred to the Procurator Fiscal, the two doctor's

cremation certificates are not needed. The procurator instead will give a certificate for cremation.

If death occurs abroad (i.e. beyond Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales) and cremation in Scotland is desired, then families have to obtain an order from the Scottish Home and Health Department. Application for this requires taking or sending a death certificate or equivalent, in English, showing clearly the cause of death, together with the application form for cremation to Scottish Home and Health Department, Division IIB St. Andrew's House, Edinburgh EH1 3DE

Most crematoria in Scotland are run by District or Islands Councils. The charges usually include the medical referee's fee and a fee for use of the chapel. They should not be charging for the services of a minister.

Ashes can be scattered or buried in a garden of remembrance at the crematorium or in a favourite spot chosen by the deceased or their loved ones. They can alternatively be scattered or buried in a churchyard or cemetery or even just kept in an urn. It is important to express a preference. Crematoria should chase up people who have not expressed their wishes. Arrangements can be made for the placing of a memorial plaque at the crematorium.

With regard to burial, families should begin by finding out if the dead person has already paid for a lair in a churchyard or cemetery, by checking the will and looking through their papers for the necessary documents. These should be given to the funeral director. If there is no prior plot, then one has to be purchased. The funeral director can help to arrange this.

Normally funerals are arranged by members of the family or by close friends. Sometimes however there is no one of this description and sometimes public authorities have to make the arrangements. When someone dies in a hospital, local authority home or temporary accommodation, sometimes the funeral is arranged by the local Health Board or Social Work Department. The Health Board may arrange and meet the cost of funerals of still-births occurring in hospitals or in the community under the National Health Service. If no other arrangements can be made, Districts or Islands Councils have a duty to bury or cremate dead persons. Funerals conducted by public authorities are conducted with

dignity and respect and bear no resemblance to the “pauper’s burials” of the past. Some local authorities prefer to carry out cremations rather than burials, but the wishes of the dead person and their relatives are normally respected.

If you think the cost of living is quite high, then wait till you see the cost of dying! Seriously though, it is important to get the cost of a funeral spelt out in advance and to check where the money will come from to pay for it all. The cost can be met from the following:

(1) The money and possessions left by the dead person. Reasonable funeral expenses take priority over other debts on the dead person’s estate. The bank account of the dead person may be frozen unless it is a joint account. The Department of National Savings, the Trustee Savings Bank and Building Societies will usually pay out amounts up to £1,500 on the evidence of the death certificate (although they are not bound to do so until “confirmation” to the estate has been obtained. If the dead person was living in a hospital or residential home, the body and possessions –up to a certain figure fixed by the relevant local authority – will be handed over to the nearest relative or to a person with written authority from whoever is dealing with the will. Any belongings worth more than the figure cannot be released until the confirmation has been obtained.

(2) The Government might in certain circumstances give grants to help pay for funerals (eg. it might not pay for still-born babies but it might pay for deaths abroad). For details you would have to check with the local benefits agency.

(3) A War Pensioner’s Funeral Grant might be paid when a war pensioner dies from disablement for which he or she gets a pension, and when no other death grant is payable.

(4) An Income Support cash grant to help pay funeral expenses may be given either if the person paying for the funeral receives income support or if they are not working full-time and their income is just above the income support level. Obviously it is best to check this out with the benefits office BEFORE making any funeral arrangements.

(5) A Cash Sum or Pension may be paid by the dead person's employer or trade union, professional body or other association.

(6) Insurance Policies of the dead person can also pay for funerals. Solicitors can look after this sort of matter but it can also be done by any individuals. The insurance company should be informed as soon as possible and they will say exactly which documents they need to expedite the matter. Insist on a receipt when handing over insurance policies. Check also the amount due to be paid before signing for any money. Make sure that all policies are still in force and that their true values are known before committing to funeral costs.

(7) A Tax Refund may be payable if the dead person was paying tax. It is worth contacting the tax office to find out if a refund is due.

The law on succession (i.e. what happens to a dead person's money and property) is very complicated and is perhaps best left in the hands of a solicitor. Legal advice is available free or at a low cost for anyone with limited means. The Citizen's Advice Bureau and Advice Shops can advise to some extent in this matter. See in particular "In the Event of Death" by David Nichols - a book published by the Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux in conjunction with the Scottish Legal Education Trust.

A WILL states what the dead person wants to happen to their money, property and possessions. It may state what the dead person wished to happen to their body; whether they preferred burial or cremation; whether their body is to be bequeathed to a hospital or whether the organs are to be donated; and may indicate what kind of a funeral they want. A will may also appoint one or more people as executors, to be responsible for paying any debts and for dealing with any money, property or possessions in the dead person's estate. It may also nominate a person to act as guardian to any children. Obviously it is important to find the will as soon as possible. Usually it is found amongst personal papers at home or in the bank, with the lawyer or with relatives. Whether or not a will is found, an executor or executors have to be quickly appointed.

An EXECUTOR is a representative of the dead person who pays off any debts or taxes and who distributes the dead person's property and possessions to those entitled to them. An executor may be named in the

deceased's will. If no executor is named or if there is no will, the solicitor or sheriff clerk will arrange for the Court to appoint an executor who will normally be the surviving spouse or the next-of-kin. An executor must (1) make an inventory list of all the money, furniture, savings and property belonging to the dead person. This is known as the dead person's "estate" (2) pay capital transfer tax if it is due. It all depends on how much the "estate" is worth. Advice can be obtained from the Capital Taxes Office, 16 Picardy Place, Edinburgh (3) obtain confirmation of the estate i.e. the legal document which gives the executor authority to receive payments due to the estate and to make payments on behalf of the estate (4) in-gather the estate and (5) distribute the estate to those entitled to it.

It is possible for an executor to handle the estate himself without the assistance of a lawyer but there is wisdom in hiring one. Both the executor's expenses and the lawyer's charges are met from the dead person's estate. Dealing with a large estate or one which includes a house can get very complicated and time consuming. If any mistakes are made the executor is legally responsible.

If an executor chooses not to employ a solicitor (in order to avoid paying solicitor's fees) then he must obtain confirmation from the court. There is a statutory confirmation fee. The local sheriff clerk will help with this. He requires (1) to see the will; (2) personal details of the dead person and their family; (3) a full list of the dead person's estate and its value as it stood at the date of death including any interest, dividends or bonuses to be added to any bank accounts, stocks and shares or insurance policies; (4) the death certificate. The sheriff clerk cannot advise an executor any further once confirmation has been obtained.

In the case where there is no will, a person wishing to be confirmed as the executor may need to obtain a "bond of caution" (pronounced "kay-shun"), which is a guarantor's agreement from an individual or from an insurance company that the executor will carry out their duties correctly and insures against losses in the handling of the estate. (A company will charge a fee for this). The Sheriff Clerk may also require the executor to return to his office with two witnesses who will confirm the executor's identity and relationship to the dead person.

After confirmation has been obtained the executor proceeds to in-gather the dead person's property. The confirmation is their authority to receive payments from banks, insurance companies and other organisations, institutions or persons who have property or money belonging to the dead person. The confirmation is needed to obtain payments. The executor on the other hand also distributes the property to those legally entitled to receive it.

If there is a will, the dead person's property and possessions will be distributed in accordance with the dead person's wishes, by executors, after confirmation has been obtained, subject to payment of the legal rights due to the deceased's spouse and children. A will can be challenged on a number of grounds e.g. if the dead person was insane when they made the will; if children were born after the will was made; or if the dead person was improperly influenced by another person when making the will. Whatever a will says, the surviving spouse and children can, if they wish, claim "legal rights" to a proportion of the estate (excluding house and land). If challenging a will you should consult a solicitor and inform the executor.

If there is no will, the dead person's estate is divided according to specific legal rules which include: "Prior Rights" (i.e. the surviving spouse's rights); "Legal Rights" (i.e. the spouse and children's rights to money and possessions after prior rights have been dealt with); and "Rules for the Remainder" (i.e. after spouse and children the rest is given to surviving relatives according to a strictly laid-down sequence namely to children first, secondly any parents, thirdly any brothers or sisters etc.). for fuller details see "Rights of Succession" which is free from any Citizen's Advice Bureau or write to Scottish Home and Health Dept., Division IIA, St. Andrew's House, Edinburgh EH1 3DE. Solicitors will also give advice on this.

If a person is living in a home which the dead person owned or rented, they should not move out of the home, sub-let or take in lodgers without getting legal advice about their rights. They should also contact the building society, the landlord or Council to arrange how the mortgage or rent should be paid in the future. It is also important to find out if there is any insurance policy covering the mortgage and if so to inform the insurance company of the death.

Debts are paid out of the estate of the dead person; relatives do not have to pay them out of their own incomes or savings. Debts have to be settled before an executor can distribute any of the estate to beneficiaries. The executor must give six months for creditors to make claims before they start distributing the estate (otherwise they may be legally liable for unpaid debts). The executor should check gas, electricity and telephone accounts, any firm where the deceased had an account, credit, hire purchase or rental agreement.

Normally it makes sense to advertise inviting creditors to make claims. If the debts are greater than the assets of an estate, the executor should seek legal advice because there are complicated rules for paying out assets to various creditors. Executors should not be rushed into parting with goods before taking legal advice. For example hire purchase goods cannot be repossessed after a third of the purchase price has been paid unless the creditor gets a court order.

There are various sources of cash help for those who are left. The social security office will help in this regard. Income Support and perhaps free prescriptions, spectacles and dental treatment may be given if a person is not in full-time work. Working Families Tax Credit is paid to people bringing up children on a low wage from work. Financial help with rent and Council Tax is paid to people who find it hard to pay these and who are not getting Income Support.

There are different kinds of payments made to widows depending on their age, the number of children they have living with them, and the amount of national insurance contributions their husband paid. These payments are made regardless of other income and are taxable. Widow's benefit ceases when a widow remarries or if she goes to live with a man as his wife. Widows can claim: (1) Widow's Allowance – paid to most widows for twenty six weeks after the husband's death; (2) Widowed Mother's Allowance – normally paid after widow's allowance ends if the widow has at least one child under nineteen receiving full-time education or if she is expecting a child by her late husband; (3) Widow's Pension – paid after widow's allowance ends and the person is aged over forty and has no dependent children or when widowed mother's allowance ends and she is over forty; (4) War Widow's Pension – paid if the husband's death resulted from service in the Forces or if he was receiving a war pension or constant attendance allowance or even if the widow has lost a son or daughter in the

Forces or if the applicant is a widower, near relative or orphan of someone who died because of Forces service. In the case of War Pensions, how much a person gets depends upon their age, their husband's rank in the Forces, the number of children they have, whether your husband was in receipt of a constant attendance allowance. If a widow decides to remarry or live with a man as his wife, she would get children's allowances only, but may also get a lump sum on remarriage. (5) Industrial Death Benefit is paid to a widow or other dependant of an employee if death is due to an accident at work or an industrial disease. (6) a Child's Special Allowance is paid to a divorced woman when her ex-husband dies (if she has not remarried and if she has a child which he helped to keep) (7) Industrial Death benefit is paid to a widower if his wife died as a result of an industrial accident or disease and if he is unable to keep himself financially and was supported financially by his wife. (8) A widower can sometimes improve his pension by using his late wife's National Insurance contributions. (9) A widower can get Invalidity Pension (based on his wife's contribution record) if he is incapable of work when his wife dies or becomes so within thirteen weeks of being widowed.

(10) A Child Benefit Increase is paid to certain lone parents if they have at least one child of their own living with them. (11) Guardian Allowance is paid if someone takes an orphan (meaning usually that both parents are dead) into their family and get child benefit for the child. (12) War Pensions payable on the death of a war disablement pensioner may be paid to the orphans, parents, near relatives or widowers of someone who has died as a result of service in the Forces.

As you can see the whole area is a very complex one and made further complicated by successive governments regularly changing the rules. By the time this book is published it may be slightly out of date. I give the information to give a flavour of the complexity and as a starting point for further enquiries. Solicitors, Advice Centres or Citizens' Advice Bureaux or the Benefits Agency can all help mourners through the legal maze!

Every individual who dies leaves behind a unique combination of things for their executor to see to, but there are some standard matters to be attended to such as the following. Executors should return....

1. Pension books, order books, Council Tax books, payable orders or Giro cheques to the local Benefits Agency. This also applies to a child benefit

book which includes payment for a child who has died. Orders should not be cashed after the death of the person.

2. The dead person's passport to the nearest passport office.
3. The deceased's driving licence to DVLC, Swansea, SA6 7GL. It is also necessary to change the ownership of the dead person's car.
4. The log book of a car, for the change of ownership to be recorded.
5. Any season tickets and membership cards of clubs and associations and claim any refunds due.
6. Library books and tickets.

Executors should enclose a note of explanation with the date of death with each of these documents.

Other people or organisations to notify or deal with might include:

- the deceased's Employers; Doctor; Dentist; Bank; Building Society; Credit Card Companies; Insurance Company; Solicitor; Accountant; Housing Association or Council Housing Department; Post Office Savings Book; Shares and Investments; Car Insurance; Inland Revenue; Police (regarding security of empty property); Organisations which the dead person attended; Water; Gas; Electricity; Telephone; Newspaper Shop; Milkman; T.V. Rental Company; Post Office (redirect mail); Estate Agent (for valuation and sale of property); Travel Agent (if booked a holiday before dying); Voluntary Services; Church where the dead person was a member and groups to whom they belonged; cancel Gift Aid commitments...etc.

The executor should tell....

- 1 The Social Work Department of the death if the dead person was getting meals on wheels, a home help, or had an appliance or aid issued by the department.
- 2 Any hospital the dead person was attending
- 3 The family doctor to cancel any home nursing
- 4 The employer and trade union
- 5 The child's teacher if a parent, brother or sister has died
- 6 The deceased person's bank.

Many people have life insurance and so the insurance company should be notified as soon as possible when someone dies. The executor should produce the policy together with a copy of the extract of registration, obtainable from the Registrar's Office. Some insurance companies have

their own particular extract and you should advise the Registrar of the insurer's name so that the correct certificate can be prepared. One copy per company is required, regardless of how many policies one has. Photocopies of the document will not be accepted by insurance companies. Some insurance companies are quicker than others in paying!

As far as the Government is concerned, some people are eligible for a grant from the Social Fund to meet "reasonable funeral expenses". A reasonable funeral is defined as a coffin, hearse and one limousine, funeral director's reasonable service costs, a wreath and necessary cemetery or crematorium charges. In order to qualify, a claimant must already be in receipt of benefit from the Social Fund. The funeral director can advise on the current qualifying benefits and any savings limits. Application forms are available at the Registrar's or Benefit offices. Claims can be made up to three months after the death. Once authorised, the claimant is advised and a Giro cheque, made payable to the funeral director, is sent to the claimant to cover all or some of the funeral cost.

Helpful Publications and Addresses.

1. "Rights of Succession"
 - Scottish Home and Health Department
St. Andrew's House,
Edinburgh EH1 3DE

2. "In the Event of Death...Wills and Inheritance in Scotland"
 - Scottish Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux,
12 Queen St.,
Edinburgh EH2 1JE
 Or Scottish Legal Education Trust
c/o 14 Perth Road, Dundee

3. "Funerals"
 - Office of Fair Trading
Field House, Bream's Buildings,
London EC4A 1PR

Addresses:- National Association of funeral Directors
57 Doughty Street, London, WC1N 2NE

Age Concern Scotland
33 Castle Street, Edinburgh, EH2 3DN

General Register Office for Scotland
New Register House, Edinburgh EH1 3YT.

(2) Fees and Gifts.

There are fees for the Church, the Organist and the Church Officer but not for the minister. Churches vary considerably in what they charge; some even choose not to charge anything as a gesture towards the grieving family. Some charge different rates for members and non-members. I find that offensive for the Church is not a club of subscribers who get benefits. Archbishop William Temple pointed out that:

“The Church is the only institution in the world which exists primarily for its non-members.”

That would even argue for charging non-members less than members! Most congregations however would settle for parity of treatment for all. My own feeling is that the Church should not subsidise people’s funerals but nor should it be a money-making exercise and most certainly not a means of punishing people for non-involvement! We should encourage people to have their funerals in Church. It is good for the Church to be able to minister – and better late than never. We have good news to share at a time of grief. The mistake is not the coming to Church after years of not attending; the mistake is the not attending.

The minister should not receive any payment especially if he or she is a Church of Scotland Parish Minister for it is their JOB to minister to everyone in their parishes. (There is a conscience clause for exceptional cases but generally it is the minister’s job). Even a non-Parish Minister should not really charge a fee. Travelling expenses however are legitimate. I say this for the following reasons:

- (1) The Church of Scotland has a duty to provide for the worship needs of its parishes.

- (2) The minister is not to be tipped like a waiter or grave digger. He or she is “an ambassador of Christ” and you would not tip an ambassador when he delivers a message.
- (3) It is generally a wise policy to separate money and people. It frees you from making differences in how you treat people according to whether and how much they might pay you.
- (4) Payments can sometimes be guilt money. People think they can cover years of non-Church involvement with a little contribution. To receive it is to foster a symbiotic relationship and ratify the psychological game.
- (5) The main reason is GRACE. It is the minister’s life work to communicate and convey the grace of God. This is a tall order! However funerals are wonderful opportunities to do this. They are rare windows of opportunity when suddenly “sales-resistant” parishioners have real, and now perceived needs and when they ask for help from God and His Church. This is the chance to let them experience God’s grace and unconditional love. We should welcome them wholeheartedly and freely give them our best efforts. Only when people experience God’s free grace will they have reason to worship Him and become part of God’s community of grace-recipients called the “Church”.

One further complication arises when ministers are unavailable through absence or ill health or through over-work. Ministers are increasingly being stretched to do more and more funerals. It is not unusual now to have over a hundred in a year. Somewhere there is a limit and if ministers do not ration how many funerals they personally will do, they will pop and end up unable to do any. The future (and the future has already begun) is that retired ministers, auxiliary ministers, readers etc. will need to do more and more funerals. This will meet with some resistance but it will have to happen. The particular point at question here is: what about payments? Parish ministers are paid a stipend and so can be free to not take payments for conducting funerals. Should not a retired minister receive at least travelling expenses for their voluntary labour? At present in the Church of Scotland they would get their travelling expenses but it would be paid by the congregation not the bereaved family. This raises certain anomalies. For example, the churches which need to make such payments the most often might be the poorest churches. Should the minister be forced to overwork simply because of the congregation’s finances? Would it not be fairer to have a central fund to which everyone could turn? Could not the bereaved family pay? It would be only a small proportion of the cost of a funeral

nowadays and after all it is the funeral service and its conduct we are discussing here. However it would be anomalous to have some funerals financed by congregations while others required families to pay. There would then be overwhelming pressure for the minister to do the service! On the other hand, if the families paid in every case, then all the previously stated arguments about no charge for the minister would be overturned. Perhaps one compromise is that we basically keep to the principle of not charging for the services of a minister (in the widest sense) but invite families to donate to a central Funeral Fund which could be used to pay non-parish ministers travelling expenses.

APPENDIX 1 The Church of Scotland's Official Position.

1. By its Declaratory Articles the Church of Scotland "acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland." (Article III)
2. Church of Scotland parish ministers therefore have responsibilities, even obligations, to their parishioners as well as to their congregation.
3. Church of Scotland parish ministers should not withhold their services from their congregation or parishioners "without sufficient reason"
Cox's Practice and Procedure in the C.of S p55
4. Funeral Directors should be informed not to include in their charges any fee for the services of a minister.
5. Any expenses claimed by a deputy in connection with a the conduct of a funeral should be met by the parish church, but no fee is payable.

APPENDIX 2 A Letter Returning a Payment for conducting a Funeral.

Dear Mr. So-and So,

Thank you very much for your kind letter and generous cheque. I was very pleased to conduct Margaret's funeral service and I am delighted to have been of some comfort to you in your bereavement. Thanks also for your earlier letter giving me lots of invaluable information about Margaret which I was able to use in the service.

I hope you will not be offended if I say thank you for your very generous gift but return the cheque to you. The reason is that I never take payments for funerals (or weddings or any other services) because it is a matter of principle. This applies not only to myself but also to other ministers. Before the Reformation (450 years ago), ministers were paid bit by bit for each service which they conducted...so the “bad boys” thought of more and more services to do until it became a racket. John Knox and John Calvin and the other Reformers of the Church said that ministers should be paid a stipend and thereafter not deal with people and money together. I have found this to be a wise principle over the years. So, contrary to what some people seem to think, there is no obligation upon people to pay ministers for services rendered...and even a 450 year old principle that they should not be paid!

If however you still feel that you would like to give a donation to the Church, or a charity, or something, then please feel free to do so – but could you do it without my knowledge or involvement? Thank you. But I stress again – you do not need to give anything anywhere. Funerals are part of my job as a Parish Minister and your kind words of thanks are more than enough. I hope to see you soon.

Yours sincerely,

(3) NO PRIVATE FUNERALS

I am very much opposed to the idea of “private funerals” but in practice I turn a “Nelson eye” to this practice. It seems to be common in my third parish but was not in my first two parishes so it obviously varies from area to area. I am almost never asked for my opinion so I sing dumb and just hope and pray that they make the wise decision. The reason I say nothing is because it is not the most important battle; it is not one I can win, and it is not one I care to die for.

There is a very important point here generally, namely that in reality the minister has very little “clout”. In life the strong have to give way to the weak and the minister tries very hard to accommodate the bereaved’s wishes. It has to come down to a matter of personal principle or Church Law or some very clear bottom line before the minister pronounces “no”. Private

funerals I find offensive but they do not constitute a case for saying “no”. (However, if given half a chance I would try to steer people away from them).

So why am I not keen on private funerals?

- 1) Worship services (and that includes funerals) are God’s things not ours. It is for Him to invite to His “party” whoever He wants, and “God so loves the world...”. Jesus said: “He who comes to me I will not cast out”, and “Come unto me ALL you who are weary and heavy-laden..” Who are we to forbid God’s children to come to Him in their time of grief? Jesus scolded His disciples for precisely that!

- 2) One of the greatest fallacies in funeral arranging is to think that it is Joe Bloggs’ funeral and that it is Joe Bloggs’ family’s funeral. A funeral is an act of worship in which God is the “star of the show”. I feel more strongly about this than any other point in the whole of this book. I am absolutely fed up of people getting this point wrong. Most of the problems derive from this core mistake. Joe Bloggs might have been a very private man and left notice in his will that he wanted a private funeral. His family might like the idea of having as few people there to see their tears as possible. However God wants to welcome whosoever wants to come. His Church, His Kingdom and His comfort are for all. This is part of a wider problem: people try to possess the funeral as they try to possess the Minister, the Church, the Bible and even God Himself. Instead they should be possessed by God, sit UNDER His Word, serve His Church, and ask the Minister for advice. In the Church of Jesus Christ there should be no “Lording it”. Indeed the pecking order is God first, others second and self third. In other words other people have higher priority than ourselves in the Church, so how can we play the master rather than servant and tell them not to come?

- (3) It hurts mourners to be cut out of the funeral which is an important stage in the grieving process. Why hurt and offend friends of the deceased unnecessarily?

- (4) It always causes confusion. There is always someone who reads in the newspaper that the funeral is “private” and who feels that they are a borderline case and they wonder if they are included or not.

- (5) Why do people want private funerals anyway? Is it for some virtuous Reasons? Is it because the deceased indicated their desire for a private funeral in their will?...or... is it for much less commendable reasons such as...
- (a) the fear of an embarrassingly low attendance if left to people to choose to come or not to come.
 - (b) because we want to be within a safe environment in case we become emotional and shed a tear and embarrass ourselves ie. small is safer.
 - (c) control freaks who want to organise every last detail and know exactly who will be there and who will not be there....perhaps because they do not want any surprises....perhaps because they want to exclude certain persons (e.g. the first wife's family)...or perhaps because at a time of impotence in the face of death they want to wield some power and control –namely the power to select who will be there.
 - (d) perhaps it is felt that society requires us to be modest and modesty forbids the making of a fuss.

You will notice that all of these reasons focus on the griever themselves rather than on other people. It is understandably self-orientated or selfish but none the less selfish and un-Christian. So think more about others and forget about “private” funerals!

(4) The Minister – Undertaker Relationship

The Minister and the Undertaker are both professional carers and both are seeking to do the best funeral possible. It is a real blessing when they work happily and harmoniously together. However they will both no doubt have strong opinions about how to do their respective jobs because they care so much about people and the important work they are doing.

There are many reasons why things could potentially go wrong. For one thing, the undertaker has a commercial element to his relationship with his customers while the minister keeps money and people well apart. The minister is primarily motivated to serve God (he serves people as his way of serving God) while the undertaker may or may not be a believer. In my own

personal experience up till now I have really enjoyed working with various undertakers. I, indeed we, have enjoyed being a team, a professional team, and delighted in together giving considerable comfort to the bereaved.

However there was one undertaker in particular with whom I did not enjoy working and all because we started from different premises (I don't mean buildings but mind-sets)! His unashamed, fundamental premise was "give the customer what they want". I can see why a commercial businessman would say that, but my premise was nothing to do with money and philosophically even came from a completely different angle. I aim to primarily serve God. I serve God by helping others. It does not always help people to give them what they want (indeed that is how we spoil children) nor does it always serve God to give people everything they want. Subsequently we disagreed on many derived matters. For example he thought that the minister had no say in the matter of hymns. His attitude was: just let the family choose them and I will go and print the hymn sheets; there is no need for the minister to do anything. My attitude was that the hymns are integrally woven in to the seamless garment of the service. I therefore should have a say in choosing them. Indeed it is for me to choose them but graciously I consult with the family. Families sometimes have strong views; sometimes they do not. Even if they choose the hymns it would make sense to co-ordinate with the person conducting the service and to tap their expertise. (Why are people so reluctant to ask experts for advice)? I would argue that the minister and the family should work together on the matter of hymns and make a joint decision. This undertaker asks people in the very heat of the crisis, within hours of the moment of death, for an instant decision; asks about hymns while asking about a lot of other things; asks without any knowledge of what the minister's theme will be; and asks without giving a knowledgeable selection or suggestions whereas the minister waits till later, takes a longer time, and gives more insights on the subject, and will have some idea of what he is going to say between the hymns. Even regular worshippers can find it hard to recall hymns on the spot. They can also choose very unsuitable ones. It usually ends up in choosing the same ones over and over again. We argue over hymns but I honestly believe that this is just one specific example which arises because underlying everything we have fundamentally different starting points, philosophies and aims.

The minister-undertaker relationship works best when there is commonly agreed good practice. Sometimes it emerges naturally as we work together but sometimes it requires discussion and even writing down the basic ground-rules of the working relationship. Whether written, spoken or unspoken, I would offer the following as being good practice. By the nature of this being a *minister's* manual I am writing from the minister's end of the relationship. However I am fully aware that a healthy relationship has to work both ways and be healthy at both ends.

1. Ideally the family should contact the minister, (as a matter of courtesy), but where the undertaker offers or is asked to do so, he should phone, e-mail or visit the minister right away, as soon as is possible. (It can be helpful to all parties to phone the minister even while the undertaker is still with the family so that arrangements can be completed quickly and conveniently). This is because funerals are pastoral matters even more than administrative matters and it is good for the grieving families to have the pastoral carer at the scene of the pastoral crisis as soon as possible. I know that the undertaker does some pastoral care while doing administrative work (and the minister does some administrative work while doing pastoral care) but it is a matter of emphasis. I know that neighbours and family and friends do most of the pastoral care, but the minister offers pastoral care from a more objective, detached, professional angle. Anyway the key point is that pastoral care begins right away without delay and it is much better having the minister sooner rather than later. Sometimes a minister helps a family more by his pastoral care before and after the funeral than by the funeral service itself.
2. The minister looks after the service aspects of the funeral. He contacts the organist or relief organist and the Church officer. He discusses hymns with the family and the organist. If the deceased was a Church member he phones their elder to let them know of the death. Later he records deaths in the Kirk Session meeting and prints them in the parish magazine. If the undertaker prints the hymn sheets it is incumbent on the minister to inform him what is to be printed right away since there is never very long to wait for the funeral.
3. When contacting the minister, the undertaker should give the following details: The full name of the deceased; the name, address and phone

number of the family member to be contacted, the day, time and place proposed for the funeral and any other information which the undertaker thinks might help the minister.

4. The undertaker should not confirm funeral times until he has consulted with the minister (in case the minister cannot make the appointed time). It is not good enough to say that we can always get another minister. It is not as simple as that. It is a pastoral matter not an administrative matter. The minister may have a long-standing deep relationship with the family so it is not just a case of getting any minister. There is also the parish system to consider. It is not just a Church of Scotland by-law but part of the law of the land in Scotland. There may be all sorts of reasons why the minister (and indeed the family) may want to do the service himself. Other ministers should also be reluctant to step on neighbouring ministers' parishes. Other ministers can cross parish boundaries "to officiate at a funeral by private invitation" but when they wish to do so they should contact the parish minister beforehand to make sure that it is all right. On the other hand, undertakers sometimes have problems getting a minister, so ministers are reminded that they should "not refuse to perform ministerial functions for a person who is resident in their parish without sufficient reason." (Cox's Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland p55).
5. The undertaker should contact the parish minister unless the family particularly express a strong wish for another minister or no minister. Even in cases where the parish minister does not conduct the funeral, he or she may well be involved with pastoral care of the bereaved family before or after the funeral. Where someone else conducts the funeral it is courtesy for them to first check with the parish minister that it is acceptable and then for the parish minister to let the undertaker know which one of them is in fact doing the funeral. It also helps undertakers to give them a map of your parish boundary.
6. Undertakers should allow plenty time for services and not put the minister (and therefore all the mourners) under time pressures. Funerals are about the transition from time to eternity so it is a cruel irony to rush it! The crematoria always seem to be like airport terminals and in a rush.

I can understand that it is simply the product of the pressure of demand. However other funeral situations ought to be and felt to be unhurried.

7. If the minister is unable to conduct the funeral he or she should arrange a supply minister. Note: the minister not the undertaker should do the phoning around to get another minister. This is because it is the Church's funeral service not the individual minister's service, not the family's service, nor the undertaker's service. Outwith the service then it is the family's bereavement and it is the undertaker's contracted job; but the act of worship is the Christian Church's function. By extension the Church should provide organist and church officer and reliefs if neither can be there. In the Church of Scotland the minister is responsible for all services in his/her church even when he/she is not there. The Church of Scotland also says that any expenses claimed by a deputy in connection with the conduct of a funeral must be met by the Parish Church, not the family. (n.b. Deputies can claim expenses from the parish church but not a fee). If the minister is away more than 24 hours he or she should inform the undertakers of their absence, of how long they will be away and of the name of their deputy. Conversely, if the undertaker does not get an immediate reply, but has received no word that the minister is away, he should keep trying to contact, leave a message on the answer machine or slip a note in the letterbox.
8. There is no fee for the minister. Such fees as there are (i.e. organist, church officer, church) are determined by the financial court of the congregation. It is very handy if the undertaker would administer the payment but he is under no obligation to do so. If the undertaker kindly agrees to make the payments on behalf of the family, it helps if the payments are made in separate envelopes and paid on the day of the funeral. The minister should let the undertaker know the names of the organist and church officer (especially if they are relief ones). The undertaker should not handle any payments for the minister (because there should be none). If people are insisting then let them directly approach the minister so that he can decline their generosity in his own personally tactful way.
9. The minister should always inform the local undertakers of times and dates when he or she will be away and who the covering minister will be

(or else give a contact telephone number). This helps the undertakers and families greatly.

10. Ministers and undertakers should be speaking and listening to each other all the time and always seeking to perfect their relationship and find ever better ways to minister to needy families. In a good relationship there should be room for suggestions, criticisms, new ideas, changes, experiments, honesty and frankness – all in love and in a common desire to continuously improve. Ministers are not undertaker’s employees (kept in their cupboards as some families seem to think); nor are they undertaker’s bosses but rather fellow caring professionals serving God and helping others. Strictly speaking we are not colleagues but parallel professionals. Again strictly speaking, people themselves should ask ministers to conduct their loved ones’ funerals. This is just common courtesy. There will be exceptions, but generally they should ask. Where an undertaker asks the minister he is doing so on the family’s behalf, not as the “funeral master of ceremonies”.

(5) A Note Regarding Undertakers.

Funeral directors play a very important role in our society by being an invaluable support to individuals and families at very vulnerable times. Undertaking is very much a caring profession. They are on call twenty four hours of the day and they have to deal with people when they are not at their best, to put it mildly. Indeed they face grief anger, tempers and tantrums as individuals reach the end of their tether and they can be caught between competing wishes of various family members. They also have to work around crematoria availability, ministerial idiosyncrasies as well as familial incompatibility! They have to deal with it all with discretion, diplomacy and confidentiality. They expedite the task in hand while also building relationships (with strangers who are distraught and whom they may not see again after an intense few days). Sometimes they do know the bereaved and have many contacts with the same family. This also presents challenges in terms of becoming emotionally involved. Undertakers also do very well to keep doing their job just after their own spouse or loved one has died. I knew one excellent undertaker – a really sensitive and caring man – who just could not face another funeral as an undertaker after his wife died. He

had to take early retirement. In passing, I also know a lady minister who came back to work after her husband died and within days found herself conducting a burial at the grave immediately next to her husband's! Sacrificial service is the name of the game for both undertakers and ministers!

Undertakers, doctors and ministers should each be contacted immediately on the occasion of a death.

When undertakers visit the bereaved they ask lots of questions including these key questions:

- What is the deceased's name, address, age, religion, place of death, doctor's name, the next of kin.?
- Has a death certificate been issued?
- Do you want burial or cremation?
- If burial, is there an existing grave or do you need a new plot?
- Which cemetery do you prefer?
- Who has the title deeds?
- Who is to own the grave?
- If cremation, what is to happen to the cremated remains?
- Do you want a Church service?
- Who is the minister?
- Do you want music, an organist and hymn sheets to be printed?
- Do you need cars?
- Do you want flowers?
- Do you want newspaper notices and/or acknowledgements/
- What style and quality of coffin would you like?
- Where is the body to rest till the funeral?

The undertaker can give advice on: registering the death; details of local cemeteries; crematorium requirements; local customs; cars; flowers; fees; gratuities. He should give a written estimate. He may provide rest rooms and he can undertake arrangements as the representative of the family.

Families must register deaths themselves. The undertaker cannot do it. Registration must be complete before a funeral can happen.

The cost of living is high, but so too is the cost of dying these days! What do you get for your money? You get a coffin; removal of the body from the

place of death to rest rooms to Church then cemetery or crematorium; a hearse; car(s); rest rooms; preparation and care of the body; administration including – arranging the cremation or burial; getting forms from doctors and hospital; paying fees to crematorium, cemetery, church, doctors, newspapers; arranging notices and flowers; making telephone calls; perhaps contacting the minister; twenty four hour availability of support. He also has all his overheads to cover. He can also help with funeral meals and gravestones and burying or scattering ashes.

Many undertakers offer funeral bonds by which you purchase your own future funeral at today's prices. The longer you live the better a bargain it is! Guaranteed pre-arranged funeral plans also have the advantage that you can plan your own funeral in detail, just as you want it. They also save your loved ones from having to pay.

There is The National Association of Funeral Directors, (NAFD which is a bit like ABTA to travel agents), which has a code of practice covering services provided by members. The code was drawn up in consultation with the Office of Fair Trading. The address is:-

The National Association of Funeral Directors,
618 Warwick Road,
Solihul,
West Midlands,
B91 1AA

They will supply a copy of the code of good practice for funeral directors. The main points of the code are:-

“Members of the National Association of Funeral Directors will:

- Keep their dealings with you confidential.
- Help you with any action you need to take – for example certification and registration. They will also tell you about social security benefits.
- Give full information about services offered, including price lists.
- Offer (if required) a basic, simple funeral which includes all necessary arrangements and provides for:
 - 1 a coffin in accordance with local custom;
 - 2 taking the deceased from a local address in normal working hours or delivery of coffin (at least 10 running miles allowed);

- 3 care of the deceased (you will be told whether this includes embalming);
- 4 provision of a hearse and one following car to the nearest local cemetery or crematorium, and conductor and bearers as necessary.
- 5 giving a written estimate of all charges, either on the spot or as soon as possible. This estimate will not be exceeded without your permission.
- 6 charging fair prices and giving a detailed account.”

“The code has four steps for dealing with complaints. If you have a problem:

1. Tell the funeral director. He will make sure that a complaint is promptly handled. If you are still not satisfied you should:
2. See a consumer adviser at a Citizens Advice Bureau; a trading standards (or consumer protection) department; if there is one, a consumer advice centre. The adviser will discuss your problem and advise you. For addresses see a phone book or ask at your town hall or council offices. If the problem is still not settled you can then:
3. Use the conciliation service of the National Association of Funeral Directors. This will deal with complaints that are not the subject of legal action. Write to: National Secretary,
National Association of Funeral Directors,
57 Doughty Street,
London,
WC1N 2NE
4. Finally, if the National Association of Funeral Directors cannot help, you can pay a fee to use an arbitration scheme set up under the code. This means an independent arbitrator will make a judgment which both you and the funeral director must accept. Your fee will be returned if the finding is in your favour. You have the right to take your complaint to court. You cannot take a case to both arbitration and court. Seek advice first.”

(6) EXTRA BITS and HANDLING AWKWARD CUSTOMERS.

I have discerned a growing trend throughout my ministry for people to ask for “extra bits” in the service. Sometimes they don’t even ask! Other ministers agree that in the past two decades more and more people want to

add bits to the service. This can be both a blessing and a curse! No longer do they leave everything to the professional; they want to have a say. This is sometimes a healthy participation and helps to make it a more powerfully comforting service, more owned by the mourners. On the other hand it can be simply an extension of our consumer society and its unhealthy attitudes. Consumerism means that the consumer is always right; others are there to serve the customer; the one paying calls the shots; ownership becomes possessiveness. The ideal would be co-operation, working on the service together, making constructive suggestions without taking over. Genuine, humble co-operation however is a rare thing; usually relationships degenerate into dominance and submissiveness (with not a little conflict till it is established who is the dominant). Unfortunately the initial contact in a pastoral situation can in some cases become a psychological wrestling match!

It is debatable whether it is easier or harder with people whom you know or with complete strangers. The funeral visit, in both cases, carries a tremendous lot of weight. It has to be principally pastoral, but also to be administrative, and be a getting to know you session while establishing ground rules as well! (Sometimes I feel that we ask too much of one funeral visit. However time and other commitments often limit us to the one, brief encounter).

The presenting situation surely is that the family ask the professional to conduct a funeral service. The family have subjective contributions to add and the professional has objective contributions to add. The funeral is enriched by both inputs. The family having asked a professional with expertise should allow the minister to plan the service at his or her discretion. The minister ought correspondingly to involve the family and elucidate information and thoughts from them. Mutual respect and a common goal go a long way to facilitating a happy inter-action and outcome.

Extra bits include suggestions such as:

- The spouse or family member reading the Bible or giving an eulogy
- Someone singing or playing music
- Flags
- Objects on top of the coffin
- Guards of honour

- Playing recorded music
- Someone giving a reading
- Reading out a message from the deceased

I have also had requests to take bits out! Once, when I was a newly ordained minister I went to a funeral home. All was going fine, when the widower suddenly said: “Do you mind if I ask you a wee favour?”

“What is that?” I replied.

“Could you skip the God-stuff?”

I fell off my perch at that in a mixture of surprise and laughter! Regaining my composure, I pointed out that a funeral does not need to be religious. Indeed, in Britain anyone can conduct a funeral – it doesn’t have to be a minister. I said that if he preferred to have a non-Christian funeral, he could have that and I would not be offended. It was his choice. However I pointed out that if that was his choice then it would not be right to ask a minister (myself or any other minister) to do it. We ministers preach. It’s like inviting a dog but asking him not to bark!

I, as a minister would not conduct a non-Christian funeral. Indeed I, as a committed Christian cannot imagine how I could possibly attempt it! Without the assurance that “the Lord is our Shepherd” and the guarantee of Resurrection in Christ there is no other comfort to give! To me a non-Christian funeral is a non-event, like bread without yeast or wine without grapes. I would go so far as to say that a non-Christian funeral is a great dis-service to the deceased and to God. People say that it would be hypocritical for Joe Bloggs to have a Christian funeral if all his life he was a rampant atheist. My reply is that what matters is not maintaining Joe’s error, but pleasing God his Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Joe may have done the wrong thing for years but we should do the right thing now.

I should say that the widower in question, thought for a moment then said: “Oh well, please yourself; just keep in the God-stuff.”

I did keep the God-stuff and in the end he thanked me for the service.

However it was not very encouraging for a new minister to realise that the widower, and no doubt many others, were just putting up with my “God-stuff”! Truth be told, he was very open and honest about it but lots of other people are thinking the same, just not saying it!

I remember being asked by a widower if he could read the Bible at his wife's funeral. I replied that if he really insisted then he could, but that I advised against it. I pointed out that he was not used to reading the Bible in public; that he had never been a widower before and so would be in uncharted waters; that his family and friends might lose sleep at the prospect of his attempting it; and that they might be more concerned with whether or not he would make it than with whatever comfort the Bible passage was meant to give. I pointed out that the reason why ministers are asked to conduct funerals is partly to allow the family to be mourners subjectively wrapped up in their grief while they, the outside professional can be more detached and objective. It is asking a lot of someone who is sitting as a mourner, facing the front, to come out to the lectern and turn round to face the congregation and seek to comfort them. It is a huge psychological shift and turn around. There is a big leap from recipient to giver...and back again. I said to the man that he probably could achieve it but at what price? He would lose some of the comfort of being the mourner in order to sacrificially stand up in public to comfort others. The man thought about it and telephoned me the next day to say that he was taking my advice and would just leave me to do the Bible reading.

This case also reveals something else which occasionally happens. I became the victim of his grief anger. Although he took my advice he spoke to me and to others about me as if I had stopped him doing the Bible reading. At one point I had to point out to him: "You remember that I did say that you could do it if you insisted!" He acknowledged this fact but still he felt angry and blamed me for something, he couldn't quite name. I am sure it is general grief anger but in particular it is the need for the minister to not only accept families' suggestions but also to reassure them that their suggestion is a wonderful idea. In their weakness and vulnerability they desperately need reassurance. This gives ministers dilemmas. How can honest professionals reassure people that their sometimes daft ideas are truly wonderful? Some ministers feel that it comes into the category of "do you like my new dress dear?" (ie. just say you like it and that it makes her look twenty years younger no matter what the reality is). I, and many other ministers feel that honesty is the best policy because vulnerable people can make bad decisions which lead to great hurt and many tears. Whatever the minister says should be said in love and with tact; however hurting families often cannot receive and hear tactfully. Sometimes no matter how tactfully you say something it is heard very hurtfully and tactlessly. This is

sometimes the price of hugging porcupines – the price of getting involved with sensitive people at the time of their greatest hurts.

There are all kinds of people at any time, but grief can often cause people to be even more selfish or irritable or demanding than usual. I remember a woman coming to the manse to ask me to conduct a funeral service. She was the classic type of the dominant woman, the “dame formidable”. At her side was her silent, subservient, hen-pecked husband. From the moment I opened the door she strode in, talking like a machine gun, laying down one demand after another in a “tour de force”. I was taken aback at first, then decided to say nothing and just let the whirlwind blow itself out. After several minutes I looked into her eyes and smiled a little. This stopped her in her tracks. She confessed: “Oh I know; I do rabbit on sometimes. I don’t mean to. It’s just my way.” A fleeting glance into the eyes of her consort confirmed that it was indeed “her way”! She was actually very nice and offered to start again, this time listening more than speaking! In a conciliatory spirit I said:

“I’m smiling because it is rare to meet someone who knows their mind so clearly. Often people do not know what they want.”

To my mind it is good when families have ideas but it is bad when they ride roughshod over the minister and others. The ideal is when people discuss respectfully and co-operate harmoniously. The problem is that in daily life relationships are not pure and in grief they can be even more contaminated. Minister and mourners are in the space of a few minutes trying to get to know each other and co-operate together at a time of great emotional stress. The days of the authority figure are passed but that demands more of both minister and mourners. It is sometimes a source of wonderment that funeral arrangements go so smoothly so often! I have to confess that in my own experience the vast majority of funeral arrangements do go smoothly – even the ones which have extra “twiddly” bits.

On reflection I suppose the minister is somewhere between the psychologist and the surgeon. The psychologist encourages the client to speak, indeed to say anything at all, while he does not react in a personal way but in a functionary way i.e. he or she is unshockable and accepts whatever the client says. At the other end of the spectrum is the surgeon who does not allow members of the family into the operating theatre and certainly does not entertain them looking over his shoulder and giving advice as he

operates on their loved one. Ministers do have more inter-action than the surgeon but not to the extent of letting the clients set all the agenda. (Apologies to any surgeons and psychologists who might object to my oversimplification of their roles but I am just trying to illustrate a limited point).

One other awkward problem comes to mind. I remember standing at the door of the crematorium just a few minutes before conducting a service while people were slowly filing in, when a young woman stopped and asked me if I would read an extract which she had in her hand. Many thoughts raced through my mind including the following:

- Oh no I've been caught! I knew I shouldn't have stood at the door!
- This could be any kind of rubbish.
- How do I get out of this one?
- Am I being too negative?
- Give it a look.

When I looked it seemed to be a strange and obscure paragraph from some "prophet". My thoughts continued:

- I've never heard of this guy! Is it Christian? Do I agree with what she wants me to stand up publicly and proclaim alongside Holy Scripture. They will maybe think it is a Bible prophet if the minister is reading it and that would be deceiving.
- This is not fair on me. My head is spinning. I cannot really take it in and understand it. Even if I do understand it I'm not sure I agree with its sentiments.
- I have no time to rehearse it so I am bound to read it badly.
- Why don't I ask the young woman herself to read it. It obviously means a lot to her so she would read it with conviction. But then who is she? Is she the deceased's daughter or someone on the periphery of the family, maybe even the black sheep who ran off to join the Moonies! Maybe she doesn't want to read it herself; she did ask me to read it. What would the family think?

You can see all the dilemmas involved and remember that they flashed through my mind in a flash. I had to reply within the time it takes to skim through a paragraph. I am tempted to leave the matter at that and not tell you what I did because the point is that each minister must come to his or her own instinctive judgments. However in kindness, to put your curiosity out of its misery, for the record, I did read a bit of it but I played it down and

couched it with the qualifying statement that on the way in someone asked me if I would read a few lines. I distanced it from myself and from Scripture and resolved not to be caught like that again!

One last footnote on that and indeed the previous points is that while I did feel used and abused a bit, the world didn't end. Often the person conducting a funeral agonises over every last detail while the general public and the mourners are not nearly so worried and don't even notice that you might have had a dilemma or two.

(7) Going Back for Tea.

Usually, though not always, there is a funeral tea. Sometimes it is just a cup of tea and sometimes it is a full meal and more often than not it is something in between. It depends on the area of the country: I have found meals common in Stirling and Dunbar but rare in Aberdeenshire where it is usually tea and biscuits. It also depends on when the funeral finishes – people are more hungry at meal times than mid-morning or mid-afternoon. It depends on whether people have had to travel a distance to attend the funeral. It also depends on the finances of the chief mourners for it can be very expensive. It can depend on the geography because sometimes the cemetery is nowhere near an eating place. It can also depend on how good or bad the relationship between the chief mourners is. Sometimes they skip having a tea if it is likely that they will fall out at it! Venues for teas can range from five star hotels to living rooms to pubs and clubs to church halls.

I have noticed that if it is a big funeral there tends to be a big drop off in the number of people who come back for their tea presumably because they say to themselves that there will be too many people if they all go back and that no one will miss them since there is such a big crowd. If it is a small funeral the attenders tend to come back for their tea presumably saying to themselves that they are needed to keep the numbers up and would be missed if they were not there. So, there tends to be an evening out of numbers. Having said that, it is by no means an exact science and estimating numbers is notoriously difficult.

Occasionally the tea is considered and advertised as private. This gives more accurate numbers of attenders, though still an estimate since people sometimes fail to turn up even after having accepted an invitation.

The minister or person conducting the funeral is often invited. I am sure that ninety-nine times out of a hundred the minister is welcome (but there is that one percent of times when you pick up other vibes)! However families in grief very often forget to invite you. This poses a problem since you do not know if they have simply overlooked the small detail of explicitly inviting you or whether this is one of those cases when they would prefer not to have you. It is further complicated when they say that the tea is private. Does that include or exclude you?

Beyond all that, from the minister's point of view, there are also difficulties. Funeral teas can be very time-consuming and energy-sapping. They are often people from beyond your parish whom you will never see again. It might be your third funeral that week; you promised to pick up the children from school, you have visits to do etc. No doubt there will be alcohol and probably smoking. Maybe they are just inviting the minister because they think it is the right thing to do in terms of etiquette but will be embarrassed if you actually do accept the invitation and come! Will the public accept you going to some funeral teas and not others? Can you go to every one? Should you therefore go to none in order to keep everyone the same? Should you keep everyone the same? How do you decide which ones to go to and which ones not to attend? Should it be decided in terms of your own busyness or should it be to do with the people? Should you make a special effort to attend funeral teas of Church members while maybe skipping some or all of non-members? Or should it be the other way round and a special effort be made, for missionary reasons, to mix with the non-Churched.

Archbishop William Temple said:

“The Church is the only organisation in the world which exists primarily for its non-members”

As you can see, it gets a bit complicated! Nearly always people seem pleased that the minister made the effort and took the time to come. They can however also be embarrassed and not know what to say or what to do with you now that you have come! There is not a rush to sit next to the minister! In fact I make a point of arriving slightly late and standing around till everyone is seated and then picking someone to sit next too, for if I sit down early on, no one wants to sit next to the minister! Once under way I work hard at putting people at their ease and they get a pleasant surprise that I am human after all!

Personally I nearly always go back for the funeral tea. Sometimes I stay longer and sometimes I stay only briefly but I try to always go. It is high on my priorities. It is part of the pastoral care package. It is even an extension of the funeral service itself if you see a funeral in relationship rather than just task terms. It is a wonderful mission opportunity. I do not mean that I rush in to preach but it is fertile ground when people are thinking about spiritual matters more than usual and I am more likely to find profitable conversations arising naturally more than at any other time. People have just been reminded of their mortality; they have just peered into eternity; they are considering the deceased's recent suffering and they are wondering what happens next after the funeral. Lots of questions are floating near the surface and the skilled fisherman waits patiently for some of them to pop up and bite. Once raised by others, I am happy to discuss the matters until they change the subject once again. There is nothing like death and funerals to bring new life into the Church. Many people have started coming to Church after a funeral. Baptisms, weddings, funerals and emergencies all recruit new interest in spiritual matters and promote Church attendance and the greatest of these is probably funerals! Time spent at funeral teas is well worth it. If I have to justify it in time-table terms I put it down as visiting time or just by building it in to my thinking that funerals take this amount of time i.e. a funeral service includes visiting time also.

(8) GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

This book is a funeral resource book and as such it would be remiss not to discuss grief and the bereavement process. However there are many excellent books on the subject already and of necessity it can only be a small part of this funeral manual. This then is simply the barest outline of things which anyone conducting funerals should be sensitive to.

There is an identifiable grief process, which because we all share a common humanity, we all go through. We are all "Jock Tamsin's bairns" as we say in Scotland. However we are also unique individuals, so we each go through the grief process at different speeds and we get stuck at different points.

Stage one – Shock.

We are dumfounded, “gob-smacked”, taken aback, hit with a sledge-hammer, knocked back on our heels, completely floored, knocked for six and the wind is taken out of our sails.

Even when death has been half expected or even long expected, it still comes as a shock (because we have prevented ourselves from thinking the “unthinkable”).

We are made in such a way that we have defence mechanisms which kick in instinctively. Like venetian blinds shutting out the sun, we put up the shutters and blank out both good and bad news. Then we proceed to let it filter in at our own speed under our own control. Shock is therefore a natural defence reaction. As such it is perfectly healthy. It is a protective layer or a mental blister. We should not therefore feel guilty for feeling shock, yet it is amazing how many people do.

In a state of shock we will probably be speechless, our throat tightens, our stomach churns and feels empty and we go totally tense all over.

Stage two – Numbness.

We feel numb and empty rather than full of strong emotions at this very early stage. We feel like a polo mint with a great big absence in the middle of our lives. The dominant thing is the absence rather than the presence of feelings. Nature’s anaesthetic is washing over us. Things seem unreal and surreal. We walk around in a daze as if we had been hit with a hammer on the head or been hit by a massive body blow to the stomach. Truth is, we have! Like a punch-drunk boxer, we reel against the ropes wincing in pain, shell-shocked!

Often in this state people raise very profound questions such as “Why?”, “Why me?”, “What have I done to deserve this?” However this is not a good time to tackle heavy theological matters. This is a time to batten down the hatches and just ride out the storm. The questions are probably not so profound as they sound at first – they are really simple ejaculatory statements or expressions of pain, grander versions of “ouch”. As a minister I find that people raise the best questions at times when they are not in a good position to answer them, and conversely when it becomes a good time

to answer their questions, they are no longer interested in answering them! It is very frustrating! Such frustration tempts us as theologians and pastors to try to address theological questions when they are raised, but it is very inappropriate and insensitive to attempt to do so as early as stage two.

Stage three – “Humming and Heying”

We believe the bad news one minute, then we do not the next! We “hum and hey”. We swing about like a pendulum in an earthquake. This is how both good news and bad news gradually sinks in. We need help to take the new data on board. One of the purposes of a funeral is to help in this respect. It is a cold, sharp shock to ram home the fact that our loved one has indeed died. How can you sit through someone’s funeral and deny their death and absence? Yet, illogically our minds try hard to do so! There is an almighty inner battle to accept or to reject the bad news. It is fantasy versus reality.

We are all creatures of habit so we can find that a long time after the death we are still setting their place at table, putting our coat on to go to the hospital or shouting upstairs to them. We can feel a little silly when these things happen but it is quite natural just by force of habit. Habit is very powerful at any time and change usually has to fight to establish its existence. This is normal, natural and healthy – especially if it was a sudden death. People who have their leg amputated still feel it itch and try to scratch it. This illustration of amputation also reminds us that bereavement is not just the loss of a very significant other; it is also the loss of a big part of ourself and our life. When a loved one dies we lose the loved one plus a part of ourselves.

After the funeral we can find ourselves “humming and heying” in another sense. We can swing like an erratic pendulum from one extreme to another. For example, some people are never in while others never go out. Some cannot stand being in the house where their loved one died; others feel guilty about going out and leaving it. Some people cannot face food while others comfort eat and find it hard to stop eating. Some people completely re-decorate the house to remove familiar things which would cause them twinges of grief pain; while others refuse to change anything at all making the house a kind of shrine – e.g. even the comb is left at the same angle on

the dressing table just as she left it! Some people have to quickly sell the house and move away; some people feel they have to live in the house for the rest of their lives! In all sorts of ways our pendulum is off-balance, swinging wildly to extremes. In early days this is not a problem. We must not be too hard on ourselves. However it is not a good time to make big, life-changing decisions which we may regret later! Best advice is to avoid taking any major decisions as far as possible at this stage. If however this stage goes on and on it becomes more worrying and probably requires us to get help from a counsellor.

Stage four – Feeling Feelings

As we begin to accept reality and face the facts, we begin to feel feelings too. After emotional constipation comes cascading waterfalls of tears and emotions. After the numbness comes the pain. When the cold ice begins to melt we get flooded with emotion. Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves and the emotions come even before the thinking and facing facts; other people are more inhibited and reserved and bottle-up and suppress emotions much more. There is no right and wrong, better or worse; it is just that there are different temperaments in people. Some are outgoing, some are inward. Some are head people and some are heart people. However we all share in common this much: we start with shock, we go numb at first then we begin to feel feelings. Some people will move quickly through this sequence while other people will take longer. It is important to let everyone go at their own speed.

When emotions pour out it can be very scary for the person involved and for those around them. Often the nearest people are themselves fellow grievers. This makes it hard for them to be sympathetic sometimes and it can cause family stress and strain. On the other hand it can make people sometimes more patient and sympathetic because they have a fellow-feeling.

Melting ice is a good thing. There is natural medicine, catharsis and therapy in allowing ourselves to feel feelings. The best advice for mourners is to feel free to feel your feelings. In other words let nature be natural. We get problems when we interfere with nature being natural e.g. when we artificially suppress feelings. Remember “Jesus wept” at the grave of Lazarus His good friend. The “Plaint of the Sufferer Psalms” beautifully

articulate what we are talking about and can bring great comfort at this stage
e.g. Psalm 6 v 2-7:

“I am worn out, O Lord; have pity on me!

Give me strength; I am completely exhausted

And my whole being is deeply troubled.

How long, O Lord, will you wait to help me?

Come and save me, Lord;

In your mercy rescue me from death...

...I am worn out with grief;

every night my bed is damp from my weeping;

my pillow is soaked with tears.

I can hardly see; my eyes are so swollen”

Other such Psalms are Psalms 13.1,2; 69.1-3; 102.1-7,9-11.

Many feelings churn around inside us till sometimes...often...we cannot identify all the ingredients of the stew! It doesn't really matter that we do identify them, it is just something we have to live through. It is not a time to be too analytical nor too hard on ourselves...not unless we get totally stuck in this stage for a long time.

If we do analyse the feelings for the purpose of this book and so that we can better understand fellow mourners, then somewhere in the mix will be anger, frustration, rage, guilt, “if-onlys”, regrets, melancholia, depression etc.

We are entitled to such feelings for death is a thief who has sneaked up on us and taken our loved one away from under our noses! We are entitled to be angry at that! Grief anger is a powerful thing! When it erupts like a volcano it can be frightening and it can dump itself on whoever comes into the room next. Grief anger is usually not focussed on its real target which really must be “life” or God. Both “life” and God are notoriously hard to hit but we can hit a friend, neighbour, the doctor, undertaker or minister or anyone in the room at the time! We blame the ambulance for being too slow or the deceased for not saying they felt that unwell. We even find ways of blaming ourselves. We should have seen the signs, we should have called the doctor more quickly etc. When we turn the anger in on ourselves we get wracked with guilt; and anger turned in on ourselves is the definition of depression at the best of times. Deep down we know that it is just rage in us rather than faults with all these other people, God, or even ourselves but we

can lose sight of that fact for a time. There is a lovely poem by a little girl which I am not able to print in full but which conveys grief anger beautifully even just in its title: “If God wanted a Gerbil...”!

It is amazing how we can so easily turn the anger in on ourselves causing guilt and depression. Maybe it is because we human beings tend to see the whole world through our own eyes (like standing inside a post box and looking out)! When we dream we are always the leading star in the film and all the action revolves around us. It is not always selfish; it is just the way we humans are. So when bad things happen to us and we ask why, we, sooner or later, answer our own question in terms of ourselves. We then hit ourselves over the head and make things worse for ourselves. It is well documented that children who are abused by adults somehow manage to blame themselves. Once people get it into their heads that it was their fault it is very hard to comfort them and convince them otherwise. Sometimes all you can do is wait till they pass through this stage. Often if not usually grief guilt is unfounded but what if it is true? What if you did murder your mother? It was the Chaplain to Cornton Vale Prison, Scotland’s only prison for women, who said to me:

“Think of the pain and agony of prisoners who really were guilty of causing the death of others. Their grief guilt is well founded and much worse than the normal grief guilt!”

All these feelings are normal, typical and to be expected. When a person who is to conduct a funeral meets the bereaved family, they can expect to encounter people in stages one to four as outlined above. Clearly these are not people at their best but people in distress and their grief numbness, grief anger or grief guilt etc. can make them difficult people to deal with. (On top of that they might be difficult people to deal with at the best of times)! However, this is our vocation and minister to them we must. Our heart goes out to them, their need cries out to us and God calls us to help them. Jesus Himself said: “Those who are well do not need a doctor, it is those who are sick who do”. We minister in Jesus name and indeed Jesus ministers to them Himself through us. This is a wonderful privilege and thrill. I personally find it the most rewarding aspect of my ministry.

When people who are as vulnerable and volatile as this are asked to organise a funeral which necessarily involves lots of questions calling for quick decisions, it would appear a recipe for disaster! Bereavement is not a

good state in which to think straight nor to choose objectively and wisely but needs must. This is where family, friends, undertakers and ministers, personal and professional helpers can all be of service.

Stage five – Chewing Over

We have a great big lump in our throat which we have to chew and chew until we can swallow it. This takes a lot longer than we imagine and certainly longer than our patience allows. If we don't get the chance or if we try to avoid chewing over things during the day, then our sub-conscious mind will grab the opportunity to chew things through the night giving us many sleepless nights. This in turn makes us very weary during the day and sets up a vicious cycle. We are scared to chew because it hurts but it is actually healthy for us. It is only nature being natural. There would be something terribly wrong if we buried granny at 3pm. Then never gave her a passing thought thereafter! Sometimes people express concern that they cannot stop chewing, night and day. Actually it is healthy. It is not us not coping (as it often feels); on the contrary it is the way we cope. This is the healing process at work, just like a blister on our skin. We have lots to chew over. There is the whole life of the person who died and all the years that we had a relationship with them – so many shared experiences and now precious memories! As well as that, a lot has happened since their death – so many people, activities, arrangements, the funeral event. Then there are profound and fundamental questions like Why? Life After Death? How shall I cope?

Fortunately we cannot chew non-stop twenty four hours a day. It has to come in fits and starts. It comes thick and fast at first like waves lashing the shore when the tide is coming in on a stormy day. Gradually, over time, the little peaks of waves of grief spread out further and further between each other until we can get enough space between them to get on with normal daily life. We will probably have little twinges of grief till the day we die, but they will spread out enough to let us enjoy life after grief. Life can and does and should go on. However that is a long way into the future. Meanwhile, all sorts of things trigger bouts of chewing. It can be seeing their empty shoes, a photo, looking at their empty chair by the fireside. It can be the strange but widely recognised phenomenon of seeing our loved one's face in many strangers' faces...everywhere you look! It can be a memory or something somebody says. It can be just about anything, and

you never know when the pang of grief will strike. It is very difficult to defend against that. We cannot really stop it happening, nor should we. We are better to accept it and embrace it and see it for what it is as the healing process at work. I once went to the Grand Canyon in the United States. I stood in awe at the edge of it! It was one mile deep, ten miles across and 248 miles round to the other side. I know it was 248 miles because I drove round from the south edge to the north edge. When we face the “valley of the shadow of death and grief” we are daunted and we long to drive round it rather than go down into it. Unfortunately grief is not able to be circumnavigated! So all we can do is put our heads down and battle through it, the quicker the better!

Well not entirely. Maybe if we go through it not just with a will but also with a desire to learn from the experience and be enriched by it, maybe even grief can be a life-enhancing experience! That is not an easy message to get across to people up to their eyes in grief and at the end of their tether. But it is still true! Maybe the time to convey this message is not in the middle of grief but in quieter days in between our griefs. Isn't it a healthy life posture to say that I shall embrace everything that life throws at me and learn from it; I shall suck the juice, assimilate the data, savour the experience, find the positive, make the most, use it to advantage, turn problems into opportunities, turn obstacles into stepping stones...whatever phrase you like! Maybe I've been reading too many self-improvement magazines! Seriously though, the Bible and Christian attitude would have us believe that death is not the last word but resurrection; that God can wipe away every tear from our eyes; that when we are at our weakest God comes and strengthens us so much that it is almost worth having the weakness to feel His enabling power surge through us!

Chewing is often done alone. Often we have no choice. People do sympathise but they cannot fully understand and they do have to get on with their own daily lives. Family can help but often they are more upset than we are! Professional people can also help but they are busy people. So we feel all alone and to a large extent we are alone. It is like exams or driving tests or dental appointments – there are some things which nobody else can do for us!

On the other hand we can and should take the opportunity when it presents itself to chew with others. Busy professionals hold it as a high priority to

spend time comforting the bereaved; friends do care enough to spend time being listening ears; and it is good, healthy, essential for families to share experiences, good and bad, together. Grieving together can really help a family to bond closer than ever before. Funerals do have an up-side in that they often help to heal family rifts. Shared grief can do wonders for strained relationships. It doesn't always work out that way of course, but it often does and it is surely worth the try. It can be very helpful in the midst of grief to find that you are not simply "the object of charity" but also able, in turn, to help other grieving members of the family. It is a wonderful thing to be part of a network or group who are simultaneously giving and receiving comfort. Often it is in helping others that we most help ourselves. We shouldn't just settle for the simplistic posture of going around with an imaginary label on our forehead saying "I am a victim" (poor me); rather we should accept the reality "yes I am a victim" but also send out the message "I am willing to share the burdens of others too".

I remember speaking to two widows on the same day. I had conducted both funerals of their husbands. One said to me: "I will never get over this." The other said: "I will get over this. Just give me time and eventually I will get over this." Surprise, surprise they were both self-fulfilling statements! One chewed things over negatively while the other chewed things over positively. It is important when chewing alone or in company that the chewing be of a positive nature. It is so easy to wallow in self-pity and sink into bitter resentment but it only leads to further grief and death. On the other hand, walking with Jesus along the valley floor can in itself be the spiritual high point of one's life! Cleopas found that on Emmaus Road!

Different people can help us in different ways as we chew over things. Some people can help us in subjective ways saying in effect "I know how you feel for I have suffered grief too" and others can help in more objective ways saying in effect "tell me, how do you feel". It is a bit like at the other end of life, in the maternity ward, fellow mothers can share similar experiences while the male gynaecologist helps from a very different angle!

Chewing has another interesting feature. It seems to naturally start by almost idolising the deceased. No bad people ever seem to get buried! Everyone has a good word to say about them. Memory only seems to remember the sunny days! I remember asking a widow to tell me about her husband. She said that he was a poacher. I then asked her to tell me

something good about him that I could say in the service. She replied in all seriousness and with some admiration: “He was a good poacher!” There is also the famous joke about a minister who was greatly perturbed while conducting a funeral because all he heard was negative whispers about the man who had died. Eventually his patience ran out and he stopped the committal at the graveside to announce: “I am not going to proceed with this committal until I hear a kind word about the deceased!”

No one moved or said a word. The minister repeated his threat, adding: “...and I am prepared to stay here all night if it takes that long to hear a kind word about John Smith.”

At long last someone stepped forward...did he jump or was he pushed?

The minister looked at him:

“Well, have you a kind word to say?”

The man hesitated, then blurted out: “His brother was worse!”

Normally there is much discussion of the life of the person who has died and it is nearly all of a favourable, even idealised nature. Then, gradually, almost imperceptibly even the pendulum swings and we begin to concede that perhaps they were not perfect, no saint, had one or two foibles, funny ways, idiosyncracies, bad habits, down right annoying faults. Then the pendulum having swung to the right and the left, the virtues and vices, settles down near the balanced middle with a truer picture and a sensible equilibrium.

Stage Six – Resurrection!

Our resurrection that is! There comes a day when we suddenly stop going forward always looking backwards over our shoulders. We decide to go forward wholeheartedly and start the rest of our lives. We no longer define ourselves as “widow”, “mourner”, “orphan”, “victim”, “poor soul” or whatever. Now we live rather than grieve. This is no disrespect to our loved one. Indeed it would please them to see us progressing. We could even dedicate our new life to them. They would not want us to stop living just because they died. There will always be tweeks of grief, tears and pangs of pain, but the dominant note will be life rather than death. All this is healthy. If we do not cut the umbilical cord it becomes a noose around our neck and it is a cruel irony if the positive loving relationship we once enjoyed becomes the very instrument of our living death. We owe it to our dear departed to live.

When we eventually come through the grief process successfully, it makes us stonger, wiser and more enriched people for it. Previous griefs strengthen and prepare us for subsequent griefs. The grief process can make us or break us. We always fear at the time that it is going to break us but usually we do make it (with help from our friends and especially God). It is not automatic, nor is it guaranteed. Some people do get stuck in the grief process for long enough and even for the rest of their lives. But we do not need to stay stuck. We can get all sorts of help both human and divine. Just ask! We are promised God's help if we ask for it and accept it. God is not a fairy godmother who waves a magic wand and instantly saves us from all danger and hardship, but He does promise to be with us in all our crucifixions – He is the one on the Cross in the middle – and He also promises that every crucifixion can come with a resurrection sooner or later after it.

This is just a quick skim through the grief process. For further, in-depth analysis of it I commend the books on the bibliography at the end of this book.

As far as help goes, God can use some or all of the following to help us, plus a lot of other ways:
 Minister, Bible, Prayer alone and with others, family, friends, Church leaders, doctors, undertakers, Macmillan Nurses, Personal Counsellors, Cruse, Books on bereavement, the Video: "Surviving Bereavement", other bereaved people, Church organisations and groups, Church Services, Bereavement Groups etc.

(9) THEOLOGY OF DEATH

There remains one last and vitally important aspect of funerals for us to touch upon: the theology of death. It would be very remiss not to say something about it, but of course a funeral manual like this can only scratch the surface. Indeed the nature of the topic, the great mystery of death, means that even the greatest work on the subject is floundering around the edges!

The last section was about the psychology of grief, this section is about the theology of death. Death throws up many profound questions such as – Why did Jimmy die? Why now? Why in this way? How am I going to cope? Why does anyone have to die? Why is there death? I particularly like the question asked by a little girl in her bedtime prayer:

“Dear God, why do you make people, then kill them?

Why don't you keep the ones you have?”

Ever since Adam, people have asked their searching questions about death, sometimes in a pastoral passionate way or in a logical philosophical way. Theologians chew over things like:

Is death God's will? Is death good or bad, friend or foe? What happens when we die? Is there life after death? If so, what is it like? Is there Heaven and Hell and if so, what are they like? How does the fact of death square with a loving God? How has the life, death and resurrection of God Himself changed anything? How has it affected our experience of death?

Those of us who conduct funerals should know something about the grief process, but we should also know something about the theology of death. We will not be much help to people if we have nothing to say on the subject!

Everyone has their own thoughts, intuitions, opinions, prejudices and preconceptions on the matter of death. We tend not to talk a lot about it nor to entertain the thoughts too often at the front of our minds, but we are all aware of the fact of death and life has a great way of throwing death in our face from time to time. When we are pushed into the valley of grief and forced to think a lot about death, we know that it is a great mystery which we will never solve until we see Jesus face to face. We also know that we cannot find comfort in the here and now from mere speculations and guesses. Pub arguments about life after death work in the pub but do not substantially comfort at a graveside! We need substantial food to sustain us as mourners and we need something substantial if we are to be comforters of others. Basically what we all need is real Good News in the midst of bad news.

Fundamentally funerals make two great theological statements, namely –

- (1) God is with us!
- (2) God gives us resurrection from death and from grief!

In support of the former proposition, we sing or read things like Psalm 23 reminding ourselves that Almighty God is with us like a Good Shepherd looking after his frightened and hesitant sheep.

“The Lord is my shepherd...

...even though I go through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will not be afraid, for you are with me.”

It is quite a claim when you think about it! It presumes that God exists! It also presumes that God is loving, nice not nasty! (Many people concede that God exists but think that He is very nasty filling cancer wards and cemeteries, causing earthquakes and famines etc)! It further presumes that the loving God who exists loves not only everyone in general but also me in particular! Some find this “too good to be true”! (What a horrid expression)! Some people believe that God loves the world in general – John 3.16 says “God so loved the world...” – but they find it hard to believe or feel that He loves them personally. At the age of nine I was singing the hymn “Jesus loves me” when I suddenly stopped singing. The words hit me. I thought about what they were claiming. I concluded that I could no honestly sing them, so I stopped singing them. In fact I stopped singing this hymn for three years, until my little sister, aged eleven, said something . I can’t remember what she said but whatever it was I was able once again to sing honestly: “Jesus loves me”! And I have been able to sing it ever since. Indeed as I get older I find that I can sing it with increasing conviction and understanding! Karl Barth, the great theologian, preacher, professor and author of shelves of books was once asked to sum up all of his lifetime’s theology. He paused briefly, then started singing: “Jesus loves me”! He said that if we forgot everything else, cling to that. After all is said and done, if we can really believe and feel that Jesus is truly personally loving us, then it is a tremendous comfort and it enables us to overcome life and death, grief and everything that comes our way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer another great theologian, and martyr under the Nazis, declared:

“God is WITH us, and God is FOR us”

The other great comfort is Resurrection! – resurrection in two senses: (a) in terms of life beyond the grave for the deceased and (b) in terms of life beyond grief for the mourners. So we quote passages such as Jesus words to the dying thief: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23.43)

and the Psalmist's words: "Sorrow may last for a night but joy comes in the morning" (Ps.30.5).

Resurrection gives a completely different perspective on death. Instead of looking out on an infinite abyss of nothingness, there is the prospect of a greater life to come. Metaphorically, instead of falling over the edge of a cliff it becomes a re-birth from the womb of earthly life into the fuller life of eternity! Something dreaded becomes something desired; the source of nightmares becomes the promoter of dreams. Resurrection reduces death to merely a temporary separation. We are much happier at the airport waving goodbye to loved ones when they are only going on a temporary holiday rather than permanently emigrating. These metaphors are vitally important because the more I conduct funerals and relate with bereaved people, the more I grow convinced that how we cope with death and indeed how we cope with life, largely depends on what mental pictures we have of them. I like to see death as a cocoon, a transitional phase between crawling around this earth at one time and place, like a caterpillar, quickly followed by temporary sleep and then re-birth and liberation into a new and greater life, like a butterfly. Death is but a doorway from this life into the next – simultaneously an ending and a new beginning. At the Queen Mother's funeral (9TH April 2002), the Dean of Westminster said:

"Death is nothing but a horizon
and a horizon is nothing but the limit of our sight."

Death is not easily defined nor described. It is hard to pin down accurately and comprehensively by prepositional statements. That is why I prefer to discuss the theology of death in terms of parables and images. A picture sometimes speaks more eloquently than a thousand words. However every metaphor and analogy has its limits too.

Other images of death, (and there are very many), include – Jacob's Ladder (the meeting place of heaven and earth, time and eternity, things visible and invisible); temporary silence between musical notes (between hearing their voice on earth and one day hearing it in heaven); sleep after a long hard life and before awakening at the dawn of the eternal day; God's gracious gift; crossing the river Jordan (the narrow stream of death) marking the end of wandering in the wilderness and the beginning of life in the promised land. For more on these and other images and parables of death see my other book: "Sunshine Through Shadows".

It is a legitimate question to ask at this point: How do I know? I haven't died yet, so I am not talking from personal experience! Nor have I talked to other people who have died to find out from them! So is it all pure speculation and wishful thinking? No. I am getting all my theology of death from a trinity of sources: (a) the Word of God written, the Bible; (b) the Word of God spoken by the Church and (c) the Word of God lived out in flesh and blood, Jesus Christ. All three are easily misunderstood individually, but when all three agree that is for me and other Christians "the bottom line". Where one is out of step with the other two, then there is a system of check and balance with which to work things out. The Bible, the worldwide Church in all its varieties and Jesus all agree that there is life after death so we take God's Word for it. Jesus indeed demonstrated this fact by dying and rising again from the grave. He is the one who came back to tell us! Still some people will not believe. So what is their bottom line? Everyone has a bottom line but we do not all know our own bottom lines. What is yours? Not all bottom lines are valid either! Is yours? It really comes down to whether or not you take Jesus seriously or not. Either He is God Himself come down to earth, incarnate in flesh and blood, revealing divinity and humanity or He is not. If He is God, then this is His world, it spins His way, and we had better believe what He says. We cannot go behind God and measure Him by something greater! Many people try to but it turns out that what they are really doing is projecting themselves and their own pre-judgments. The truly scientific thing to do is to be open-minded and truly listen to what the controller of the destiny of individuals and worlds is saying and doing. The Lord of life, death and life beyond this life is the only legitimate source of information on these three linked activities! So it boils down to the fact that Jesus is the basis of our hope and Jesus our God is the guarantee that we shall live after death.

We cannot now turn to what Jesus says about life after death – that is an infinite subject for other books to try to tackle. All we can do here is register the facts that Jesus often spoke about life after death, Heaven and Hell, the importance of getting ready for eternity, the certainty that life will end for each of us and time and history will end for the world, and that He Himself would come in all His glory at the end of time (ie. His second coming).

But what of death itself, regardless of what will happen after it? Death starts off in the Bible as something bad but by the end is transformed by Jesus into something to look forward to! In Genesis Adam and Eve sin and because of that they die. “The wages of sin is death” says the Bible. Death is punishment. Death is the logical and unavoidable consequence of doing wrong. We naturally tend to think of death in negative ways e.g. it is a thief sneaking up on us and robbing us of the precious gift of life and stealing away our loved ones. Death is the last enemy as far as we are concerned. Death rightly conjures up images of decay, corruption, darkness, haunting shadow, anti-life, emptiness, barrenness, numbness, ugliness etc. However God comes down to us and our predicament, since we could never reach up to Him nor solve our own problems. He comes as Jesus of Nazareth. He comes to us as one who can turn disease into health, despair into hope, death into life. He took the Cross – the worst thing imaginable, an instrument of torture and death, the symbol of everything evil and He made it into the very means by which our sins are forgiven, our souls redeemed, our relationship with Him restored and our eternal life made possible. By His own life, death and Resurrection, God conquered evil, wiped the slate clean, pioneered the way for each of us to rise and transformed even ugly death into the very means of our transition from a lesser temporal life into a richer eternal life! That is why we call the day of His death “Good Friday”. He died for us, representing us. He died our death on our behalf. He took the sting out of death and robbed the grave of its victory. United to Him we can rise! It is a bit like a group of mountain climbers with all their equipment tied to each other by a rope. The leading climber pioneers the way upward, working out the hand-holds and foot-holds. The rest follow in his steps and so he leads them up from the valley of death to the mountain-top experience with all its exhilaration and triumphant joy! So death, something bad in itself, is transformed into the experience of resurrection and becomes the gateway to eternal life. Death, which begins as the ultimate enemy to fight against, becomes something to embrace heartily. When I say “embrace heartily” I mean theologically. I know that in practice we have good reason to fear the possibly painful and untimely ways of dying which we see all around us. But that is fear of method not of the fact of death. It is a bit like a mother facing the prospect of giving birth. On the one hand she longs to give birth – she may have spent years working towards this goal; it is her hope and dream; but on the other hand she has good reason to dread labour pains and be wary of the risks involved in giving birth. On balance she embraces it all willingly and certainly after the

birth is successfully completed she rejoices in it. It is also worth noting that just as there is no birth without labour pains, so there is no access to eternal life except through death. God does not give us immortality so that we never die; what he gives us is resurrection from death. We must face death but we no longer need fear it.

CONCLUSION

This funeral resource book has been designed for anyone privileged to conduct someone else's funeral. We have looked in detail at the elements of the funeral service. We have thought about the pastoral care before, during and after the funeral. Now we have considered many issues related to funerals including practical details, legalities, the grief process and the theology of death. Like life itself, there are so many interesting areas which we might have explored in much more depth, but time and space runs out on us. Hopefully however we have picked up a few helpful hints in the passing which might stand us in good stead in the future. It is interesting to think that one day we shall see God face to face and know all the answers. Until then we keep striving for incremental improvement! May God bless your own life and death and may He make you a blessing to others facing their lives, deaths and bereavements.

APPENDIX 1: A Complete Funeral in the Light of All the Above

Below is a verbatim script of the funeral of Craig Mackie which I conducted.

“The Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

We are gathered here today to mourn the loss of CRAIG MACKIE. We are here to give thanks to God for his life and commit him back to God. But before we proceed any further, I am afraid that I have some more bad news to pass on to you. Within the last half hour his mother, Ella, has taken ill and has had to be rushed to the Western Hospital. It is probably a stroke.

This is for us a double body blow! The funeral of Craig is bad enough!
 Now this! It's not fair is it? Why us? Why now at Christmas time? Why?

Now is not a time for clever theories. Now is the time for someone to step in and help us. Now is the time for God to be God. Well the good news is that God is with us in our troubles – not saving us from the world's miseries, but walking with us step by step to see us through eventually.

Listen to the Word of God:

“Jesus got into a boat, and His disciples went with Him. Suddenly a fierce storm hit the lake and the boat was in danger of sinking. But Jesus was asleep! The disciples went to Him and woke Him up. “Save us Lord,” they said, “we are about to die!”

“Why are you so frightened?” Jesus answered. “How little faith you have!” Then He got up and ordered the wind and the waves to stop, and there was a great calm! Everyone was amazed. “What kind of man is this?” they said, “even the wind and waves obey Him!”

Let us PRAY:

O Master of the wind and waves, we come to you now like the disciples came to you that night on the Sea of Galilee. We turn to you in our distress. We bring to you all that is in our hearts and minds. You know our deepest thoughts and feelings, even if we cannot put them into clever words. You know the questions in our minds today: Why? Why Craig? Why this way? Why now? Why us? We also pray for his mother in hospital at this moment. You know the mixture of feelings swirling around inside us .. crashing in upon us like waves beating the shore. O Lord we feel all at sea .. caught in a storm .. battered and bruised. We confess that we are out of our depth, awash with grief. Our eyes are blinded with grief and we are in danger of drowning in overwhelming emotions. O Lord our God, make haste to help us lest we perish!

Almighty God, stand up in the middle of our storm today, and command the wind and waves to be still. Give to your disciples once again the peace that only You can give...the peace that passes all understanding...peace even in the middle of life's storms. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Be still and know that He is God. Praise be to you O God who gives us the victory! Amen.

HYMN 387 “The Lord’s my Shepherd”.

BIBLE READINGS:

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...even though I go through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me”

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth, the hills and all ..”

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

“...Therefore cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you.”

God says: “Call to me when trouble comes; I will save you, and you will praise me.”

Today we have the comfort of knowing that God is with us; and when God is with us it makes a very big difference... Hear again the Word of God:

“Those of our people who have died will live again! Their bodies will come back to life. All those sleeping in their graves will wake up and sing for joy. As the sparkling dew refreshes the earth, so the Lord will revive those who have long been dead.”

Jesus said: “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes on me has everlasting life.” ... “Because I live, you will live also” ... “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, even though he die, yet shall he live.”
Amen.

TALK

Today we mourn the loss of Craig Mackie. Today the rest of the world is celebrating Christmas. It’s not fair, is it? Everybody’s happy but we’re sad. We’re millions of light years away from “Jingle bells”, dreams of “White Christmas” tinsel and trees and turkeys. Listen to the angels that First Christmas. “Peace on earth”. That’s a laugh! That’s not us! Not this Christmas. Yet ... when you think about it, we are not far from the real Christmas ... not the commercial Christmas, not the season of Santa Claus

Our comfort is that God is with us, even as He came to that stable in Bethlehem; and God is with us to heal and help and save. He alone is the guarantee of resurrection for Craig and he alone is our refuge and strength through grief.

Let us PRAY:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Baby of Bethlehem and also King of Kings, the One True Living God...we humbly ask you to make Christmas an experience in OUR lives. As You came down to Earth, to a stable in Bethlehem, come down to us again, here and now. As you transformed the shepherds and the wise men, transform us! Turn our weakness into strength; our fear into courage; our doubts into trust; our despair into hope; our restlessness into peace and our sorrow into joy. Come into our messy stables and cleanse us and renew us and revive us we pray.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks today for the life of Craig Mackie. We are grateful for all that Craig means to each one of us gathered here. We remember him as a friend, neighbour, workmate and especially as a son, grandson, brother and boyfriend.

Today we mourn in our loss and we are sad at the parting, but we also give thanks. We come into your house O God, to give you thanks for the times we have had together, she shared experiences we have come through together, and for the precious memories which we can now treasure. Even now we look back in grateful and affectionate memory upon Craig's life.

We think of him as a little baby born on the 26th September 1972 in Musselburgh, the son of a Torness worker, with one brother (Darren).

We think of Craig as a little boy, growing up in Musselburgh, a pupil of Wallyford Primary...then as a teenager, moving to Dunbar (in 1985) and attending Dunbar Grammar School. Then at the age of 16, leaving school and going to Esk Valley College to do Business Studies...working in the office of a wholesaler's in Edinburgh...for the past 4 years working in Torness Power Station where his dad also works...working as an assistant chemist and attending day release classes at Napier College...training to be a chemist.

We remember Craig living at 16 Woodbush Court with John, Ella and Darren, then moving into his own flat in March 1993...(20a Westport, Dunbar).

Heavenly Father, we each come today with our own mental pictures and memories and we each give thanks in our own way. We remember Craig in the boy scouts .. watching Hibs at Easter Road .. a member of the East Lothian Hibs Supporters Club .. playing golf at Winterfield Golf Club .. playing snooker and in the darts team (with his dad) at Phil Murray's .. loving his music .. playing it all the time (even on his answer phone) .. enjoying company

Lord God, his Creator, we thank you for creating the life of Craig Mackie. Lord God, his Sustainer, we thank you for sustaining him for these 21 years. Oh Lord, make it not so much our grief as our joy to release him to you this day, for in your merciful and tender hands we trust that he is safe and secure.”

HYMN 673 “Be Still My Soul”

BENEDICTION: “And now may the peace of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)...the peace which passes all understanding, be upon your hearts and minds this day, and each day forward, one day at a time, now and forever Amen.”

AT THE CEMETERY

Imagine that we are standing at the edge of the seashore. Out in the bay is a beautiful white yacht. As we stand watching, her sails are unfurled to the morning breeze, she lifts her anchor and she begins to glide gently across the glistening water. We watch until she becomes just a white speck on the horizon where the sea and sky mingle. Then someone shouts from the back of the crowd: “Look, there, she’s gone!” Gone where? Gone from sight, that is all. Even at that moment there are eyes watching her coming and other glad souls taking up the glad shout: “Look, there, she’s coming!”
(Courtesy of Scottish Bible Society)

COMMITTAL

Jesus says: “Fear not. I am the first and the last. I am He who lived and died and am alive for evermore ... Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first-fruits of those who sleep ... Jesus said: I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, even though he die, yet shall he live”

Forasmuch as it has pleased Almighty God to receive to Himself the soul of our brother here departed... CRAIG JAMES MACKIE ...we commit his soul to the earth, earth to earth, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us PRAY...

“O Lord our God, as we stand here today before this open grave, our minds go back 2,000 years to an empty tomb in Palestine. We thank you that by your own death and resurrection you have secured a way for Craig and each one of us to rise beyond death. So in confidence we commit Craig to your safe-keeping; and we ask you to be near to each one of us personally, and all of us together, as family and friends, till this becomes not just a time of sadness and tears, but also a time when we experience more real than ever before in our lives, your presence, your power beyond our own power and your peace...”

BENEDICTION: “Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, may He grant you His peace now and always. Amen.”

APPENDIX 2 A Letter to Someone Recently Bereaved

Dear Robert,

I was very sorry to hear about Dolores’ death. The family kept me informed about her illness – but no matter how ill a person is, death always comes as a shock.

Words are so inadequate at times in trying to express feelings, but I just want to say that, like your other friends, I share in your bereavement...and like your other friends, I am praying for you and your family.

I don't want to preach at you but may I offer you some pastoral counsel? At a time like this, when everything looks so black and unfair, don't fall back on your faith. Your faith will come and go (and at this moment it may be inclined to "go"). Your faith is not strong enough to support you. Rather then, fall back on God's promises – for no matter what happens, they never fail. The one thing you can depend upon and be sure about is that God always keeps His promises:

“I will never fail you nor forsake you.” (Heb.13.5)

“My grace is sufficient for you.” (2Cor.12.9)

“I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live...and he who lives and believes in Me shall never die.” (Jn.11.25)

And remember:

- “God is too kind to be cruel; too wise to err.”
- As Jesus, God died Himself.
- As Jesus, He rose again from the dead.
- He can raise Dolores to eternal life.
- He can raise you and me one day to meet her again.
- And He can raise you and me in time from our grief.

So, Robert, you “need not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” (1Thess.4)

I wish I could be there to speak face to face and heart to heart with you but you can be sure that our loving Heavenly Father is with you to hold your hand and whisper comforts like: Rom.8.31-39; Jn.14.1f.; Psalm 23; Psalm 121; Isa. 25.8-9; 26.3-4; Rev.21.1-4.

Above all Robert, remember that God does not lighten our burdens so much as increase our strength. He does not give us neat solutions to life's mysteries so much as stand with us – a living and powerful presence. You will not have any clever answer to the mystery of Dolores' death, but if you turn on your cross to Jesus (like the penitent thief did) and say: “Jesus, remember me”, then you too will experience the most wonderful thing in life – sharing close communion with God Himself. When we share crosses together with Jesus then it becomes amazingly true, as He promised:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

God will bless you in the days ahead as you go through the valley of the shadow of death and grief and He will lead you back into the sunshine again.

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