

GENERAL SYNOD

End to Paupers' Funerals

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4)

Summary

This motion provides a space to reflect on issues that the poorest people face in society, regarding existing funeral arrangements and the associated pastoral support. Specifically, it considers the increasing cost and challenged access to funeral provision, current arrangements such as the often-unavailable option to have a service in a church, issues relating to pastoral care, and wider policy matters.

This motion calls upon the Archbishops' Council to establish a task group. This group will listen and reflect, with the aim to provide a clear response and an action plan to tackle this great issue of our age.

The Motion

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 establish a Task Force including representatives of the Houses of Bishops, Clergy and Laity to:

- i. 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
- ii. work with other stakeholders to find ways, at an affordable price, to deliver a more compassionate send off for the departed and to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of those left behind

Defining Paupers Funerals

1. 'Paupers' funerals' is a term often used to describe public health funerals, or other schemes, which fund funerals for those who cannot afford to pay their own costs. These are undertaken by local authorities, or via Social Fund Funeral Expenses payments, or via health budgets (Parliament.uk, 2020).
2. Liam Foster, a recognised expert in social policy and social works, provides a succinct summary of the background and challenges of paupers' funerals.

“What happens when someone cannot afford to pay for a funeral was entrenched within the ethos of the UK welfare state at its inception through a Universal Death Grant. Seven decades later, how funerals are provided for through the state has changed considerably. No longer a universal benefit, the Department for Work and Pensions’ Social Fund Funeral Payment is a conditional benefit to those eligible, with claims assessed on both the availability of resources and family members. [This centrally-managed system] is supplemented by the Public Health Funeral system, administered by local authorities, which is intended to ensure there will be a funeral and body disposal for those who have no family members, or there are no means to pay”. (Foster, 2016).

3. Whilst this motion focuses on what is traditionally regarded as ‘paupers’ funerals’, the motion also seeks to establish a forum to consider and address the plight of those suffering from funeral poverty. This should include those who wrongly – due to fear, shame or anxiety – avoid a public health funeral but instead take out a loan they cannot afford. Any task group should, as its terms of reference, consider the wider context of funeral poverty.
4. I cite Corden et al (2016) to define the issues and the associated constituency that the motion affects:
 - “People’s inability to pay the costs’;
 - ‘The economic impact of lack of affordability, in particular problematic indebtedness’; and
 - ‘Negative psychological and emotional constituents, including the impact on grief and experience of bereavement’”.

The state of funeral provision for the poor in England today

5. Across England and beyond, paupers’ funerals are increasing at an alarming rate. As cash-strapped local authorities try to meet the growing need amongst our poorest with dignity in death and with support for those are left behind, the state, society and the Church are failing to respond appropriately to this cruel situation.
6. There has been a 70% increase in the number of paupers’ funerals between 2015 and 2018 (ITV.com, 2018). This figure continues to grow costing councils alone, £5.4m annually. This does not include the cost or number of funerals for those passing away in hospital. The Commons Work and Pensions Committee has called for the Competition and Markets Authority to intervene in the way prices are set for burials. Academics such as Tony Walter posit that ‘there are considerable issues with the way in which the state administers its funds in this area’ (2017).
7. There is also no national set of standards for paupers’ funerals. As a result, different local authorities have different practices, meaning the experience is a

postcode lottery. Recipients of a paupers' funeral and their loved ones' experience:

- Funeral services that they cannot attend
- Funeral services at which no one is allowed to be present
- No option for the funeral service to take place at a church
- Ashes often not returned to loved ones (thetimes.co.uk, 2018)
- Those left behind often have no pastoral care, and if they do, it is often undertaken by an unqualified 'funeral minister.' This practice leaves the vulnerable open to abuse.

Our responsibility to the poor and the purpose of a funeral

8. While funerals play a central role within our faith, those of faith or none are still Children of God and a funeral service and pastoral care before or after death remains a rite of passage for all in society. Whether for the departed or those who mourn, funerals offer comfort, care and an opportunity to say goodbye. For all of us, they are also an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of our lives and our journey here on earth. The participation of others allows a process of grieving and celebration of life lost. Our approach to death speaks to God's purpose for us and our own gift of life. Funerals are also considered sacramental for those left behind, and everyone has the right to be commended to God at the end of their early pilgrimage.
9. Biblical teachings, theological works, and Church-centred organisations have all advocated for Christian responsibility to the poor.
10. Loftin and Dimsdale (2018) writing in *Work as a Cooperation with God*, reflect on Matthew 24:34-40 arguing that Jesus calls us as Christians to be "judged on basis of [our] efforts to satisfy basic human needs of the poor".
11. The Church Urban Fund argues that "Christian theology provides a distinctive perspective on poverty, including an in-built 'bias to the poor' and a strong emphasis on a personal and collective responsibility to help those in poverty as an expression of God's love for, and identification with, the 'least of these'" (cuf.org.uk, 2020).
12. The Scriptures read:

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy". (Proverbs 31.8-9, New International Version)

"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land, the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard hearted or tight fisted toward them. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need". (Deuteronomy 15.7-8, New International Version)
13. In discussing the relevance of theology to the poor, Trevor Homfray-Cooper points to Psalm 146:7–9 and argues this imbues Godly characteristics in respect of the poor:

“He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked” (Psalm 146:7–9 , New International Version).

14. Homily 50 on St Matthew’s Gospel by St John Chrysostom in the 4th century sheds further light:

“Do you wish to honour the Body of Christ? Then do not disdain Him when you see Him in rags. After having honoured Him in Church with silken vestments, do not leave Him to die of cold outside for lack of clothing. For it is the same Jesus Who says, “This is My Body” and Who says, “I was hungry but you would not feed Me. Whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.” The Body of Christ in the Eucharist demands pure souls, not costly garments. But in the poor, He demands all our care”.

(Barkhuizen, 1995)

Conclusion

15. Each funeral costs £1400 in average. At present, paupers’ funerals are an increasing burden for the state. And as time goes on, the experience for the individuals involved worsens.
16. Funerals offer a great opportunity to connect with the communities we as the Church serve, acting often at times as a primary point of contact; contact that we – and our communities – cannot afford to miss out on.
17. The question is, therefore, what can the Church at a national, diocesan and parish level do to work with the available budget to support those departed, their families and Councils to meet the needs of the community, living and dead?
18. My first hope is that in passing this motion there will be space to consider how we, as a Church, might respond in mission, ministry and using our resources and networks to challenge or aid existing authorities to meet the needs of those suffering what has become a cruel experience.
19. My second hope is that the Church can offer leadership in ensuring that paupers’ funerals as they are today end, and that a new person-centred, modern affordable and universal basic funeral replaces existing provision to offer a Christ-like experience of love, hope and compassion. Some Parishes or Dioceses have wonderful experiences that show a Christian witness, and by having this debate and discussion, we can enlighten one another.

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