

# **TRAINING IN FUNERALS**

## **A Response to the Challenge of the Third Declaratory Article**

**The Revd. Nigel Robb**

### **Introduction**

The course had its beginning in the concerns shared by two former Presbytery Clerks in the light of the shortage of ministers in their respective geographic areas. Both the Very Revd John Christie and myself had resigned as Presbytery Clerks to facilitate the formation of new enlarged Presbyteries. We still maintained an interest in the Church, and in my case, I was Interim Moderator once again, in Crail linked with St Ayle (Anstruther and Cellardyke), which has a huge funeral load, often much larger than five other congregations put together in the Presbytery of Fife.

Both of us recognised the pressure and expectations of ministers and how hard-pressed many of them are and would be in future. We were not enamoured, for many reasons, by the increase in non-religious funerals conducted by celebrants at huge cost to the mourners. Similarly, we were concerned at the growth and advertising of the offers of ‘disposals’ of remains and alternatives (or substitutes) to a funeral which did not recognise the importance of the community coming to terms with loss and grief in support of those more directly affected by the death.

We discussed the pressing need for assistance with the provision of this ordinance of religion, as directed under the Third Article Declaratory. As a result, we devised a programme of teaching elders and worship leaders, with the right skills and experience, to assist ministers in addressing the requests for Christian funerals in the context of the Church of the future.

The intention was not to cause distress to ministers who are faithfully trying to meet the demands of parish funerals and the provision of effective pastoral care. Rather, the proposal was to bring into existence partners who might take on some of the ‘normal’ parish funerals which then would allow the ministers to have time to undertake more mission and provide support for the bereaved in the more testing and demanding of circumstances.

### **Historical and Contemporary Background**

Funerals have a complex history in the Reformed tradition.

The corpse is reverently brought to the grave, accompanied by the congregation, without any further ceremonies, which being buried the minister goeth to the church if it be not far off, and maketh some comfortable exhortation to the people touching death and resurrection. (*The Second Book of Discipline*, 1562).

Lack of ceremony was due to the thinking of the times. '*The First Book of Discipline 1560*' records that '*some superstitious think that singing and reading of the living may profit the dead*'. The difficulty arose from the idea that prayer at the grave could lead to prayer for the dead. This had the potential to acknowledge the idea of purgatory.

In the centuries following the Reformation, ceremonies for the dead and the bereaved were sparse. Some historians suggest that it was only due to the introduction of the tax on flax and the expectation that the shroud would be made of flax that the minister became involved. The minister was called to witness in the 'mort house' that the flax had been used as prescribed and later on this developed into the minister saying a prayer.

The situation remained relatively unchanged until the mid-Twentieth Century with services being introduced in the '*Book of Common Order*' to guide the ministers in their conduct of funeral services. Contemporary Christian funeral services are often a helpful witness to the Gospel, often as an 'evangelical opportunity, demonstrating the care and concern of the Christian community for those who have been bereaved. Their effective communication of the Gospel comes through the 'being' of those leading the service, and not because of preaching, or forcing theological opinions, in a service.

The fact that there are to be fewer ministers and there are elders and others with skills and abilities to offer the conduct of services, seemed to create a need for a carefully constructed course of training being offered. While it could not be as extensive as might be ideal, it was our hope to create a core of basic knowledge, in alliance with practical experience and theological reflection with mentors. This we trusted would encourage further exploration by those called to this form of service.

## **Purpose Statement of the Course**

The purpose of the course may be *‘the training and support of elders and others in the preparation and leading of funeral services in a sensitive manner in the Christian context’*.

## **Beginning**

We presented our perception of the necessity of providing a course to Faith Nurture. We were told by the staff member responsible for education and training that they were aware of the need to provide training and education in this specific area for those involved in worship and ministry who were not ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament. There was an acknowledgement that no one had been able, or willing, to develop the process or programme of training. We agreed to be involved and provide a ‘Pilot’ course for the benefit of participants and to assist Faith Action.

We agreed to produce a whole course outline and some suggested exercises for the participants. Both of us had a significant rôle in the preparation of a major conference of Glasgow Presbytery in 2022, on ‘Recharging the Eldership’, which has been prompted by Robert Hynd as an Elder Moderator of the Presbytery of Glasgow. Glasgow Presbytery agreed to offer the opportunity for members to be involved in the Course and a recruitment process, conducted by Glasgow Presbytery, commenced.

## **Structure of Course**

We are both volunteers and we declined the increased demands made of us by Faith Action. We made it clear that the learning in face-to-face sessions had to be supplemented and developed by a process of mentoring of participants on an individual basis. We were not going to be responsible for their selection and training. Instead, we made some suggestions as to the kind of attitudes and qualities required of participants and the skills and attitudes of mentors required, and offered some suggested areas of discussion which the mentors might have with participants.

Our other commitments and our awareness of the many demands on elders and others in the Church in this time of Presbytery Mission Planning, determined that three sessions in this ‘Pilot’ course might be the best possible approach. I would have preferred shorter, but more sessions, but this was not practical, or possible, in the pilot.

The course was agreed to take place on two long Saturday mornings, two weeks apart (to accommodate the other appointments we had to undertake in support of vacancies, and also allow some time for reflection for those who had volunteered to seek training). Then a session at the Glasgow Crematorium, courtesy of the Directors and with the support of the Crematorium staff team on the day, some two months later, was arranged. It was hoped that by that time the participants would have gained some practical experience under the guidance and supervision of their appointed mentors.

### **Process**

While there is a huge amount of literature and information which may be important, we hoped that sufficient material required for this group could be presented, which participants would find enough to start them on a journey. Our aim was to enable engagement with a mentor and reflection on individual experience of involvement with the mentor in funeral services. Clearly the material in the sessions and the additional reading material we provided was a basis. It was expected that those who did go on to work in this area and offer leadership in the conduct of funerals would engage in further reading and exploration.

Some preparatory work was required of each person wishing to attend the course, and responses to two questions (see end of the article) were enlightening and confirmed that what we proposed to offer was appropriate and would meet the perceived needs. Paul Cathcart, Deacon, undertook the administrative work and located mentors for the people willing to engage in this period of preparation.

### **Clarity Regarding Participation**

It was made clear that this form of service may not be for everyone and anyone who undertook the course would not be expected to become, automatically, a person involved in the conduct of funerals. Similarly, we emphasised the fact that this was not a course for those with unresolved grief and loss to find counselling and care, and that they needed to be mindful of this before embarking on the training.

Dates of the course presentations were indicated in advance. Each person applying to take the course had to agree to attend these to avoid any need of repetition or duplication. The withdrawal of some who were interested meant in the end that there was a group of 10 from the Glasgow Presbytery bounds.

Several of them were from UPA parishes. There was a balance of male and female participants and all were elders.

### **Relational Approach**

The sessions were designed to try to communicate appropriate knowledge clearly and quickly, while giving time for the participants to discuss issues and express their own perspectives in small groups and in plenary. Questions to help them engage with the material were sent out in advance and discussions in groups were encouraged early on to allow them to relate to each other.

Some questioned why we did not attempt to offer the course online and this is answered by our view that a funeral, to be appropriate, must be relational and is all about human and personal relationships. The delivery of the course, therefore, should have this essential aspect. Others may disagree and in the future such a course may indeed be offered by others online, as they see fit.

The course was to be supported by the provision of some resources, (see end of article) and a number of resources thought to be helpful in the preparation of funeral services. The reading was to encourage reflection and address some of the issues of background knowledge and theological issues connected with the responses required to deal sensitively with the needs of the bereaved.

### **First Session**

The first session was devoted to an introduction to the processes of death and dying and the varied manifestations of grief. While the psychological aspects were outlined, it was stressed that these were to be understood in the context of Christian belief and principles. Reference was made to the importance of Elizabeth Kubler Ross's work being carefully read, critiqued and handled. This was set against the background of the understanding of the funeral being a 'rite of passage' with many of its important characteristics.

The participants then considered the processes of undertaking the preliminary preparation of the visit to the family of the deceased, the characteristics of the visit to the bereaved, and what its purposes and content might include. The importance of ensuring that the service reflected the deceased person and their character, and had a personal quality were highlighted.

As this was a pilot scheme, the particular perspectives and insights of the participants were recorded and were incorporated in the second session. Their personal insights from their experience and backgrounds helped shape

the subsequent sessions and therefore made an invaluable contribution to how a course might be appropriately developed in future by Faith Action.

### **Names**

There is great theological significance in names. From Genesis, when the account of Creation indicates that humanity was separated from the other animals by the power given to human beings by God to 'name' all parts of creation, to the meaning of the names of places and individuals in the Old Testament.

The names people use in life need to be recalled in death and there is often great power, or heritage, and ancestral links in the way names are used. Without names in a service, especially of the deceased, there is a real sense of anonymity. All of God's children are important and the names of the departed are not to be ignored. Sometimes names are powerful reminders of other people in the family structure, and at other times demonstrate a determination to be independent and free of the family of origin who chose the name for a birth certificate. It is important to check what name would be preferred by the closest family members in the service, and if he or she was known in a public way by another name, this should also be considered sensitively.

### **Second Session**

The session began by inviting questions and reaffirming the psychological dynamics of grief and loss and set them against a background of offering Christian based pastoral care. The 'rite of passage' terminology was used to highlight the various aspects of the process of a funeral service and its preparation and impact. The theological and liturgical resources available were also highlighted.

In group work, the participants identified what they believed were essential aspects, or required emphases, in the construction of a funeral service which was effective and expressed a Christian theological approach. Their view was unanimous in that the service had to be both personal and declare something of the faith of the Church. To do otherwise was to fail to touch lives and would lack theological integrity. The comment, when he was dying, of Pope John XXIII, was used as a means of summarising easily the distinctive nature of a Christian's funeral 'Majesty, simplicity and the gathering of the people.'

## **Interview with a Deacon**

The course was facilitated by the diligent administrative work of Paul Cathcart, DCS who had himself led many funeral services. His interview responses and reflections enriched the wide range of perspectives and approaches to the challenge of leading funerals in the Christian context. A different voice, with a variety of experiences in funeral care and service, was another means of involving and retaining the energy and involvement of the participants.

## **Elements of the Service**

Each of the elements of the service was examined in turn, with reference to the *'Book of Common Order'* as a guide to the appropriate construction of the service. It was agreed by all that the services offered had to be distinct and different with individual elements, without slavishly adhering to the use of the same readings and prayers. A wide range of readings from both Old and New Testaments were commended for consideration, while warnings against the use of the dangerous and inappropriate secular, atheistic or pantheistic readings, out of context and distorted, were given.

Theodicy and the questions of why God allows suffering or early tragic deaths were explored. The importance of creating an environment where there is permission to ask such questions was stressed. The articulation of the question may be encouraged, but the natural desire to respond and offer an answer must be resisted. None, no matter how experienced, can hope to respond in a satisfactory manner, but allowing the question to be presented is not only helpful, but a means of expressing pastoral care. It might even be expressed with a degree of sensitivity in the service. Giving permission to question is not only healthy, but Biblical, as in the example set by Jesus.

## **Appreciations**

A particular issue which had been raised by one participant, directly, and by others in conversation, was with the inclusion of eulogies, or tributes, in the service. It is often appropriate to devote some time in the service to a focus on the character and interests and contribution of the person who was deceased. The term 'appreciation' was suggested to reduce any attempt to glorify an individual and divert attention from the worship of God in the service. Eulogies have their basis in Virgil and in Graeco-Roman culture out of which the Christian Church emerged. The participants were advised that while some of the traditions and actions of the Christian rites and rituals have

their roots in that environment, it is important not to adopt all the features of that culture while trying to lead people to a Christian understanding of death.

Some of the resources given to the participants were examples from a wide variety of sources, including Jewish traditional prayers and those of other denominations. Discernment and sensitivity are required to make sure that such imported ideas are integrated appropriately in a service.

### **Preparation and Anticipation**

If individuals from the family or friends wished to speak at the service, this was not to be directly discouraged, (as it could lead to a healthy expression of grief). The participants were advised always to ask for the utterance to be timed carefully and for a typed copy to be given to the person conducting the service in case emotion, or other factors, made it impossible for the person who had been designated to deliver the words of reflection. This also meant that the person in charge of the service was able to remove any particulars from their script which were repetitive and redundant. The importance of keeping to the time limit at a crematorium and the respect of other families who may be arriving was emphasised.

### **Silence**

Care was taken to mention the helpfulness of the use of silence to ensure that individuals in any congregation could express their own memories and reflections in the service. There was also a place, in some instances, for prayers of petition asking forgiveness for the errors, hurts, and actions of the mourners which may have damaged the person now deceased. The opposite was also true, and the acknowledgement that sometimes the person deceased had been destructive, or difficult, in his or her relationships with the mourners, might be included.

### **Music**

Music choices produced a degree of debate as some were of the view that only Christian hymns and music appropriate to Christian worship were to be used. Others were more flexible in their approach. What was clear in the discussion of experience, was that while music is powerful, there is also the need for the music to have a degree of familiarity about it. If there are to be hymns sung, they require to have tunes that are either well-known, or easy to sing. We are in a post-Christian environment when familiarity with the Psalms and hymns of the Church cannot be assumed.



## **Different Voices**

We believed it was important to offer all participants the opportunity of hearing different perspectives and ideas in the course. Therefore, we invited two others involved in funerals to make short presentations to the group. An experienced funeral director, who had as an elder, also conducted funeral services, and the other, a minister, who had conducted over 7000 funerals in his time as a parish minister, and as a locum in retirement, willingly accepted the invitation to present some reflections. They highlighted some of the issues previously mentioned, but also gave participants a flavour of the thoughtful preparation and care required to conduct an appropriate funeral service. Again, the human and relational aspects of funeral services were clear.

## **Post Funeral visits.**

The importance of post funeral visits and their conduct was mentioned and the need to be careful about arranging these sensitively with the appropriate persons at the right time. These visits can be a vital way of extending the Church's care into the community, and the use of congregation grief groups who support the bereaved in their journey through loss and grief was mentioned.

## **Third Session**

### **Crematorium visit**

Through John Christie's connections, a visit on a Saturday morning to the Glasgow Crematorium was arranged with no services taking place on that day. This provided the opportunity for participants to have a tour of the facilities, and a talk to the staff who were extremely helpful. This offered the participants the chance to learn more about the technical processes and also prepare them for answering any questions about cremation during funeral visits to the bereaved.

The participants were all invited to prepare a four-minute section of a funeral service for a Biblical character and deliver it in the setting of the Crematorium. This challenge was met by all of them, though some did exceed the time limit by a few seconds. The quality of the presentations was impressive with all who were willing to undertake this opportunity offering sensitive and insightful reflections. The Crematorium Staff said '...there would be no problem at all in any of them being the service leader at a funeral' after hearing them speak.

Additional questions from the participants and feed-back were then encouraged to help the organisers and Faith Action in the evaluation.

Written submissions were also invited to assist in future development of any subsequent course of training and education.

### **Feedback**

A number of interesting suggestions were made by the participants after the conclusion of the course. Some had not been able to be involved in funeral conduct as their mentor had a low funeral load, and this was disappointing. Some focused attention on the conduct of the service, rather than the dual responsibility of offering supportive pastoral care to the bereaved beyond the worship service. Others were keen to rely on the *'Book of Common Order'* and while this is understandable, the hope would be that the participants would be able to be flexible and imaginative in their approach when circumstances demanded this.

### **Request for follow up support**

It was noted that this was a pilot course, and there was a clear recognition in those providing the course and the participants that there would be a need for some follow up once the course had been completed. The work with the mentors would probably raise other issues for exploration. This was a particular responsibility for Glasgow Presbytery.

### **Participant Assessment Process.**

The Presbytery of Glasgow agreed to undertake the process of organising the assessment of the participants. A means of assessing their development as people with the competence, capacity and capability of undertaking this form of service once they had completed the course and engaged with their mentors would be provided. Some suggestions were made as to the focus and particular areas which might be covered, but these were not an included part of the course. The reports from the mentors on progress and developmental achievement of the participants might also be considered.

There is a danger that the participants might focus only on the public 'performance' of the service, rather than the whole process of pastoral care of the bereaved. This begins prior to the service and the service should encourage and enable the gathered group to assist the bereaved in their adjustment and return to life with the death appropriately acknowledged. It is important that this aspect is not overlooked.

## Post-course Reflections

In the post course reflections with the Presbytery of Glasgow representatives who had observed the course, some suggestions were made about how the participants might engage effectively with mentors to develop the skills and abilities required in the pre-funeral and post-funeral visits. The mentoring process was seen as an equal partnership with the theoretical and theological input. Participants should become aware of the complexities and importance of personal involvement and relational aspects of the conduct of funeral care.

## Conclusion

Only time will tell if the participants found that this course has encouraged them to pursue this distinctive form of service. Similarly, it will be up to Faith Action to develop from the extensive notes and detailed description of questions, materials and references to provide the Church as a whole with a scheme of training and education which adequately prepares people for this important pastoral responsibility.

## Appendix

**Questions to participants** - prior to the course (200 words maximum)

1. Why do you want to be part of the course?
2. What do you want to examine in particular?

## Reading and Resources:

### (i) Sermons

Dr William Sloane Coffin : *Alex's Death*

Dr Arthur John Gossip : *When Life Tumbles In , What Then?*

### (ii) Books

N J Robb : *A Time to die and A time to Live*

*Common Order*

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