

# Candour



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of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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## Funerals



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# Contents

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We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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## EDITORIAL

Jose Reader ..... 3

## ESSAYS

Ministers and their grief ..... 4

*Rose Luxford*

The funeral: the service of witness to ..... 7  
the resurrection as this is your life

*Allister Lane*

Funerals in a rural parish ..... 9

*Stephanie Wells*

Funerals: issues and reflections for ministers .... 11

*Martin Fey*

Reflections of a rest home chaplain ..... 14

*Jan Gough*

AES column ..... 15

*Martin Baker*

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# What makes a funeral?

Jose Reader\*

**I have attended several funerals recently; and as I reflected about these while editing this edition of *Candour*, it became clear that they all had several things in common – despite the fact that they ranged from explicitly secular to overtly Christian.**

The toddler daughter of a good friend passed away after an illness that had plagued most of her young life. The church was full of friends and family giving thanks for the short, yet full life of this well-loved young child. The family are active members of their church, and the service included all the traditional elements of a Christian funeral.

This is in sharp contrast to a secular funeral that I attended late last year. A family friend passed away after a long battle with cancer. He was a young man – in his mid-forties – and was survived by his wife and teenage children. Not having had anything to do with organised religion throughout his adult life, he requested no “God-stuff” at his funeral; accordingly his memorial service was held in a community hall and his best friend officiated. Rock songs were played and poems read.

I’ve also attended a tangi recently. The deceased was a spiritual man, but not in an organised religion sort of way. He lay in state at his marae, and the service was led by the pastor associated with the marae. At this service, Christian messages, hymns, and readings sat easily alongside traditional Maori rituals and practices (for example, the deceased was never left alone after death; a family member was always present with him from the moment he passed until he was laid to rest).

These were all very different events to mark the rite of passage from life to death. So, what makes a “proper” funeral? Is it what minister wants, what the family wants, or is it some combination of these things? I’ll leave that as a question for you to ponder, while reading the articles in this edition that reflect on what makes a funeral. Both Allister Lane and Martin Fey offer thoughts for ministers that contrast secular and Christian funerals. Jan Gough, a Presbyterian elder, shares her experiences as a rest home chaplain; Stephanie Wells offers insights into funerals in a rural parish context, and Rose Luxford discusses the important question of how ministers process their own grief.

The July edition of *Candour* will have the theme “Ministry in multicultural New Zealand”. Contributions are welcome and can be emailed to [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz); the deadline will be 1 July 2011.

*\*Jose Reader is a former communications manager of the Presbyterian Church and guest editor of Candour.*

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# Ministers and their grief

*Rose Luxford, St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Oamaru.*

**In 2008 I had two months study leave at the Knox Centre for Leadership and Ministry looking at "Insights into questions about death, and ministers and their grief". In this article I concentrate on ministers and their grief.**

How do ministers process their grief? From conversations I have had with others, taking funerals can take its toll on ministers. There are times when there is a whole run of funerals in a parish, and these not only take time in preparation, in leading the service, in spending time with the family, but they also impact with the loss of people from our communities.

A minister once said to me that after you have been in a parish for a while, you begin to bury your friends. Over time, relationships develop and when members of the parish die, it is like part of the extended family dying. As ministers we care for the families and friends of the deceased. We take the funeral service. But what do we do with our own feelings, our own grief at losing this person from our church family?

**A**cknowledging how we really are in the aftermath of funerals is important. Taking time to intentionally process our feelings and emotions is time well spent."

Also, taking funerals can bring to the surface "our own stuff" – perhaps taking a funeral for an older man can remind us of our own father's death. Or, as one minister said, whenever he takes a service for an older person about his parent's age, he feels an "anticipatory grief" for what is to come when his parents die.

In the course of my study leave I asked a number of ministers what they do with their grief, and these are some of the responses:

- use journaling to record their feelings, what they shall miss about that person, what they have valued
- make sure that after a service they leave plenty of time in the rest of the day to recover and have a bit of time out
- if it has been a burial, one minister would return to the graveside the next day by himself, to reflect and say his own goodbyes
- ensure that the casket is at the church well before the funeral, so that a little time can be spent reflecting
- talking it through with someone else. Being both professional and "real" at the funeral. Remembering that the service is "not about me and how I am feeling" but also not being too distant or contained
- Supervision was named by several ministers

It seems that a number of ministers and their parishioners believe that the minister simply goes into the professional mode to take a funeral – that it is a function of their job. As Halbert Weidner says, "Some ministers and staff may choose to 'handle' funerals the way mechanics handle cars and even dentists take on tooth decay".<sup>1</sup> And he goes on to say that some will see the display of their own grief as a betrayal of their function.

1 Weidner, H. Grief, loss and death. The shadow side of ministry. The Haworth Pastoral Press, New York. 2006. p. 12.

Weidner strikes a somewhat mocking tone: “A community is unsettled by the visible grief of its minister. But ministers are not allowed to grieve over their parishioners, their clients, the ‘objects’ of their pastoral care. That would get in the way of serving them. So a minister should be able to switch from task to task without registering the cost. For some, this means they willingly take up their job as ‘a role’ and move from role to role and then go home relatively pleased by the rewards of an objective measure of effectiveness. Personal investment and personal cost are neither part of the measure nor of the effectiveness”.<sup>2</sup>

Of course we need to be professional about how we go about our ministry, but there are some warnings here. There are some contemporary expectations that being professional or having professionals around will save us from the “tattering of life”.<sup>3</sup>

As ministers we need to remind ourselves that we do this ministry through the grace of God, and we need to surrender to that grace. Ministry does not grant us immunity from the pain of bereavement, the emptiness and pain of loss. But we also remember that we do not grieve as those with no hope.

Weidner has some harsh, but possibly true, words to say:

***“How many in active ministry don’t have a devotional life? Now, if anyone wants an excuse not to pray, ministry is as good as it gets. Everything we do we do for God. The work is never done so there is not time for prayer. If we are praying and someone needs us, we go from God to God. So there. We find God everywhere except in our own hearts.”***<sup>4</sup>

I would recommend Halbert Weidner’s book – *Grief, Loss and Death. The Shadow Side of Ministry*. He doesn’t pull any punches about ministers’ tendency to be in denial about how they really are.

## Taking funerals for family or close friends

While we are on this subject, let us consider the situation of ministers taking funerals for close family members and friends. I have done this, and I know many clergy do. Yes, we want to honour the person who has died by creating a service that has dignity and meaning, and we consider it something we do to honour them. But is it a wise thing to do? I was interested to read Susan White’s comment on this in her article “Rituals Lost and Found” in the book *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth*.

***“...I often admonish my students preparing for ordained ministry to resist, if at all possible, the temptation to preside at the funerals of close family and friends. In times of deep grief, I tell them, it is important to lean back and let the rituals of lamentation do their work; I tell them that to focus their attention on orchestrating the liturgical proceedings is the most effective way of short-circuiting their own processes of mourning a loss.”***

I spoke to a number of ministers about this issue. Some have made the decision not to take family funerals, for the very reasons that White mentions. They feel they want to be together with the family. Having taken such funerals, a number have vowed not to do it again. One minister said we need to be careful about imposing things on our family (say especially if they are not church people) and it could be disturbing to family dynamics if there is dissatisfaction with the way a funeral is conducted and that criticism is levelled against a family member. One minister took the funeral for his father-in-law. It was difficult to be “up the front taking the service” while his wife and children were upset in the congregation; he would have liked to have been right with them.

Others feel that it is something they like to do for the person who has died, and for the family. It is a precious thing to be able to do, and they would never say no to such an invitation. But they admit that it takes its toll on them; that it is emotionally draining and they have felt shattered afterwards.

I think it would be helpful for ministers to think this issue through, and make some decisions before they find themselves thrust into the situation of being asked to take the funeral for a close family member or friend. If you are going to take such services, I would suggest having some strategies in place to assist you.

2 Ibid. p. 19.

3 Ibid. p. 7.

4 Ibid. p. 48.

I have found it very helpful to have another minister there to take some of the prayers, and to “be on call” in case you find taking particular parts of the service, like the committal, too much. This is not being weak; this is being human and it also models something to our communities about the reality of death and how it impacts on us all.

## Ministers' self-care

It was heartening to find a section entitled “The pastor’s self-care” in Fowler’s book *Caring through the Funeral*.

*“If you ever want to see what denial is like in the realm of grief, just talk to a pastor who conducts a fair number of funerals over a period of years. Such pastors may feel depressed, have physical problems, feel like crying at anything sentimental, not feel much joy, have marital or other relational difficulties, harbor secret desires to leave their work behind, drink too much, and feel that their interior life is turning to gelatine. But grief? Of course not....”<sup>5</sup>*

Fowler points out what I have been thinking: that there can be a lot of denial among clergy as to how loss really impacts us. I believe that acknowledging the effect of a death on us is an important starting point. Fowler outlines some strategies for dealing with this grief and pain. It may just involve some time for self-reflection, allowing oneself to cry, thinking through the funeral you have taken. It needs to be stressed that this is a legitimate part of ministry. To take this time will be of benefit to oneself, and to the congregation.

He also suggests having the regional church body, in our case the presbytery, provide a worship service for all ministers on some regular basis. We know that rites are very important for grief and mourning. If we attend such services, they can help us deal with our grief. (I did this a couple of years ago when I spoke about my study leave with some ministers in the Auckland Presbytery and many found it to be very helpful.)

A minister once said to me that after you have been in a parish for a while, you begin to bury your friends. Over time, relationships develop and when members of the parish die, it is like part of the extended family dying.

## Conclusion

I believe that ministers need to think seriously about these issues. We are in the business of working with people who are experiencing grief, and at the same time, we have our own grief. Acknowledging how we really are in the aftermath of funerals is important. Taking time to intentionally process our feelings and emotions is time well spent. Attending to our spiritual life needs to have priority. Our regional church bodies have a role to play in providing a service for its ministers in which grief and loss can be acknowledged, and perhaps also other areas of concern, for example, disappointments and hurts, experienced in ministry.

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, G. *Caring through the Funeral. A Pastor’s Guide*. Chalice Press, St Louis, Missouri. 2004. p. 173.

# The funeral: “the service of witness to the resurrection” vs “this is your life”

Allister Lane, St John's in the City Presbyterian Church, Wellington

**L**ast year the Catholic Church in Australia banned the playing of pop songs at funerals. The instructions distributed to priests and funeral directors stated: “Secular items are never to be sung or played at a Catholic funeral, such as romantic ballads, pop or rock music, political songs, football club songs.”<sup>1</sup>

Asmidgen of pastoral sensitivity, and some rationale was also expressed: “The wishes of the deceased, family and friends should be taken into account ... but in planning the liturgy, the celebrant should moderate any tendency to turn the funeral into a secular celebration of the life of the deceased.”

This issue is about people's expectations. Ministers will encounter a range of expectations from the grieving families we meet with to provide pastoral care and plan funeral services. They will look to us to do what they think needs to be done for their deceased loved one.

What about OUR expectations? What do WE think we are doing in leading a funeral service?

When we are clear about what we are doing and why, we can inform and guide those who grieve, ministering to them as we draw on the theology and practice of the Christian faith.

To reconcile for ourselves the appropriate emphasis to give the deceased will help us to ensure that hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not squeezed out.

Attentiveness to the particular story of our baptism, the participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus<sup>2</sup>, is necessary to assess a request to play ‘My Way’ by Frank Sinatra as part of the service<sup>3</sup>.

Thomas Long comments:

*Christian pastors have desired to make funerals more personal, more expressive of the desires and lifestyles of the deceased and mourning families, but have ended up allowing them to become more individualistic and even narcissistic. Pastors have tried to make funerals more pastorally sensitive, more comforting to the grief-stricken, but have allowed them to become controlled by psychological rather than theological categories and, therefore, shallower in meaning. Pastors have wanted to free funerals from the morbidity of funeral home cosmetics, but have allowed them to become spiritualised and disembodied. Pastors have desired to make funerals more faithful expressions of hope in the resurrection, but have allowed that strong hope to be edged out by sentimental views of spirituality and immortality<sup>4</sup>.*

Many of us are aware of the expectation that the funeral will acknowledge and celebrate the fullness of the years of living the deceased had. The expectation is that the funeral is a public event that “paints a picture” as a summation of the collective memories of the deceased.

In my experience the most extreme expression of this is the obsessive desire to highlight the positives of the deceased's life, almost with comprehensive meticulousness.

Of course we can understand this desire by grieving families who feel acute loss and the need to retain their precious memories. But in our role as ministers of Word and Sacrament we have a responsibility to serve those who grieve, offering them an opportunity to share in an expression of far greater meaning.

1 ‘Australia's Catholic church bans pop songs’, Belinda Goldsmith for Reuters, 10 September 2010.

2 Romans 6:3-5.

3 This is the most requested song, according to Centennial Park, funeral directors in Melbourne, Australia.

4 Thomas Long, *Accompany Them With Singing* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p xv.

Rather than focusing on the individual, or the collective memories of the individual, we offer meaning, comfort, and hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ that sustains the Church across time and place. It is for this reason that the Christian funeral is called “The Service of Witness to the Resurrection”. A recovery of this title would help guide those of us expected to guide the grieving when they need this ministry most.

The term “witness” is of particular help to identify the expectations in what we are doing. Our witness is to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ – this is the locus of our shared hope, particularly at the time of death.

Rather than focusing on the individual, we offer meaning, comfort, and hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ that sustains the Church across time and place.”

Our “witnessing” is us pointing to the truth we know, declaring with clarity and conviction the source of our faith. We are not witnessing to the “goodness” or “virtue” of the individual, nor to a perceived “quality of life”. When the meaning of life (and death) is potentially reduced to this individualistic level, we really have to stand firm and proclaim that our witness is to something other than ourselves, and that our hope has a more significant basis than the sum of the lifetime of the person lying in the coffin.

I’m not suggesting that the life of the person doesn’t matter, or that the dignity of our humanity is not significant. But at the time of death particularly, we are reminded that our true human dignity is not something we earn over a lifetime, but is a sheer gift to us.

The opportunities to share our memories are very important as part of our grief; I’m not suggesting they are invalid, but they do not constitute the primary content of the funeral service. The sharing of memories should be shared across the days, weeks and months following the death. Indeed all that often needs to be shared cannot be crammed into the short space of the funeral service.

The sharing of personal memories of the deceased needs more time than the duration of the funeral service and, at the same time, the funeral service has a much more specific focus.

We celebrate our human dignity, not as what was somehow achieved in the manner the individual happened to live their life, but what God has gifted us in our living, and how our living continues and is drawn into the wholeness of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To this truth may we remain ever faithful.



# Funerals in a rural parish

*Stephanie Wells, Maniototo Presbyterian Parish, Central Otago*

**I solated rural areas, such as the one where I live, seem to do funerals differently. Due to the shortage of resident clergy, (there is only me and usually a Roman Catholic priest), Catholic and Anglican families are the only ones who tend to get their relevant clergy to take their funerals. I often get offered the rest.**

This is due to a number of factors: first, rural funerals tend to attract large numbers. In a small community there are few people who would face such a public speaking role with calmness. Many find speaking the eulogy or reading a poem daunting enough. The thought of organising such a big event is even scarier.

Second, funerals are often expected to be held within a few days of the death. This places a huge time constraint on gathering together the various elements of a funeral service. The discipline that clergy have of weekly preparation is a tremendous help in being able to prepare a funeral in the short time often given. Most other people do not have this training.

Thirdly, most clergy have built up a number of resources to take a variety of services that all help develop a funeral that fits the needs of the deceased and their family. This is invaluable as many families have no idea what to do. They have never been involved in a funeral and greatly appreciate suggestions for readings, music and layout to produce a service that will honour the deceased.

By taking funerals for all who ask, I am fulfilling the desire of the Maniototo Parish to serve all the people of the district. One consequence of this wide spectrum of work has been that I have often found myself functioning more as a funeral celebrant than a Presbyterian minister. This is because many of those seeking my services do not want a “church service”.

Some of the reasons given are that none of the family has church connections, or that the deceased has never attended church and the family feels it is hypocritical to use the church at this point. Others seem to have had bad experiences in some church context and do not want “them” involved. Still others have no Christian belief and do not want any of that “God-stuff” said.

Despite this anti-church stance, most people actually get quite a bit of God’s involvement. They get me to lead for a start – an obvious God-person. They also get my prayers and those of others who support the family and me during a funeral service. And even though the usual prayers in the service are often re-labelled as “reflections” and are not addressed directly to God, I, for one, know who is listening.

It’s also amazing how many times readings will be chosen from the Bible or other religious writings if they are referred to as poems. Add to that the biblical language that is woven into the service like “everlasting arms” and “unceasing love” which give comfort whether God is named or not, and which any Christian, hearing the added resonances, notes with delight.

Also, while seeking to accommodate most family needs I have always requested that I can say a blessing at some point. So far I have never been refused, and often this has led to some interesting discussions as to what is a suitable blessing based on the deceased’s interests and ancestry. So, I have given blessings from St Patrick and St Columba of Iona, old church ones and newly written ones. All have been a sign of God’s presence.

The choice of music at funerals is also an interesting place where God’s presence is evident to Christians, if not to the non-churched majority. A favourite funeral song in the Maniototo is a Scottish folk song, *For these are my Mountains*. Surrounded by mountains as we are it is very appropriate but to those of us brought up on phrases such as “I lift my eyes to the hills” such a song has a much deeper meaning.

By understanding my role as working more as a funeral celebrant, I believe it allows me the freedom to provide a specific moment in time that speaks for the deceased and their family. This flexibility has led to non-Christian funerals in church buildings and evangelistic memorial services in halls; it has enabled the spiritual needs of different cultures to be accommodated at the graveside and elsewhere. It has also meant that the grief and anger of youth suicide can be as equally acknowledged as the celebration of a life well-lived of a faithful local saint.

One consequence of this wide spectrum of work has been that I have often found myself functioning more as a funeral celebrant than a Presbyterian minister.

I believe, too, that my role as funeral celebrant in the Maniototo introduces Jesus to those who need him, even if they do not know it. It gently opens the possibility that Christianity may be relevant to people who, for whatever reason, have dismissed it. Many families seem to dismiss the idea that a minister of religion is the person to discuss the most deep and meaningful issues of life with. By working within the values of the family, with a listening heart and an open mind a funeral can be developed that allows them to acknowledge their most profound emotional and spiritual needs. By being respectful of the desire to dispense with religious jargon and to craft a funeral that fits those that have died and those that remain, trust is built up that opens up new possibilities for conversations about God at a later stage.

As a Christian I believe *all* the funerals I take are of God, sometimes, as St Francis said, I use words.

*Author's Note: I have used the term "funeral" to cover all rituals that deal with the death of someone eg. unveilings, memorial services, graveside services, etc.*

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# Funerals: issues and reflections for ministers

*Martin Fey, St David's in the Fields Presbyterian-Methodist Church, Auckland.*

No outward sun for more than a  
hundred miles. Grey, grey the spitting  
sky like a soiled sheet hung from ocean  
to the hills. But the rain falls only  
on Oamaru, which is a most appropriate  
grieving. She lies parloured elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

So writes Owen Marshall, describing his journey to Janet Frame's funeral. Something in us requires that the dead be properly honoured, that a sense of appropriateness surrounds our farewell to those we know and love, that a certain gravity and ceremony attends one's departure from this life.

This applies whether we are Christian or not, whether we are agnostic or pointedly atheistic of worldview. We would expect no less when our own time comes. A good funeral is a thing of beauty to be remembered, and does bring closure and comfort, hope and encouragement to the living.

Key to the success and appropriateness of a funeral is the relationship between funeral director and presiding minister, or celebrant. Central to this relationship is what I would describe as timely communication. If you are aware that a church member or adherent is recently bereaved and you are likely to be the minister of choice for the service, it is wise to be contactable at all times. Funeral directors have deadlines, such as getting funeral service details into the paper, making bookings and other arrangements. A smooth and timely communication with the director will ease the worry for a family grieving and possibly already stressed.

As the presiding minister, you will be responsible for the order and conduct of the funeral service. Ideally, proof-reading of any text should be done (also by the family) and a final version of the service sheet and any associated text should be with the director 24 hours before the service, to allow for final proof-reading and printing.

Funeral directors get to see more funerals than ministers, and often have a very balanced view of how the tone of a funeral service should be. Most could cite occasions when an ordained minister got too "preachy", seeing the funeral service as a prime opportunity to declare the gospel, perhaps motivated by the presence of those less likely to frequent a Christian service under normal circumstances. A more direct gospel message may be appropriate if the family are of a Christian persuasion, but this becomes a far more difficult task if most of the family are basically unknown to the minister.

There are of course as many family spiritual landscapes as there are venues for funerals, and I think it is safe to say that the minister should think clearly and soberly about the required tone for any funeral address. Thomas Long suggests of the funeral address that:

*"...like all Christian sermons, it is both biblical and contextual... Because the funeral is essentially a processional, funeral sermons are preached figuratively as the church walks to the grave. They are proclamations of what the gospel has to say about these people walking along this path carrying the body of this brother or sister in sorrow over this loss and in joyful hope of the resurrection."<sup>2</sup>*

This type of contextual thinking, will, I think, preserve us from insensitive and inappropriate sermonising at funerals.

What of the funeral where all religious content is rejected by the family? Perhaps they don't want any of that "God stuff"? It could be they have a fair point that it would be hypocritical to have Christian content when the deceased and/or their family have no religious or church connections whatsoever.

<sup>1</sup> Owen Marshall *Occasional: 50 Poems* (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 2004), p 62.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: the Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 187.

I recently attended the funeral of a young father who had battled brain tumours for some years; an affliction which finally claimed him. It was a large funeral, packed to the back wall. Music, tributes, photos, some poetry, a good eulogy and rounding off from the celebrant made for a heartfelt service with good memories of the young man, who clearly was a well-loved family member and an excellent friend to have had. What struck me, and this particularly came out in the tributes from siblings and friends, was that some people were instinctively articulating a theology and a spirituality of sorts, in spite of a deliberately non-religious context.

The talk of “being up there with Grandma”, and “being a part of all of us now”, spoke of deep desires for a continuity in heaven, or with God, or to be in a better place with no more pain, whatever that might entail. A spiritual expectation was articulated, though none was officially stated.

I know the family and friends of the young man had time to think of and construct quite well developed stories, memories and thoughts, given the journey through illness they had walked with him.

This was in stark contrast to another deliberately non-religious funeral I went to a few years back, where the fifty-something father of a Christian friend dropped dead with a massive heart attack. The friend was distraught at the hope-less funeral. She was the only Christian in the family, and her family made sure the funeral had a secular tone. With no noticeable journey towards death, just a sudden catastrophic end, the funeral, as I recall it, consisted of bewildered tributes and music beloved by baby-boomers. At any rate, he was a nice guy who liked Van Morrison’s music...

Both of these services lacked the sense of the processional described by Long. A Christian funeral seems more like a dance or a symphony to me, with particular movements that allow us to give thanks, remember, consider our mortality and also reflect on the Christian hope. Traditionally, “the funeral rite was a continuum, broken by movements from place to place, from home to church, to the place of burial and back to the home.”<sup>3</sup> Often now, our Christian funerals are far more convenient, in that we no longer have this actual physical journey to contend with. We go to the church or chapel, have the service and say farewell at the hearse, even forgoing the journey to the crematorium in many cases.

Even so, the Christian funeral can draw the mourners into its spiritual movement, causing them to hope, remember, give thanks, even to worship God in the midst of their grief and loss. I have seen elements of this at work in the several Christian funerals I have been to in the last few years.

The Christian tradition provides the grieving community with an absolute wealth of resources from which to create meaningful funeral services. The non-religious services I have attended, still contained spiritual elements, but of the more speculative variety, seeming to clutch at straws in an attempt to construct independently that which has already been completed in Christ. Long speaks of the unity evident in a Christian funeral:

*“At death, we are, like all human beings, under the necessity of moving the dead body from ‘here’ to ‘there,’ but it is the gospel story that tells us the truth about where ‘here’ and ‘there’ are in the Christian life, that names the ‘here’ as the life we have shared in faith and the ‘there’ as the place in the arms of God toward which our sister or brother is moving.”<sup>4</sup>*

Romans 6:5 speaks of the believer’s identification with Christ: “If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” With this in mind, the Christian funeral raises the possibility for the bereaved of considering more than their present desolation and loss. The psalmist, in lifting eyes to the hills, asks: “Where does my help come from?” The response is “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth” affirming that “the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” (Ps 121: 1-2, 8)

So hope and faith are tangibly present for the Christian, in the knowledge that the Maker watches over the comings and goings of humans for all time. The believer can have confidence also in the presence of Christ, and identifies strongly with Jesus’ own experience of death and new life. The hope-less secular funeral can be in sharp contrast to the Christian funeral, filled with thanksgiving, hope and faith.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh James, *A Fitting End: Making the Most of a Funeral* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), p 28.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) p 16.



The first funeral I was required to preside at was a potentially complex affair, requiring careful planning. Not only did I have to conduct the service, but I also provided most of the musical accompaniment to the three hymns. I am close to the family, so I felt a certain self-imposed pressure to do a good job. The family is large and diverse, with a variety of world views, yet mostly open to a spiritual if not specifically Christian approach to life. The funeral was outdoors, under the plum tree in the back yard of the family home, presenting various logistical challenges, not least of which the plan to Skype the funeral to grandchildren overseas.

One should not underestimate the presence and work of the Holy Spirit at a funeral, for all concerned. After the somewhat rushed final preparations for the funeral the day before, which saw me trying to track down music stands amid writing various parts of the service, I awoke on the morning of the funeral with a deep sense of peace. I went for a run, got myself ready, and felt that all was as it should be.

Something was clearly at work in me also, drawing me closer to Christian ministry, ministering peace within, during what should have been a highly stressful time humanly speaking. We seemed to be on a journey with God. The deceased was remembered fondly, the stories were heartfelt and sometimes cheeky, thanksgiving was made, the Word was preached, we said our goodbyes. The prayers were traditional, thanks to the *Book of Common Order*, and the *A New Zealand Prayer Book*. Much of the service was commonplace, yet I will never forget that funeral – it was a gift from God.

Scripture reminds us “that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the saviour of the world”. (1 Jn 4: 13 – 14 NIV) When we walk away from a funeral, full of cups of tea and club sandwiches, how we feel about that particular event can have a lot to do with the spirit it was conducted in. If the funeral acknowledges the presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and is authentically Christian, bearing in mind the particular context, we often walk away with our eyes lifted up, still with tears perhaps, but also with hope and thanksgiving.

The problem with the secular service, in my view, stems from the absence of the reference points provided by Christian faith, the lack of connection with God, church and this shared faith narrative. The reference points are mobile and less defined, and the worldview expressed often seems hastily constructed, “cobbled together” even. They can end up simply being the focus for an anguished cry of loss, with little comfort or redress.

In contrasting the secular and the Christian funeral, I am left not with a sense of despair, however. What remains for me is a growing conviction that the role of the Christian minister in funerals is vital. It is a community facing aspect of ministry, an opportunity to demonstrate that for those most in need, the Church does bring a timely word, a genuine difference.

What we must be alert for in our current Western cultural climate is summarised here:

***Postmodern culture encourages us to be autonomous beings; to follow our own path to our own chosen destination and is an era in which death itself has been privatised and medicalised. Grieving in contemporary society is a journey into the unknown...there are few, if any, cultural norms which provide benchmarks for the bereaved as to what are normal feelings to have or how to articulate or enact those feelings.***<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the challenge for those of us called to ministry is to offer a benchmark, to dare to say that the gospel of hope is “normal”. Kelly suggests the bereaved “have a deep need to find meaning in their situation and in their relationship with the deceased. If church representatives are willing to engage with their pain and particular story, the bereaved can and want to do theology.”<sup>6</sup> Let us offer the theology of hope, about a God who meets with us in our distress, and suggest that this is what normal looks like; to grieve, give thanks and pray. To worship and to lift our eyes towards God, and to allow Christ to minister to us in the humanity we all share.

<sup>5</sup> Ewan Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals: Meeting the Theological and Pastoral challenge in a Postmodern Era* (London: Mowbray, 2008), p 40 – 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 178.

# Reflections of a rest home chaplain

Jan Gough\*

**In a rest home funeral services are occasions to celebrate life. They are a time of reminiscence and reflect on the lives of elderly people who have experienced times that hopefully we will not have to encounter. Many rest home residents were born during World War I, lived through a depression then World War II, rationing and making ends meet while struggling to bring up families.**

The stories that are told are amazing: men and women who served their country overseas; war brides coming to a new country and knowing nobody; those who farmed our land; those who learnt trades (mainly on-the-job); those who taught in our schools, or were missionaries overseas - many of whom were committed Christians and others with no belief at all. But all were people of courage and determination who helped make our country what it is today.

Even after 20 years of working in a rest home, I still feel privileged to be able to share with these folk in their twilight years. They often come into care grieving for the loss of their independence, their homes and personal belongings, or grieving a loved one with whom they shared many years together. To gain their confidence and trust takes time, but I find it so rewarding when the families ask me to lead their farewell in our chapel.

Working with families is also important - keeping them informed about their loved one's care and finding out the resident's history, especially if they have dementia, and finally understanding what their wishes are when they're deceased. This can sometimes be difficult or not what is normally expected, but it is their call and we do our best to work with families to ease their loss, remembering at all times to be respectful and aware of any cultural needs.

In many cases the deceased has left instructions of what they would like in their service - for example they may stipulate that the service be brief, simple, Christian or non-Christian, they may stipulate music or readings, cremation or burial - and in consultation with the family members these wishes are usually carried out. On the odd occasion, we have had to override the wishes of the deceased as the service is for the living to give the closure they need. This is especially so when the deceased may be well known and people want to pay their tributes to honour a life that has been so full.

Our services are usually a time for sharing both laughter and tears, with music and singing that reflect joy and the favorites of the departed, with the committal done at the end as many families do not want a graveside or crematorium farewell. This is then followed up with a cuppa and get together in the rest home social centre so staff and residents can attend as well. This is important as many of the siblings and friends have already passed on or are too frail to attend. Their fellow residents and staff have become their family now and it enables them to pay their last respects as well.

Over the years I have become very close to so many amazing people and their families - some of whom often still keep in contact - and I have always felt both privileged and honoured when asked to lead their service and send them on their final journey with God's blessing where they will find the rest and peace they have so richly earned.

*\*Jan Gough is an elder at Kaeo Kerikeri Union Church and a chaplain at the Kerikeri Retirement Village*

# AES Candour

*Martin Baker*

**S**ue, a presenter on TV3, began her account of the day's weather on Saturday 21 May with the words, "Well, if you were sitting at home waiting for the world to end, you didn't miss much", and Bob, the newsreader, concluded the hour saying, "We hope to see you again...tomorrow night".

The fact that Harold Camping and Family Radio used some of their millions of dollars of resources and their network of supporters to publicise Camping's assertion that the world was to end on 21 May is strange enough. But we seem to lack any analysis of why so many got caught up in such weirdness. Admittedly TV3 had manifest its religious ignorance a few weeks before, declaring that Easter day was a Monday, but why was such a story picked up by so many others? I have to confess, I was one of the thousands who went to the Family Radio website on 22 May to find if there was a retraction or apology or explanation, maybe I had missed something. But alas, much of the world also visited the website at the same time causing it to crash.

For some peculiar reason, one of the only quotes I can remember from Martin Luther has him saying, "Come dear Lord. Come and let thy day of judgement break, for no longer can any improvement be expected". In 1540 he expected that either his generation or the next would experience the last day. The Pope, now revealed as the antichrist, the errors of the Anabaptists, the Sacramenterians, not to mention the Turks, indicated to him with little doubt, that the signs of the final time had been fulfilled.

It would be ungracious to compare the courage and brilliance of Martin Luther with the idiocy of Harold Camping, but they seem to share a world view that things were getting worse, and the end times imminent.

One of the most sophisticated international measures we have is the Human Development Index, (HDI), which, taking a good number of variables into account indicates that for almost everyone the world is getting a whole lot better. There is a good body of evidence to suggest that there are far fewer wars, significantly less poverty, better health care, and far higher levels of literacy and longer life expectancy than there has perhaps ever been.

Even with the memory of churches full to overflowing 50 years ago, most people I speak to seem to feel their quality and richness of life is greater now than it was in 1961. In the 1980s at the beginning of my own ministry, I can remember visiting people who, in their mid-60s, had moved into small rooms in rest homes to wait out their sunset years. The end-of-life residential care that people receive now is more measured in days and weeks. Who wants to go back?

Some people do point to a deterioration of our moral standards, but a free press, not to mention the fact that almost everyone has a mobile phone with camera, creates an accountability and transparency which would have been unheard of all those years ago. Any public official today has to, for better or worse, prepare for the fact that every aspect of their private and public lives will be scrutinised. As we have seen most recently in North Africa and the Middle East, access to the internet and other communications technology, with all its problems, is also a key element in the strengthening of movements for justice, peace and reform – not to mention the spread of the gospel message.

Maybe in some perverse way Camping was right when he urged followers to recognise that the "the church age" had come to an end. Perhaps a church that can't speak to the fears, wants, and longings that drive us to accumulate the growing private debt outlined in the recent budget – along with its accompanying dire warnings of the future – is a Church whose values and voice have become indistinguishable from those of society.

It is a pretty nutty thing to do, to announce that 21 May is going to be the day of rapture. But it certainly got people's attention. Reflecting on the hundreds of millions we have stored in our real estate and our congregational accounts, the potential for us to speak words of hope and new life into the lives of people and communities is huge. It may not be to name an "end date"; it might be to name a different future.

Thanks again for your support.

Martin

# GROUP STUDY SOCIAL ISSUES RESOURCES

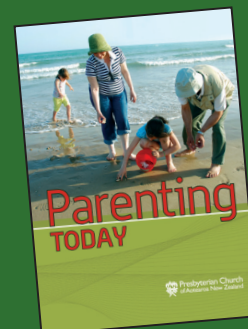
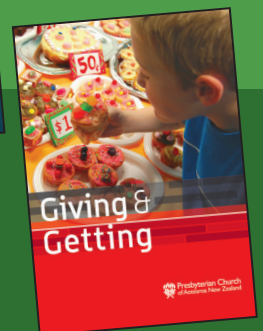
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