



CNI

COMMENT - Encouraging the Church to be confident in speaking about death and dying

Sandra Millar, head of projects and developments, Archbishops' Council writes

Under a glorious June sky, nearly 200 clergy and Readers gathered to celebrate a Eucharist at the heart of the *Taking Funerals Seriously* conference, near Leamington Spa. It was simple, beautiful and moving, especially against a back drop of deep thinking about death and dying. Over the 48 hours that we gathered, we listened to the research findings of the Archbishops' Council funded work around funerals, engaged with the resources and heard some theological and sociological thinking from leading academics. Running through all of it was a message of confidence, hope and relationship.

The key messages emerging from the two-year research programme are encouraging the Church to be confident in speaking about death and dying in the contemporary and changing cultural context. The Church of England touches the lives of an estimated 200,000 people a week through its work as a leading provider of funerals. We have the spaces to hold the conversations, and the experience and wisdom to offer that comes from walking

alongside people for generations. We heard about building relationships – personal, warm relationships with families that lead to funeral services which reflect the uniqueness of God’s interest in every human being. We thought about what it meant to be a community that was there in every location for those whom death has affected, whether recent or long ago, locally or far away. But there was also a challenge to build a new depth of professional relationships with funeral directors and their colleagues.

That relationship came into full view when all the delegates boarded buses to take them to the [National Funeral Exhibition](#), held every two years at Stoneleigh, Warwickshire. The faces of both exhibitors and delegates were a picture as they entered a new world. For the exhibitors there was delight at the presence of the Church of England and its ministers - ministers listening to their stories and entering their world. For clergy, it was the surprise of realising that taking a funeral service on the day is only the tip of an iceberg of work and skill that takes place.

Two years ago I stood in the same exhibition space, shocked that the Church of England, whose ministers still conduct over a third of all funerals in England, and in some areas nearer two thirds, was almost invisible in the breadth of exhibitors there. You could find a celebrant, a counsellor, a coffin maker, a training programme, jewellery and even a hearse – but it was hard to find a minister from the Church of England. This year it was different. Our stand was significant, our conversations confident. And above all we had a message of hope to share and a message of confidence to communicate -

[Church of England funerals](#) are for everyone, and the good news of new life in Jesus Christ still brings hope and comfort to the bereaved.

Revd Canon Dr Sandra Millar, is head of projects and developments, Archbishops' Council.

:: Listen to a special Church of England podcast which was recorded at the funerals conference. It includes interviews with Revd Dr Brendan McCarthy, the Church of England's adviser on medical ethics, Revd Dorothy Moore Brooks, deputy senior chaplain at Great Ormond Street Hospital and Tony Walter, Professor of Death Studies at Bath University.

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england/funeralsconfpodcast>