

The General Synod today called on the Government to end the 'cruel' experience of so-called 'pauper' funerals in a debate where members heard of the plight of those unable to afford funeral costs.

Members voted to back a call for the Government to oversee the development of basic standards for public health funerals, run by local authorities.

Sam Margrave, a General Synod member from the Diocese of Coventry, introducing a motion to the General Synod, said bereaved families unable to afford funeral costs experienced a 'postcode lottery' of different practices.

These included no one being allowed to be present at a service; service times that make attendance impossible; ashes often not returned; pastoral care rarely provided to support the bereaved and no headstone allowed, enforcing a policy of unmarked graves, he told the Synod.

He said there had been a 70% increase in the number of public health funerals between 2015 and 2018 with this figure expected to grow. This presented a 'major public policy issue' he said.

He said: "The Church of England reaches into every community and can make a profound difference if we choose to.

"We have a moral and theological imperative to do all we can to change policy and transform the experience of the poor."

The General Synod backed an motion put by Mr Margrave calling for the Government to develop, with council leaders, a national plan and basic standards for 'pauper' funerals.

Synod members also backed plans for the Church to work with others to tackle the issues raised in the debate.

The Ven Pete Spiers, from Liverpool Diocese, told Synod members about the Good Funeral Company founded by the diocese two years ago and its work building relationships with funeral directors and local authorities.

"One of the answers to this issue is for every diocese to build good relationships with their public health departments in the local authority so that you can say to them 'if you need someone to be a celebrant for one of these funerals, we will do it', because we believe that everyone is made in the image of God and is unique and precious," he said.

That this Synod noting:

(a) the substantial rise in the number of 'pauper funerals' in England and the pain and hurt arising from them; and

(b) the call of the Gospel to meet people as Jesus does, in their time of need, as well as the duty of Christians to the poor as set out in Proverbs 31.8-9 and Deuteronomy 15.7-8;

call upon the Archbishops' Council to direct and resource the Life Events Advisory Group, in consultation with the Churches Funeral Group and the British Council of Funeral Services to:

1. undertake the formation of plans at national, diocesan and parish levels to utilise Church resources (whether in the form of finance, volunteers or buildings) to tackle the issues relating to and, where possible, end 'pauper funerals'; and
2. Work with other stakeholders to find ways, at an affordable price, to deliver a compassionate send off for the departed and to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of those left behind; and
3. Report progress made with reference to the above by the end of 2021.

And further call on Her Majesty's Government to develop with Council leaders, a national plan and basic standards for pauper funerals, which should include allowing a Christian funeral service to take place in Church or at a Crematorium; for family or others to attend; and the return of the departed (where permitted) to family members.

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