

GENERAL SYNOD

Bereavement, life events and the pandemic

“This is a time of great dying and the church should be in the thick of it helping all who need help in any way they can” [research respondent 2021]

A background paper from the Evangelism and Discipleship Steering Group

1. The Church of England has always been privileged to be there for people to mark significant moments of celebration and sadness in their lives, through baptisms, weddings and funerals, with over 220,000 such ceremonies in 2019. These events enabled us to have close conversation with almost a million people involved in organising these events, and with between 11 and 15 million people who attend as guests.
2. Since March 2020 the pandemic has dominated life and death, affecting all of these special moments, and death, dying and grief have been talked about publicly more than they have ever been. At the same time, funerals and all the rituals associated with bereavement have been seriously affected.
3. In January the Archbishops’ Council Life Events team commissioned research with the adult population of England to:
 - Help provide churches with insights into the opportunities, challenges and impact of the changes in how society deals with mortality, death and grief.
 - To develop understanding and confidence as to how we can offer support and comfort to the millions who have been affected, however and wherever we meet them in the months and years ahead.
 - Although not the primary focus of the research, it also showed how much contact around Life Events impacts how people feel about the Church of England, reminding us that this ministry remains one of the most important ways in which those who are not regular worshippers feel connected and close.

Background

4. The research was conducted online through a representative survey with 2008 people aged 18 – 75 in England. The Church of England was not revealed as the sponsor until the latter part of the questionnaire. All the work that the Life Events team has developed since the beginning of the Wedding Project in 2010 has been underpinned by robust research with those who encounter and experience the church. Insights and resources are then developed to enable the local church to minister more effectively and confidently with all those they meet through weddings, baptism of a child, funerals and bereavement.

Key Findings

5. In the past year, many people have been impacted by the death of people they know, by restricted funerals and by thoughts of their own mortality. This

GENERAL SYNOD

has had a particular impact on those under 30, with 5 out of 10 having lost someone close to them, compared with 3 out of 10 in the over 60s age group.

“Covid hanged over the death of my grandfather. It was not a death caused by Covid, but Covid ruined the day. This has impacted on my mental health immensely.” [Research respondent]

6. Restricted funerals have had a major impact on how people feel able to process grief, and also on thoughts about mortality, ranging from fears about the death of someone close [almost half of respondents] or questions about life after death [26% of respondents].
7. The Church of England is seen by 63% of the population as definitely being able to offer spaces, places and people who can help on the journey of grief. This ranges from indoor and outdoor spaces for quiet reflection and prayer to the providing a listening ear about death and grief [61%], and giving practical advice with funeral planning [49%].

“It would be amazing if there were support groups and more help when dealing with grief. We don’t forget those who help us at our darkest times”.
[Research Respondent]

8. Digital communication, through websites, social media and live streaming, is of major importance as people find information and help around death, funerals and grief. Almost half of respondents [47%] would look for support online as they grieve, which includes exploring deeper questions, and just over a third search online to find practical help in planning events.
9. When the Church of England has been there for someone at one of their significant life moments, whether a wedding, christening or funeral, they feel a close connection to the church. 19% of adults say they feel close to the Church of England, although only 3% attend regularly, with 36% of these saying they have helped organised a funeral, and 18% organising a wedding or christening. In addition, a majority of adults in the population [54%] have attended a church wedding, funeral or baptism.

The huge impact and potential of Life Events

10. Each year through Life Events we have a million conversations with those who are at the heart of these events.
 - This gives an opportunity for many, across all age groups, including under 40s who are the most likely parenting and marrying age, to have contact with God and God’s people.
 - There would usually be some 12 – 15 million people attending a christening, wedding or funeral each year, with the research showing that over 54% of the population have attended such a service.

GENERAL SYNOD

- In addition to the specific services of baptism, weddings and funerals, we have an opportunity to be alongside the millions who have experienced bereavement, in whatever situation we meet them.

11. However, in a secular culture where there is an increasing choice of ways to mark life's significant moments, Church of England services have continued to decline. The research shows that contact in these moments is still one of the most important ways in which we serve the wider population, and enable them to experience church, perhaps for the first time.

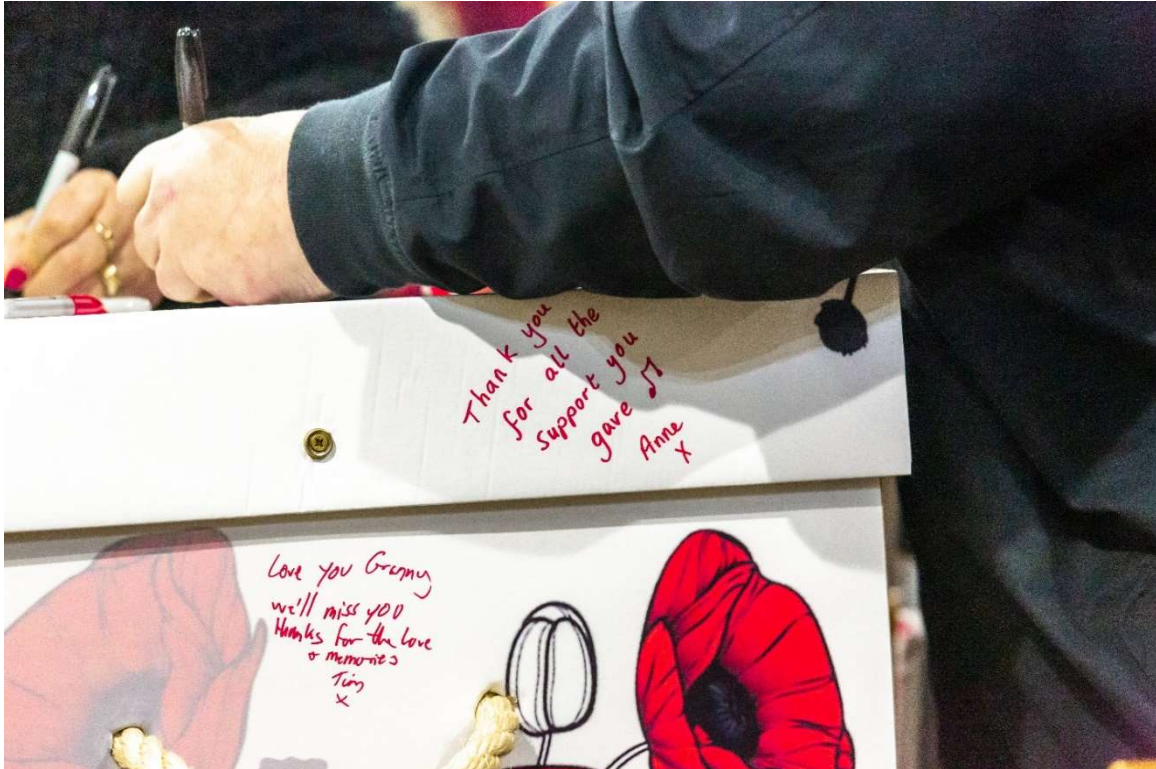
Challenges and opportunities for 2021/22

12. As we become able to welcome people again, both regular worshippers and those who are marking life's big moments, the research suggest some actions which will be helpful as we respond to all that has happened.

- There will be a continuing story of bereavement and its impact on people of all ages. We will need to respond to this in different ways, both through individual opportunities to reflect, and also gathered moments for remembering. For example, some churches are now offering regular services for remembering, and others are creating spaces in churchyards through memorial cairns and prayer trees. Churches may also want to develop more confidence and skills through short courses open to all [see www.lossandhope.org]
- It will be important to communicate clearly across all media that the church is there for people, to grieve, to remember and to celebrate because we can no longer assume that people know who we are and what we offer.
- We can recognise and value the significance of this ministry at a local level, affirming lay people, as well as licensed and ordained ministers who are alongside the bereaved.
- Good local partnerships will be helpful as we walk alongside the bereaved, working well with bereavement charities, funeral directors, care homes and others to remember and to support people when someone has died. This was very effective when we supported the National Day of Reflection on 23rd March, spearheaded by Marie Curie, and delivered in partnership with hundreds of large and small organisations.

13. This research has demonstrated the wide-ranging impact of the past year, and also given us confidence that the message of hope and comfort offered through local churches is valued and valuable. Being there for people at the key moments in their lives remains at the heart of everyday faith and discipleship, as each of us becomes more aware of how to draw alongside and bear witness to God's great love to those we meet.

Funerals and Bereavement Research



This is a time of great dying and the church should be right in the thick of it helping all who need help - in any way they can.

Conducted for the Church of England in January 2021

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Introduction

Since March 2020 the pandemic has dominated life, and death.

- There have been many excess deaths.
- Fear of death has been brought to the front of mind.
- People have been prompted to consider their own mortality.
- There has been huge change in how society deals with dying, death, bereavement and grief.

There is a need for greater understanding of the impact this has had on people.

This research has been conducted to help the Church of England understand what the impact has been and determine how best to respond.



Research method

Research was conducted online with 2008 people aged 18 to 75, 15-20th January 2021.

The sample was representative of the England population by age and gender.

35 people who said they worked for a religious organisation were excluded from the research, to eliminate any possible bias.

The Church of England was not revealed as the sponsor of the research until specific questions relating to it were introduced in the latter part of the questionnaire.

Key findings

Since March 2020, many people have been impacted by:

▶ DEATH

- 6 in 10 experienced the death of at least one person*, 1 in 4 experienced **more than one** death*
- 4 in 10 experienced the death of someone **close**, 1 in 10 lost **more than one** close person.

▶ RESTRICTED FUNERALS

- 7 in 10 of those who experienced someone's death were not able to attend funerals.
- More than 8 in 10 agreed people haven't been able to say goodbye properly or fulfil funeral wishes.

▶ BEING ISOLATED IN GRIEF

- 8 in 10 agreed those grieving need more support.
- 3 in 4 agreed grief has been harder due to the restrictions.
- 3 in 4 agreed it's hard not being able to gather to mourn.

▶ THINKING ABOUT MORTALITY

- 1 in 2 have thought about the death of someone close.
- 3 in 10 have thought about their own death or how they might die.
- 1 in 4 have thought about fear of dying, whether there is life after death, how they might be remembered or dying alone.

In many ways, younger people (18-29s) have been impacted more than older people (aged 60+):

- 5 in 10 18-29s lost someone close to them, compared with 3 in 10 of those 60+.
- More than half helped someone cope with bereavement, compared with 1 in 4 of those 60+.
- 1 in 4 were involved in arranging funerals, compared with less than 1 in 10 of those 60+.

People feel the Church of England should be offering help and support:

▶ PHYSICALLY

- Offering indoor and outdoor spaces for reflection, grief, prayer or lighting candles.

▶ RELATIONALLY & PRACTICALLY

- Listening to and supporting people with dying, death, funerals and grief.

▶ SERVICES & PRAYER

- Holding private and public services, praying for people, and helping people to pray.

▶ ONLINE

- Offering online support and spaces for remembering or prayer.

In some ways, younger (aged 18-29) were more positive about the Church of England offering support than older people (aged 60 or over).

I'm not sure how much support is presently available. Although not religious I am aware of some community work the church is involved in. These are immensely useful for the local community. I would imagine their support around bereavement is equally impressive. Any help can be useful when dealing with bereavement.

(21 year old male from London)

* Death of someone where they would normally have gone to their funeral

Research Summary

Death

Experience of deaths since March 2020

- 62% experienced **at least one death** (where they would normally have gone to the funeral).
- 27% experienced **more than one death** (where they would normally have gone to the funeral).
- 42% experienced the death of **someone close** to them.
- 10% experienced the death of **more than one person close** to them.



Restricted funerals



Funeral services

72% of those who experienced at least one death* were **unable to attend a funeral**. Restricted attendance was the main reason for not going to the funeral (72%), although 25% were worried about covid and 23% were unable or unwilling to travel.

86% agreed that people have **not said goodbye properly** to those who have died, 57% strongly agreed.

82% agreed that people have **not been able to fulfil funeral wishes**, 52% strongly agreed.

Live streaming

- At least 40% of the funerals involved **live-streaming** (or video).
- Where there was live streaming, 86% said they watched it (58% of those watching live).
- 86% felt it is a good idea to offer live streaming.

Being isolated in grief

- 78% agreed those grieving **need more support**
 - 48% strongly agreed
- 77% agreed **grief is harder** due to the restrictions
 - 49% strongly agreed
- 74% agreed it's hard **not being able to gather** to mourn
 - 42% strongly agreed



Thinking about mortality

What people have thought about more in the past year:

- 48% Death of someone close to me
- 35% My own death
- 32% How or when I might die
- 27% Fear of dying
- 26% Whether there is life after death
- 25% How I might be remembered
- 24% Dying alone

Older people were more likely to think about their own death. Younger people were more likely than others to think about whether there is life after death, how they might be remembered, fear of dying or dying alone.



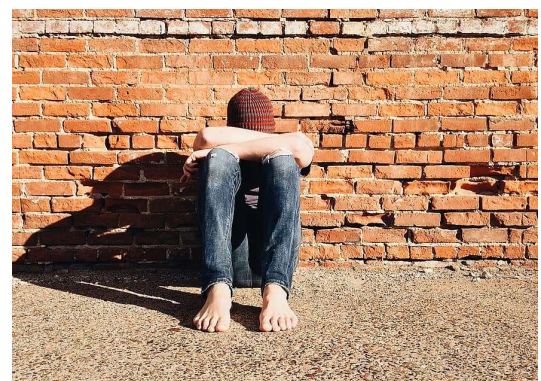
Where people would go for more information or advice on dying, death, bereavement

- 35% Close family member
- 34% Internet/social media
- 25% Funeral director
- 19% Friend around your own age
- 14% Church person
- 13% Friend who is older
- 12% Doctor or other health professional
- 8% books
- 6% person from another faith

The impact on younger people (18-29s)

The impact on 18-29s since March 2020:

- 54% **helped someone cope** with bereavement (v 26% of those aged 60+).
- 51% have **lost someone close** to them (v 31% of those aged 60+).
- 27% were involved in **arranging a funeral** (v 7% of those aged 60+).



It has been hard thanks to Covid, I almost felt like covid hanged over the death of my grandfather. It was not a death caused by Covid but covid ruined the day - having to wear a mask, feeling guilty about cuddling people, the wake. This has impacted on my mental health immensely

What the Church of England should be offering

People were asked what they felt the CofE should be doing in relation to dying, death, funerals and bereavement. The findings show there is an **expectation** the CofE will be active in these areas.

Here are a couple of comments made by respondents:

I'm not sure how much support is presently available. Although not religious I am aware of some community work the church is involved in. These are immensely useful for the local community. I would imagine their support around bereavement is equally impressive. Any help can be useful when dealing with bereavement. There is never too much available.

It would be amazing if there were support groups and more help when dealing with grief. I also feel this would encourage more people to join their church later down the line. We don't forget those who help us at our darkest times.

Q. Thinking about death, dying and grief, do you think the Church of England should offer any of these?

Physical spaces

	% of total sample	Definitely	Maybe	No
Indoor spaces for quiet reflection, grief or prayer		63%	32%	5%
Places to light candles for those who have died		57%	35%	8%
Outdoor spaces for quiet reflection, grief or prayer		54%	40%	6%

Relational and practical support

	% of total sample	Definitely	Maybe	No
A listening ear to those who want to talk about death and dying		61%	32%	7%
Guidance on preparing for someone's death		55%	37%	8%
Help for people to talk about grief		54%	39%	7%
Advice on how to talk to someone about dying, death or funerals		51%	41%	8%
Practical support to those affected by death		50%	43%	8%
Help and support with funeral planning		49%	41%	10%
Help for the grieving in local communities		48%	44%	8%
Support networks for those affected by death		48%	45%	7%
Help for you to think about your own death		42%	45%	13%
Short course to help people affected by bereavement		34%	54%	12%

Services & prayer

	% of total sample	Definitely	Maybe	No
Private services to remember individuals who have died		53%	40%	8%
Services to celebrate the life of individuals who have died		51%	42%	7%
Prayer for people affected by death		50%	41%	9%
Public services to remember people who have died		45%	44%	11%
Advice/ideas on how to pray		43%	43%	14%
Remembering services in special places (e.g. outdoors)		42%	48%	10%
Simple services around special anniversaries (e.g. of birth or death)		40%	49%	12%

Online support

	% of total sample	Definitely	Maybe	No
Support online for those affected by death		47%	44%	9%
Online spaces for remembering or writing prayers		40%	48%	12%

Younger people were more positive than older people about the Church of England offering these:

- Support online for those affected by death
- Help for the grieving in local communities
- Remembering services in special places (e.g. outdoors)
- Advice/ideas on how to pray
- Short course to help people affected by bereavement
- Simple services around special anniversaries (e.g. of birth or death)
- Online spaces for remembering or writing prayers

Church of England connections

Awareness and consideration of Church of England led funerals

- Only 44% thought that **anyone** could have a Church of England led funeral, and just 35% of those aged 18-29.
- People were more likely to consider having a Church of England led funeral if they **knew they could hold the service in the church building** and the church **actively welcomed people more**.

How they would contact the Church of England to find out what it could do to help and support

- Most commonly, people would search **online**.
- Those aged 60+ were equally likely to search online, contact a local church or contact a vicar.
- Those aged 18-29 were least likely to contact a vicar.

Current relationship with the Church of England

- 19% said they had a close relationship, 40% a distant relationship and 41% no relationship at all.
- Younger people were more likely to say they had a relationship than older people.
- **Life Events** were the most common point of contact.
- Regular contact was most likely to be through **church/Sunday school, Church of England schools or toddler/child/youth services**.

Final comments

A space was given at the end of the survey for respondents to write down any other thoughts that might be helpful to the Church of England in supporting people with death, dying, bereavement or grief.

Here is a selection of those comments:

I appreciate that the Church of England is trying to support people in this way, I wish them very well. I think a follow-up phone call or visit a year after the person who has died would be appreciated by many people, to know that they are not forgotten in their loss.

I have to admit I am not very religious. I do like the idea though of the Church of England working in local communities to encourage people in being able to share and cope with grief.

If they helped more with funeral advice I think they would engage more people in their church

I feel that they do a good job now but would welcome a more active support for relatives of those who have died

If you can do any of the ideas shown here then more power to you, some folks need all the support that they can get when a death hits them so good luck and I hope that your god blesses you for your efforts

I think the Church should hold remembrance circles for anyone affected by bereavement and who are grieving. A drop-in service for people to open up to each other and help each other with their grief. I don't think it should just be up to a religious leader as many people could take comfort talking to others in their community.

I'm not sure if they support only Christians but I wasn't christened so I hope u would still accept me. Welcome all, be a shoulder to cry on, or chat but know when to stay away.

It's such Big subject but a welcome initiative

This is a very hard subject. Personally I have a real fear of death that makes me feel empty and scared. However I would find it hard to talk to others about this. So it is hard for me to see what is necessary from the church. An ear to lend when wanted is always good though.

You guys are doing great, even from another religious persons view point

Just be there, my greatest friend was C of E and when she passed I was so happy with the way the Vicar conducted her service and the comfort he gave me, as well as all the other mourners.