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Report

Love, Grief, and Hope:
Emotional responses to death and dying in the UK

Madeleine Pennington with Nathan Mladin
Foreword by Archbishop Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

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In the ancient church, the message of Christ's triumph over death produced some peculiar attitudes toward the dead. Believers would assemble for prayer in tombs. They would worship Christ among the bones of the dead. Believers would raise the bodies of martyrs in the air and parade them through the streets like trophies. At funerals they would gaze lovingly on the dead and sing psalms of praise over their bodies. Such behaviour shocked their pagan neighbours. According to Roman law, the dead had to be buried miles away from the city so that the living would not be contaminated. But Christians placed the dead right at the centre of their public gatherings... Even today the Apostles' Creed makes the most sense when you imagine the words echoing among the bones of the catacombs. The creed is marked everywhere by an unflinching acceptance of the facts of human mortality, coupled with a straightforward confidence in the ultimate triumph of life — a triumph that has already happened once and for all in the person of Jesus.

Benjamin Myers, The Apostles Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism.

Contents

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Foreword

Everyone, even an Archbishop, has to face the deaths of people they love, and the profound grief which can attend them. Earlier this year I lost my mother. Her death wasn't unexpected, and yet I was still surprised by the complex feelings that arose, the unforeseen ways I found myself responding to her loss.

Confronted with death, we can feel diminished, fearful and lost. Bereavement can make us vulnerable, questioning and numb. Yet Christian faith has always been a source of hope, and the church community a place of comfort to the bereaved in both practical and pastoral ways. A funeral is a rite of farewell, but also the start of the journey of living with loss. For Christians, Jesus's victory over death frames that act of letting go and lets us trust our loved ones to God.

That is why *Love, Grief and Hope: Emotional Responses to Death and Dying in the UK* is such an important report for our time. A sea-change in our culture means that as people around us are increasingly sheltered from the physical reality of death, they know less and less about how they will die and how to cope with loss.

This is the landscape of Madeleine Pennington and Nathan Mladin's research for Theos. People are not just becoming increasingly distanced from the traditional means of comfort and hope offered by the Christian funeral; many people say they don't want any sort of funeral at all. It is shocking to discover that death may be seen as expensive, time-consuming and irrelevant, and that it is better just to move on.

We seem to have short memories. It was only recently that Covid meant that we often could not mourn our loved ones in person even if we wanted to. If we avoid what death means, we can also lose a meaningful vocabulary for death and dying. As

a hospital chaplain during the pandemic, I sat with people as they died when their families couldn't. I found that presence of someone willing to face death was a comfort not just to the person, but to those who cared for them. It assured people that we are not alone, even in death. In fact, it is often when death approaches that we might feel love and connection most strongly.

This report notes that some of us think about our own death at least once a week. We still know that we will die and that everything we have been in this world will eventually be erased and forgotten. In an increasingly individualised world this can feel scandalous. How dare our lives come to an end?

2569 people generously shared their thoughts about death and dying for this research and deserve praise for their honesty in offering their feelings on a difficult subject. How many of us would have always gone for the 'prefer not to say' option on these matters? *Love, Grief and Hope* not only informs us of trends in our society around death and dying, but prepares us for a future in which death is increasingly taboo and grief shameful, possibly managed by technology, a future of 'griefbots'.

At the beginning of the report we are reminded of early Christians crying Christ's triumph among the bones of their dead. The Church has honed compassionate skills in walking with people at the end of their lives and cares for those who mourn. Now we must re-open conversations, name Death, and think about how this compassionate caring can be re-shaped for this new world. Our love in Christ for those in grief is surely more urgent than ever.

Archbishop Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

November 2023

This report in 60 seconds

This report examines emotional responses to death and dying in the UK, presenting the findings of a nationally representative poll commissioned by Theos and conducted by YouGov.

It confirms that ours is a society which keeps death at arm's length and out of sight. Many of us experience bereavement without direct exposure to death, and most do not feel well-prepared for our own deaths – though preparedness rises with age. We are increasingly likely to grieve for others behind closed doors too: religious or not, we think a funeral should celebrate the life of the deceased and hold space for mourning together, but less than half of us (47%) now say we want a funeral at all. Financial pressures play a part in these decisions, but religious and spiritual perspectives are even stronger determinants of whether people want a funeral or not. In this sense, reducing religious affiliation has made greater room for market forces to shape how we grieve. The result is a significant realignment in British grieving practices. And further changes to the ways we grieve may come, given higher levels of openness to emerging "grief technologies" among the young.

Despite all this change, one prevailing factor as we think about death is the importance of relationships: the nature of key relationships (for example whether we are married or have children) affects our immediate emotional responses to death and dying; many of our concerns about dying are about how it will impact those we love, or the future life events we will miss; and we lean on those closest to us as we die or mourn others.

In a modern and pluralistic society, the Church is rightly one of many voices in this conversation, but it is well-placed to make a positive and much-needed contribution – not only

because of its practical assets and historical engagement in this area, but also because of its continued theological witness. Church buildings can be offered as accessible, informal, reflective spaces to remember the dead and seek out bereavement support. This is a distinctly modern opportunity to meet people in their grief, not least as increasing numbers go without funerals to mark their losses. The interplay of grief and hope in Christian theology also holds space for the many complex emotions people feel as they face dying and bereavement – and ultimately, gives theological voice to our intuition that grief is really about love.

List of figures

Executive summary

How a society navigates death ultimately reflects its deeper spiritual and material culture, and our own society's approach is rapidly changing. This research considers our emotional and pastoral responses to death and dying in light of such profound shifts, as well as reflecting on the future of grief in the UK. It presents the findings of a nationally representative poll of 2,569 UK adults, commissioned by Theos and conducted by YouGov, in field from 19-21 July 2023. Part one explores our emotional responses both to the prospect of our own deaths and to the deaths of our loved ones. Part two considers the future of grief in the UK more broadly, through the lenses of technology and the continued role of churches in a less religiously-affiliated age.

Part one

Chapter one illustrates the gap between how many of us are bereaved and how many have direct exposure to the end of life.

- The overwhelming majority of us have lost a loved one, but far fewer have seen a dead body or been with someone as they died. We constantly see reports of far-away death and dying on television and through the media, but more than in previous generations, we are likely to face the unvarnished realities of death for the first time only when losing those closest to us.
- Direct exposure to death was higher among older age categories, but even among the oldest respondents (aged 55 and over), among whom nearly everybody had lost a loved one (98%), nearly half (46%) had still not witnessed the end of life first-hand.

Chapter two explores the complex emotions people feel about their own death, their concerns about dying, and how often they think about it. It notes the prominence of relationships in how we think about death, especially when it comes to our concerns about dying.

— Half of respondents felt sadness when thinking about their own death, though nearly half of respondents (46%) felt acceptance. Fear (38%) and anxiety (35%) were the next most common responses across the whole population.

— These responses varied by age, gender, employment status, family and relationships, again with the biggest swings around age. Those in the older age categories were more likely to feel accepting of their own death, and less likely to say they felt the negative emotions of fear, anxiety, or denial.

— Frequent attenders of a worship service were less likely to feel fear or sadness than those who attended worship infrequently or not at all, even taking the older age profile of religious people into account. Nearly half (46%) of frequent religious attenders aged 55 or over felt hopeful when considering their own death, compared to just 12% of their non-attending counterparts. Higher levels of hope were also observed among religiously affiliated respondents.

— The most common concern when thinking about one's own death was "Suffering or being in pain" (59%), followed by "Not being present for future life events of family and friends" and "Saying goodbye to loved ones" (both 51%), confirming that our relationships are at the forefront of our emotional response to death. By

comparison, 29% said they were concerned about no longer existing and just 6% were afraid of spiritual judgement.

— A quarter of us think about our own death at least once a week, but 1 in 10 say they never do. Frequency of thinking about death was not hugely affected by working status, gender, marital status, or (surprisingly) age.

Chapter three notes that we are not generally well prepared for death, and this lack of preparedness may have a pastoral impact.

— We asked people to rate their preparedness across a range of criteria: financial, legal, spiritual, relational, legacy and achievements, and practical funeral arrangements. In none of these categories did more than half of the general population feel prepared to die, though feelings of preparedness did rise with age. Self-reported preparedness was also affected by employment status, social grade, relationships, and religiosity.

— Feelings of preparedness also correlated with certain emotional responses to death. For example, feeling unprepared was associated with higher levels of anxiety, fear and depression. Those who felt unprepared were also more likely to say they were in denial and less likely to say they felt acceptance.

Chapter four notes that less than half of our respondents (47%) said they wanted a funeral and explores reasons for this potential transformation of British grieving practices.

— Alongside other demographic factors, finances played a clear role: 49% of workers said they wanted a funeral

compared to 38% of unemployed respondents, and 51% of ABC1 respondents wanted a funeral compared to 42% of their C2DE counterparts. At a lower level of significance, some 40% of those with a household income below £20,000 (and 43% of those with a household income under £30,000) wanted a funeral compared to 56% with a household income over £100,000.

— However, the biggest markers were religious and spiritual: 76% of frequent worshippers (those who attend religious worship at least once a month) said they wanted a funeral compared to 38% who never attend, and 59% of self-identified religious respondents wanted a funeral compared to 39% of their non-religious counterparts. Religious respondents were also more likely to have decided one way or another.

— Just over one in 10 (13%) of respondents who did not want a funeral said this was because they did not have enough money saved, but far more people said they felt the money could be better spent another way (67%). This was followed by "I don't see the point" (55%) and "I don't want a traditional service" (43%).

— These responses indicate an interplay between financial considerations and a more profoundly faltering conviction regarding the purpose and benefits of funerals. This faltering conviction has left greater room for market forces to shape how we grieve.

— We also asked people what they thought funerals were for. The most popular response, including among religious respondents, was "to celebrate the life of the deceased". Pastoral options were the next most popular (including "providing a space for mourning together")

illustrating that funerals are expected to hold space for various emotions from celebration to grief. Explicitly religious purposes were the least popular.

— When asked what elements they would like at their own funeral, the most popular choices emphasised a personal touch, celebrating the personality and life of the deceased.

Chapter five considers what sort of support people want around death and bereavement.

— We asked people who they would like beside them when they die. By far the most common preferences were close loved ones. Just 7% of the total population wanted to be accompanied by a religious figure or chaplain, though this varied significantly by religious affiliation. One in 10 respondents wanted to die alone.

— When asked who they would approach for emotional support following a bereavement, again most people look to those closest to them (though 12% said they would not reach out to anyone following a close loss). Nearly three quarters (72%) would speak to family and 59% would speak to friends. Around 31% of frequent religious attenders would reach out to their faith community, and 38% of the same group would reach out to a faith leader, compared to 0% and 1% respectively of those who never attend. Meanwhile, 12% of those who said they attended worship just once every six months would reach out to a faith leader. Taken as a whole, these data indicate that few people outside faith communities would reach out to them for emotional or practical bereavement support, although they are still associated with this support among some people even on the edges of them.

— When asked what kinds of support are most important following a bereavement, types of practical support (for example, helping with organising the funeral and legal arrangements) were the most popular choices. Only 1 in 10 respondents responded that it was important to have opportunities to discuss the meaning of death/the afterlife. Those who frequently attended a religious worship service were notably more likely to prioritise both emotional and spiritual support. For example, 62% of frequent attenders felt pastoral or emotional support to come to terms with the death was important compared to 39% of those who never attend and 45% of the general population.

Part two

Chapter six notes that the current market for grief technologies such as "griefbots" and interactive avatars based on the deceased is low, but openness rises with age. These technologies are likely to play more of a role in our grieving practices in future.

Chapter seven reflects on the continued role of churches in the context of a rapidly changing grief landscape and reduced formal religious affiliation. It especially explores the public expectation that church assets should still be directed towards helping people grieve, alongside the especially high value on pastoral and emotional support among Christian congregations (as above). It suggests that the confident provision of church buildings as informal spaces to help people come to terms with their loss can be a continued gift from churches to wider society – despite fewer people choosing religious funerals, and in fact especially as more families go without a formal funeral to mark their grief.

At the same time, the historical association between churches and support for the dying and bereaved is not coincidental, nor do Christians merely have something to say on this topic out of habit. Rather, a series of claims about death and dying lie at the heart of Christian faith. This chapter therefore also reflects on the continued place of Christian theology itself in the grief landscape. Of particular relevance to the themes of this report, it finds that the interplay of grief and hope in this theology holds space for the many complex emotions people feel as they come to terms with death – and in the end, gives voice to our intuition that grief is really about love.

At its best, the Church has been (and can be still) a loving, grieving and hoping community: not shying away from the painful realities of separation wrought by death, but sitting alongside those who grieve and bearing one another's sorrows; celebrating the dignity of the deceased as precious and unique in the eyes of a God who loves (and supplies life for) all humanity; and looking forward in hope not to death but resurrection. It is this vision which has historically inspired churches to direct their buildings, leadership, and community networks to those who mourn – and which they can still aspire to embody as a practical witness, even in a rapidly changing culture of grief.

Introduction

Grappling with the inevitability of death is central to the human condition – so much so, it is sometimes said we are the only living beings that know we must one day die.

Whether this is true or not, scholars have frequently diagnosed (often subconscious) attempts to cope with the painful realities of death and bereavement across all elements of human culture. Perhaps most prominent in this regard is Ernest Becker's work, *The Denial of Death*, published 50 years ago, which characterised civilisation itself as a grand coping mechanism for our primal fear of death, providing a system that ultimately enables people to feel their achievements "are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man [sic] and his products count".[1]

Half a century on, what might Becker himself have made of our approach to death and dying?

After all, few cultures have more effectively kept death at a distance than the modern West. The world is more connected than ever, and we are constantly faced with reports of far-away death and dying through the media, but direct exposure in our own lives has become increasingly uncommon. Largely, this is the result of remarkable medical advances in recent times. Life expectancy in the UK has roughly doubled since the middle of the 19th century (though has more recently been stalling), particularly reflecting a drastic reduction in infant mortality.[2] If you were a baby boy born in 1841 and were lucky enough to survive your first year, your life expectancy would already have risen by nearly eight years since birth (though would still

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Few cultures have more effectively kept death at a distance than the modern West.

only be 47.7 years old) such was the skewing effect of high infant mortality at the time.

As the *Lancet* Commission on the Value of Death noted in 2022, modern medicine has also changed where and how we die, and who is likely to care for us when we are dying:

> **Modern medicine has changed where and how we die, and who is likely to care for us when we are dying.**

> *How people die has changed radically over recent generations. Death comes later in life for many and dying is often prolonged. Death and dying have moved from a family and community setting to primarily the domain of health systems.... Futile or potentially inappropriate treatment can continue into the last hours of life. The roles of families and communities have receded as death and dying have become unfamiliar and skills, traditions, and knowledge are lost... [and] there is an excessive focus on clinical interventions at the end of life.*[3]

Although recent years have seen an increasing proportion of deaths happening in private homes (partly driven by the pandemic) nearly three quarters of us still die under the specialist care of institutions such as hospitals, hospices, or care homes.[4] Culturally, too, we valorise youth and beauty, and put off the ageing process for as long as possible. We have become experts at excluding death from normal life.

In 1841, death was a common experience of life; now we encounter death either through depictions on TV and in the media, or through our most personal losses – which are likely to come later in life and behind closed doors.[5] This does

> **Death is "hidden rather than forbidden", meaning we just aren't very good at talking about it.**

not make it a taboo as such. Death is "hidden rather than forbidden", meaning we just aren't very good at talking about it.[6]

With this in mind, the *Lancet* Commission itself calls for a renewed recognition of dying as "a relational and spiritual process rather than simply a physiological event", and for better "networks of care" which "lead support for people dying, caring, and grieving".[7] Religion has traditionally been one of the main sources of that recognition – and perhaps also those networks of care. Yet at the same time, the religious landscape of the West is undergoing its own transformation – most consequentially, with declining religious affiliation. The 2021 census confirmed that 37% of the UK population now say they have no religion at all – a figure which is even higher, exceeding half, in other major polls (and growing). Christians are now a minority for the first time in over a thousand years, making up 46% of the population.[8] This does not mean spirituality is disappearing altogether, but it is certainly changing shape around us.

Such changes affect the way we approach death and bereavement in a variety of ways. Some of these ways are obvious: reducing religious affiliation has led to the reduced popularity of traditional religious funerals and rise of celebrant-led "celebrations of life" – though as we shall see, these secular ceremonies are in turn finding they must now compete with "direct cremation", as growing numbers of Britons dispense with funeral rites altogether.[9] If funerals were one of the few places where death was openly and communally acknowledged in modern Britain, they too are now becoming less common.

Elsewhere, changing approaches to death (and especially grief) are more subtle. New advances in a biotechnology, nanotechnology and robotics are harnessed to extend life and delay death as long as possible – but the emergence of new technologies outside medicine can also unexpectedly shape the ways we grieve.[10] These technologies range from the feasible to the fantastical, from grief-trained chatbots and "digital twin" interactive avatars to (at the greatest extreme) transhumanist ambitions to supersede biology and embodied life altogether. Such ventures not only reflect basic human anxieties about death and the afterlife but imply a whole range of unacknowledged metaphysical and moral assumptions about the human person, the relation of the body to personhood, mortality, grief, and the afterlife.

Ultimately, how a society navigates death is an expression of its deeper spiritual and material culture, meaning that there are vast differences in how cultures approach death and dying. Grieving practices have changed significantly throughout time, even relatively recently in a Western context; for example, we no longer observe Victorian mourning etiquette around what bereaved families should wear, though this was common little more than a century ago. But less often acknowledged is that the changes above amount to another transformation in how we grieve: the modern British approach to death and dying was already unusual but is continuing to change in perhaps unprecedented ways. Yet as Becker observed, the basic fact of human mortality does not go away;

The modern British approach to death and dying was already unusual but is continuing to change in perhaps unprecedented ways.

it is simply navigated in new cultural forms. We are still human. Inevitably, still, we will all die.

All this raises the question: how do such profound cultural shifts affect the ways individuals and communities navigate their most painful personal losses, and the potentially distressing fact of their own mortality, not only in the obvious and outward trends but in terms of their deeper emotional and pastoral needs?

This report explores emotional responses to both dying and bereavement in a time of rapid change. Part one considers our emotions around the prospect of our own deaths and the deaths of our loved ones, while part two considers the future of grief in the UK – focusing on the emerging influence of 'grief technology' and the continued role of churches in this changing landscape. The core of the report is a quantitative study which builds on earlier qualitative research into death and dying in the UK conducted by Theos in partnership with the Susanna Wesley Foundation. That report noted the nuanced emotional complexities of death; this report unpacks those nuances in more detail.[11]

A note on the data

Theos commissioned UK polling company YouGov to run a nationally representative poll of 2,569 UK adults, in field from 19-21 July 2023. Respondents were nationally representative by age, gender, social class and education, and precise sample sizes quoted throughout this report are unweighted figures. Unless otherwise stated, data comparisons have not been highlighted in the discussion unless they are statistically significant to at least $p<.05$.

In most cases significance is higher and clarifying information can be provided about the data on request. Potential respondents were warned in advance of the topic of the survey and had the option to terminate their involvement. They were also offered a "prefer not to say" option throughout the survey.

We asked a range of questions designed to draw out people's emotional responses to death and bereavement, covering:

— Experiences of death, loss and bereavement;

— Emotions and concerns when thinking about one's own death;

— Preparedness for death;

— Funeral preferences, including whether people want a funeral at all;

— What kinds of bereavement support are most valuable.

To consider the effect of religiosity on responses to these questions, we also asked about religious affiliation and practice. These responses were usually clustered in our analysis to maintain large enough sample sizes for robust comparison; for the same reason, we have avoided making direct comparison between specific faith and belief groups. Therefore, on religious affiliation, respondents were clustered into "non-religious", "Christian religious" and "non-Christian religious" – though it is worth noting that the standard YouGov religious affiliation question was used, on which there is no umbrella "Christian" option, meaning a small number of Christians may

also appear in the data as "non-Christian religious" respondents. On religious attendance, respondents were clustered into "frequent attenders" (those who said they attended a religious worship service at least once a month), "infrequent attenders" (those who said they attended between once every couple of months and more than never); and "never attenders" (those who said they never attend). These groupings allow comparison of the relative impact of religious attendance vs affiliation.

Taken as a whole, our sample was 57% non-religious, 33% Christian religious and 7% non-Christian religious. This slightly under-represents religious minorities and is less religious than the 2021 census results, though more closely aligns with the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey which found 52% of the population was non-religious in 2018.

1. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973 [2020 ed.]), 5. Becker's work led to the development of the influential psychological field of Terror Management Theory. A key study in this field is Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (2015), which provides empirical support for Becker's cultural reading, as the basis for the wide-ranging psychological field of 'Terror Management Theory'. Nonetheless, theories surrounding role of mortality salience and terror management have been applied to countless specific phenomenon, from gendered reactions to infidelity to consumer behaviour. See for example, Jamie L. Goldenberg, et al, "Gender-Typical Responses to Sexual and Emotional Infidelity as a Function of Mortality Salience Induced Self-Esteem Striving", in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 12 (2003), 1585–1595; " Jamie Arndt, et al, "The Urge to Splurge: A Terror Management Account of Materialism and consumer Behavior", in *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 14, 3 (2004), 198-212; Kenneth E Vail et al, "When Death is Good for Life: Considering the Positive Trajectories of Terror Management", in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16, 4 (2012), 303-329.

2. Digital Content (ONS), "How has life expectancy changed over time?", *ONS*, 9 September 2015. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09; Aaron O'Neill, "Child mortality rate (under five years old) in the United Kingdom from 1800 to 2020", *Statista*, 21 June 2022. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1041714/united-kingdom-all-time-child-mortality-rate/

3. Libby Sallnow et al, "The Report of the *Lancet* Commission on the Value of Death: bringing death back into life", *The Lancet*, 399, 10327 (31 January 2022), 837-84, at 837.

4. Georgia Brett (ONS), "Monthly mortality analysis, England and Wales: July 2023", ONS, 22 August 2023. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/monthlymortalityanalysisenglandandwales; Sarah Caul (ONS), "Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales, provisional: 11 August 2023", *ONS*, 22 August 2023; Veena Raleigh, "Invisible deaths: understanding why deaths at home increased during the Covid-19 pandemic", The King's Fund, 8 June 2021. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsregisteredweeklyinenglandandwalesprovisional/11august2023; https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2023/04/12/ashes-to-ashes-beliefs-trends-and-practices-in-dying-death-and-the-afterlife;

5. See also, for example: Charles O. Jackson, "American Attitudes to Death" in *Journal of American Studies*, 11, 3 (1997), 297-312; Panagiotis Pentaris and Kate Woodthorpe, "Familiarity with death" in Panagiotis Pentaris (ed.), *Death, Grief and Loss in the Context of COVID-19* (Routledge, 2021), p. 26; Marianne Rozario

and Lia Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes: Beliefs, Trends and Practices in Dying, Death and the Afterlife* (Theos and Susannah Wesley Foundation, 2023), 25-26.

6. Tony Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?", in *Sociology*, 25, 2 (1991), 293-310, at 293.

7. Sallnow et al, "*Lancet* Commission", 837.

8. Michael Roskams (ONS), "Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021", *ONS*, 29 November 2022. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021 See also John Curtice et al. *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report: Britain's Shifting Identities and Attitudes* (Centre for Social Research, 2019), 17-44. Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-36

9. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 49, 55.

10. See, for example, P.S. Aithal and Shubhrajyotsna Aithal, "Nanotechnology Based Innovations and Human Life Comfortability – Are We Marching Towards Immortality?", in *International Journal of Applied Engineering and Management Letters* (IJAEML), 2, 2 (2018), 71-86.

11. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 78-79.

PART ONE:

Emotional responses to death and dying in the UK

1. Exposure to death

How exposed are we to death and dying in the UK? As noted in the introduction, despite common indirect exposure to death and dying through the media, death in the modern West is highly professionalised and medicalised by historical standards. This has not shielded us from grief altogether, but does create the possibility of bereavement experienced almost entirely as the loss of a relationship, without direct exposure to death or the process of dying itself.

Our polling confirmed that the overwhelming majority (90%) of us have lost a loved one. Many of us have also witnessed death at close quarters, but direct encounter, either with the body or presence at the moment of death itself, is notably higher in the older age categories. Among 18 to 24-year-olds – the youngest age category polled – 72% had lost somebody close to them, but far fewer (33%) had seen a dead body and just 15% had accompanied someone at the moment of death. Meanwhile, nearly all respondents aged 55 or over (98%) had lost somebody close to them, but 87% of this group had also seen a dead body and 54% had been with someone as they died.

> **The overwhelming majority of us have lost a loved one, but far fewer have witnessed death at close quarters.**

These data also suggest that even among respondents aged 55 and over, among whom nearly everybody had lost a loved one, nearly half have still not witnessed the end of life first-hand. By comparison, 80% of widowed respondents said they had been with someone as they died and 97% had seen a dead body, raising the question: how many of us witness a death for the first time with the death of our partner? And how might this affect our ability to cope?

Figure 1: "Have you experienced any of the following?" (Percentages by age)

Experience Y/N	All	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Yes, I have lost someone close	90	72	82	89	93	98
Yes, I have seen a dead body	68	33	48	60	71	87
Yes, I have been with someone as they died	36	15	19	27	35	54

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n=2,569); Age 18-24 (n=227); Age 25-34 (n=355); Age 35-44 (n=535); Age 45-54 (n=401); Age 55+ (n=1,051).

These data underline bereavement as a common factor: we are all exposed to death at some level through relationships with those we love. Yet far more than in previous generations, we are likely to face the unvarnished realities of death for the first time only when losing those closest to us.

"

We are likely to face the unvarnished realities of death for the first time only when losing those closest to us.

The risk is that when we do come face-to-face with death for the first time, the experience is more disturbing. As palliative care consultant Dr Kathryn Mannix writes, there are recognisable stages to the end of life (much like the beginning) but "we have lost the familiarity with the process". Consequently, we may find ourselves unprepared when the deaths of our loved ones are near, or liable to misinterpret natural signs of the body shutting down. As Mannix notes, this has emotional consequences for the ways we approach our own deaths and the loss of others. Greater familiarity with the ordinary dying process, through sharing of

experiences and a wider public conversation about its normal course, has the potential to help people better navigate their personal losses when they do come.[1]

Age is not the only factor affecting our exposure to death. Female respondents were slightly more likely than men to say they had lost someone close to them (93% vs 88%), seen a dead body (70% vs 65%), or been with someone as they died (39% vs 33%). Religious affiliation was also correlated with higher levels of death exposure, even when accounting for higher levels of religiosity among the older population (by looking at different age categories in isolation). For example, 58% of religious respondents aged 55 and over had been with someone as they died compared with 50% of their non-religious counterparts, and 90% of religious respondents aged 55 or over had seen a body compared to 84% of their non-religious counterparts (see figure 2).

Figure 2: "Have you experienced any of the following?" (Percentages by religious affiliation among respondents aged 55 and over)

Experience Y/N	All 55+	Non-religious 55+	Religious 55+
Yes, I have lost someone close	98	97	99
Yes, I have seen a dead body	87	84	90
Yes, I have been with someone as they died	54	50	58

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents over 55 (n=1,051); Non-religious respondents over 55 (n=487); Religious respondents over 55 (n=540).

Variations in this data across gender and religious affiliation indicate that our relationship with death can be affected by a range of factors, and is therefore not steady across the whole population, as we will see further below.

Nonetheless, the basic picture remains the same: for many of us, an experience of bereavement no longer means we have come face-to-face with the end of life.

1. Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind* (William Collins, 2022), 9-64, 153-163, 188.

2. Thinking about one's own death

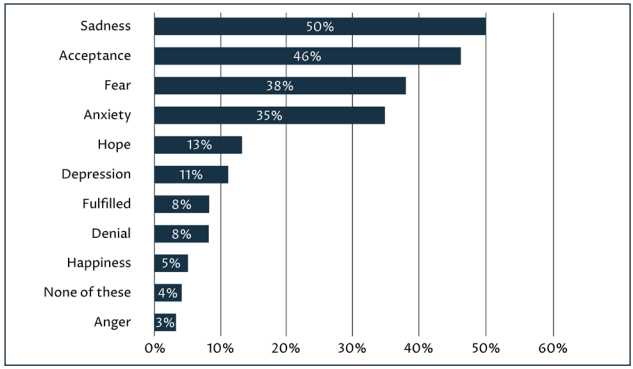
How do we feel about our own mortality? We asked people to pick up to three emotions that came to mind when they thought about their own death, from a list of 10 options. Responses reflected a spread of positive and negative emotions, but negative responses generally (and unsurprisingly) polled more highly. Half of respondents felt sadness, though nearly half of respondents (46%) felt acceptance. Fear and anxiety were the next most common responses across the whole population. Very few people said they felt anger; 8% of respondents said they felt denial, 10% felt happiness, and 13% felt hope.

“

Half of respondents felt sadness, though nearly half of respondents (46%) felt acceptance.

Inevitably the list of options was non-exhaustive, and a poll of this kind can only capture people's immediate and instinctual responses to what is an inherently complex and conflicting topic. People are also more likely to think positively in the immediate moment after being reminded of their mortality, perhaps as a coping response.[1] Nonetheless, these responses at least help us begin to uncover the sorts of emotions people are naturally drawn to even in this immediate moment – and the complexity and range of responses is clear.

Figure 3: "Which THREE, if any, of the following emotions will come to mind when thinking about your own death? (Please select up to three options)"



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

Responses varied by a range of demographic factors, again with the biggest swings around age. Those in the older age categories were more likely to feel accepting of their own death, and less likely to say they felt the negative emotions of fear, anxiety, or denial. For example, 29% of 55-and-overs said they felt fear compared with 48% of 18 to 24-year-olds; 30% of 55-and-overs felt anxiety compared to 40% of 18 to 24-year-olds. Meanwhile, 56% of 55-and-overs felt acceptance compared to just 36% of 18-to-24-year-olds.

"We did not find strong evidence that death exposure alone positively affected emotional responses to the prospect of one's own death.

Relatedly, respondents who had direct exposure to death (who had seen a dead body or been with someone as they died) were generally less likely to feel denial, fear or anxiety at the thought of their own death – and more likely to feel sadness,

acceptance or hope – but most of these effects went hand in hand with age, and disappeared when looking at the 55-and-over group in isolation. This does not mean that they are necessarily caused by age alone; other forms of death exposure and life experience could still have an impact, though more research would be needed to establish these links. Nonetheless, we did not find strong evidence that death exposure alone positively affected emotional responses to the prospect of one's own death. Among older respondents, those who had seen a dead body were less likely to say they felt denial than those who had not (5% vs 9%) – but there was also a small uptick in sadness among those who had seen a dead body or been with someone as they died.[2]

Other factors affecting emotional response included gender, religiosity, working status, marital status and parenthood:

— **Gender**: Women were notably more likely than men to say they felt the negative emotions of fear (45% vs 31%), anxiety (39% vs 31%) or sadness (54% vs 45%), while men were more likely to feel the positive emotions of acceptance (50% vs 42%), happiness (6% vs 4%) or hope (15% vs 12%).

— **Religiosity**: The overarching picture of our study, albeit with some exceptions, was that *frequent attendance at religious worship* tended to correlate with more positive emotional responses to death – even when taking the older age profile of religious attenders into account. Across the population, frequent attenders of a worship service were less likely to feel fear or sadness

Frequent attendance at religious worship tended to correlate with more positive emotional responses to death.

than those who attended infrequently or not at all. At a lower level of significance they were also less likely to feel anxiety.[3] Some 37% of regular attenders felt sad compared to 50% of those who never attend (a figure which dropped even further to 30% among respondents at the most devout end of the population who attend more than once a week). 35% of frequent attenders felt hope compared to 13% of infrequent attenders and 10% of never attenders; 27% of frequent attenders felt fear compared to 39% of infrequent or never attenders. At the same time, infrequent attenders were also sometimes somewhat more likely to feel negative emotions (e.g. sadness) than non-attenders.

Figure 4: "Which THREE, if any, of the following emotions will come to mind when thinking about your own death? (Please select up to three options)" (Percentage by religious attendance)

Emotions when contemplating your own death	All	Frequent	Infrequent	Never
Sadness	50	37	54	50
Acceptance	46	50	48	45
Fear	38	27	39	39
Anxiety	35	30	37	36
Hope	13	35	13	10
Depression	11	12	11	11
Fulfilled	8	16	8	7
Denial	8	8	9	8
Happiness	5	10	3	5
Anger	3	3	3	2
None of these	4	2	3	5

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All (n=2,569); Never attending whole population (n=1,515); Infrequently attending whole population (n=752); Frequently attending whole population (n=255).

This pattern held especially among the older population (figure 5). At the extremes, approaching half (46%) of frequent religious attenders aged 55 or over felt hopeful compared to just 12% of their non-attending counterparts (dropping further to 9% among non-attenders below the age of 55).

Figure 5: "Which THREE, if any, of the following emotions will come to mind when thinking about your own death? (Please select up to three options)" (Percentage by religious attendance over 55)

Emotions when contemplating your own death	Over 55		
	Frequent	Infrequent	Never
Sadness	31	56	49
Acceptance	68	57	54
Fear	17	27	32
Anxiety	29	30	29
Hope	46	16	12
Depression	6	10	9
Fulfilled	17	9	8
Denial	4	7	6
Happiness	10	3	4
Anger	3	3	3
None of these	1	4	6

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Frequently attending over 55 (n=111); Infrequently attending over 55 (n=372); Never attending over 55 (n=558).

The picture was more muddled in lower age categories. For example, levels of depression were marginally higher among frequently attending respondents under 55 (figure 6).

> **19% of self-identified Christians felt hope compared to 9% of their non-religious counterparts.**

Figure 6: "Which THREE, if any, of the following emotions will come to mind when thinking about your own death? (Please select up to three options)" (Percentage by religious attendance under 55)

Emotions when contemplating your own death	Under 55		
	Frequent	Infrequent	Never
Sadness	41	52	50
Acceptance	38	40	40
Fear	34	50	44
Anxiety	31	43	39
Hope	28	11	9
Depression	17	13	12
Fulfilled	16	7	7
Denial	10	12	9
Happiness	9	4	6
Anger	4	3	2
None of these	3	3	5

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Frequently attending under the age of 55 (n=144); Infrequently attending under 55 (n=380); Never attending under 55 (n=957).

Religious attendance was a better indicator of emotional response than religious affiliation on its own, which made little difference in most cases. Hope was the exception here: 19% of self-identified Christians felt hope compared to 9% of their non-religious counterparts, and these figures rose to 22% and 11% respectively among respondents aged 55 or older. Nonetheless, in none of these categories did over half of respondents feel hopeful.

> Work is not just an economic issue but an existential one: 21% of unemployed respondents felt depressed compared to 12% of workers.

— **Employment status**: The data could suggest that work is not just an economic issue but an existential

one. Some 21% of unemployed respondents said they felt depression at the prospect of their own death compared to just 12% of workers (and no more than this of any other working status cohort). Meanwhile, respondents who described their working status as "Not working/other" were not more likely to feel depression, and notably less likely than workers to feel fear (32% vs 43%) or sadness (51% vs 43%). This suggests it may not be the employment itself which affects emotional response, so much as the circumstances which lead somebody in or out of work.

— **Relationships**: Emotional responses to the thought of one's own death were also filtered through the lens of key relationships – a thread which emerged regularly in this research. Those "living as married" were the most likely relationship cohort to say they felt anxiety: 43% of these respondents said they felt anxious compared to 37% of respondents who had never married, 34% of married respondents, and 27% of separated/divorced respondents. Meanwhile, only 38% of "living as married" respondents said they felt accepting of their death compared to 48% of "married" respondents and 54% of "separated/divorced" respondents. Those in long-term relationships (married/living as married) also responded with the highest levels of sadness. Parenthood also had an impact, especially when children were young. For example, 56% of parents of children aged 4 and under said they felt fear compared to 38% of the general population

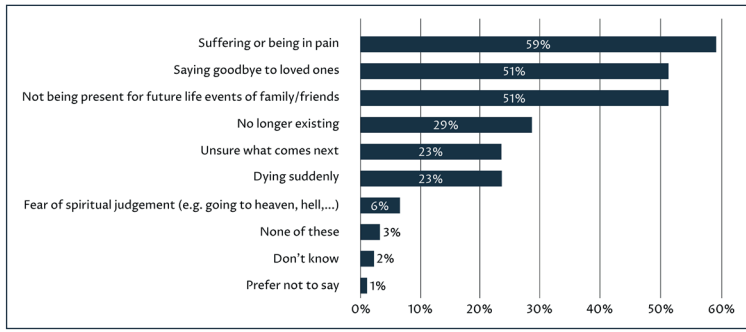
> **56% of parents of children aged 4 and under said they felt fear compared to 38% of the general population.**

– but this levelled off among parents of older children, even to the point that parents of children over 18 were slightly less likely to say they felt fear than the general population (33%). Even when we are thinking about our own death, we are thinking about the people we love.

Specific concerns around death

After testing straightforward emotional response, we also asked people about their specific concerns around death, asking respondents to tick up to three concerns (or "none of these"). The top response was "Suffering or being in pain" (59%). This echoes the findings of Theos' earlier research on what makes a 'good death'.[4] It is also notable in light of the relatively low proportion of the population who have actually seen a death first-hand, since developments in palliative care and pain relief mean that increasing numbers of patients' pain (though sadly not all) can be well managed at the end of life.[5] That said, concern about suffering and pain actually increased steadily across age cohorts, from 42% among the 18 to 24-year-olds to 71% in the 55-and-overs (and in this oldest age category it was not linked to death exposure itself).

Figure 7: "Which THREE, if any, of the following concern you the most when thinking about the process of dying? (Please select up to three options)"



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569).

Also chosen by around half the population (both 51%) were "Not being present for future life events of family and friends" and "Saying goodbye to loved ones", again indicating the prominence of relationships in our deepest concerns as we look towards the end of our lives.

Relational concerns also polled significantly more highly than existential ones. By comparison, just 6% were afraid of spiritual judgement (the least common concern of the available options) and 29% said they were concerned about no longer existing. This is perhaps unsurprising in an increasingly non-religious population, but even among the self-identifying religious only 12% expressed fear of spiritual judgement – rising to 24% (still less than a quarter) among frequent religious attenders. We found little evidence to say that religious people themselves are motivated by fear of judgement either, though 19% of frequent religious attenders were worried about not existing compared to 32% of non-attenders and 29% of society as a whole. In Theos' earlier qualitative

research on this topic, one end-of-life doula reflected that the "number one theme" of her dying clients' concerns was "what's going to happen to them after they die", suggesting that these existential concerns may grow as we move closer to death; our concerns may change as we move through life, and we may not always be aware of how we will feel when death is close.[6] However, the general population clearly does not approach death through a primarily 'transcendent' frame.

More than either judgement or oblivion, we are concerned about separation from those we love.

We might say that Brits are significantly more concerned about the prospect of oblivion than they are about spiritual judgement – but more than either, we are concerned about the immediate point of death, and what will happen to the loved ones we leave behind, rather than about what might happen to us next. In other words, more than either judgement or oblivion, we are concerned about separation from those we love.

Male respondents were less likely than women to express concern about saying goodbye to loved ones (45% vs 57%) or not being present at future life events (45% vs 55%), but more likely to be concerned about not existing (33% vs 25%). Concern about not existing decreased across age cohorts – from 41% among the 18-24-year-olds to less than a quarter (23%) in the 55-and-overs. Death exposure was also correlated with certain concerns (or lack of them) even among respondents over 55. Within this age cohort, those who had seen a dead body were more concerned about dying suddenly (20% vs 10%) and those who had sat with someone as they died were more concerned about saying goodbye to loved ones (57% vs 49%). Again, this suggests that exposure alone does not necessarily help us come

to terms with death – though both these groups were also less concerned about no longer existing than their less death-exposed counterparts.

Frequency of thinking about death

Finally, we asked how frequently people had thought about their own death *in the last year*. We found that a quarter of us had thought about it at least once a week (including 15% who thought about it more often than that), but one in 10 say they never did. Frequency of thinking about death was not hugely affected by working status, gender, or marital status. Perhaps most surprisingly, it didn't change hugely across different age groups either. Nor was it particularly affected by religious affiliation alone – though regular religious attenders were slightly more likely to be thinking about death more often, possibly reflecting the ways that religious liturgies often directly grapple with themes of death and dying.

> **A quarter of us think about death at least once a week.**

Frequency of thinking about death was also correlated with certain emotional responses. Notably, those who said they "never" thought about death were *less likely* than the general population to say they felt fear (20% vs 38%), anxiety (17% vs 35%) or sadness (43% vs 50%). This does not necessarily mean that not thinking about death is the cause of such emotional responses. For example, these respondents could be people who do not ever think about it precisely *because* they believe (for whatever reason) that it is far away and unthreatening, as distinct from those who think about death often and are afraid, anxious or accepting because they know (or think) they will die soon. That said, the data do not follow the same pattern as an

age effect alone, by comparison, and should at least serve as a word of caution around any suggestion that simply talking or thinking about death more often is guaranteed to help us come to terms with it. There are undoubtedly ways of approaching and experiencing death which have a negative impact.

Overall trends

Reflecting on this chapter as a whole, it is clear that death provokes a nuanced and complex landscape of emotions, and this vast emotional range is at play even within the most common responses to dying, stretching from acceptance to anxiety and beyond. These responses are further shaped by our life experiences, background and beliefs; trends according to religiosity, relationships, and working status are particularly striking here. Relationships are also at the forefront of our minds when we reflect on our concerns about dying, emphasising their particular importance as we think about the end of life.

The data also suggest that death exposure alone does not guarantee we feel accepting of our own mortality, just as thinking about death often does not put an end to fear. We remain a society that is generally unfamiliar with dying, and experiences of death or thoughts of dying alone can be unmoored and upsetting. The pastoral challenge for end-of-life professionals – and society more generally – is therefore to rediscover an approach to death and dying which helps rather than hinders our ability to come to terms with it. The data indicate that religious traditions might hold wisdom as to some of these ways, and the impact of regular religious practice as well as the connection between religiosity and feelings of hope are especially striking (as explored further in chapter seven).

1. See for example, Nathan DeWall and Roy F Baumeister, "From Terror to Joy: Automatic Tuning to Positive Affective Information Following Mortality Salience", in *Psychological Science*, 18, 11 (2007), 984-990.

2. $p<.10$

3. $p<.10$

4. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, esp. 40.

5. "Pain Management in *Palliative Care*", Marie Curie, 21 July 2022. https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/professionals/palliative-care-knowledge-zone/symptom-control/pain-control#:~:text=There%20are%20painkillers%20and%20non,have%20any%20pain%20at%20all. Michael Platt, "Pain Challenges at the End of Life - Pain and Palliative Care Collaboration", in *Reviews in Pain*, 4, 2 (2010),18-23. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4590058/

6. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 80-81.

3. Death preparedness

Most existing evidence suggests we are generally not prepared for death or comfortable talking about it, despite the common experience of bereavement – as we noted in our previous report on this topic.[1] But how prepared do people actually feel? We asked people to reflect on this question across a range of criteria: financial, legal, spiritual, relational, legacy and achievements, and practical funeral arrangements.

In none of these categories did over half the general population feel prepared, and in every category more people said they were "not prepared" than "prepared" – apart from spiritual preparedness, where one in five respondents said they did not know and the remainder were roughly split (39% vs 36%). At the other end of the spectrum, across the general population, 20% felt "very" legally prepared, 14% felt "very" financially prepared, and just 10% felt "very" prepared in their personal relationships.

> **In none of these categories did over half the general population feel prepared.**

Figure 8: "How well prepared, if at all, do you feel when you think about death in the following respects?" (Percentages across general population)

Preparedness	Financially	Legally	Spiritually	In personal relationships	Achievements and Legacy	Practical funeral arrangements
Very prepared	14	20	14	10	9	5
Fairly prepared	31	20	25	29	27	11
Not very prepared	19	13	16	24	22	17
Not prepared at all	28	43	21	26	28	62
Don't know	7	3	21	8	12	3
Prefer not to say	1	1	4	2	2	1
Net: Prepared	**45**	**40**	**39**	**39**	**36**	**16**
Net: Not Prepared	**47**	**56**	**36**	**51**	**50**	**80**

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569).

Responses were significantly affected by age, so that in nearly every category, more than half of respondents aged 55 and over (the oldest age category) did feel ready to die – again, apart from spiritually (45%), and in funeral arrangements (29%). Just 1% of 18 to 24-year-olds felt "very" legally prepared, compared to 40% of 55-and-overs. Among the oldest respondents, people felt most ready when it came to financial and legal arrangements.

A range of other demographic factors also affected feelings of preparedness:

— **Parenthood**: Once again, the nature of our key relationships affected responses. Self-perceived preparedness among parents/guardians was higher than among non-parents across all categories apart from spiritual preparedness: in terms of finances (54% vs 34%), personal relationships (46% vs 32%), achievements and legacy (43% vs 27%), practical funeral arrangements (20% vs 11%), and legal arrangements (50% vs 28%) – with over half of non-parents not feeling legally prepared "at all". Meanwhile, across the whole population, "never married" and "living as married" respondents felt significantly less prepared according to every category. This could be linked to age, though even taking respondents under 34 in isolation, for example, married respondents also felt more prepared in every category we tested. There may be many reasons for these swings, including (in some categories) the need to prepare because of the direct impact a sudden death would have on others – but whatever the reason, it seems that the more relationally connected we are, the more prepared we feel.

— **Social grade**: The more affluent were also more likely to feel prepared across almost all criteria (though especially on legal and financial issues). Some 55% of C2DE respondents said they felt financially unprepared compared to 41% of ABC1 respondents, and 38% of C2DE respondents did not feel financially prepared for death "at all" compared to only 20% of their ABC1 counterparts. 61% of C2DE respondents felt legally unprepared compared to

> **The more affluent were also more likely to feel prepared across almost all criteria.**

53% of their ABC1 counterparts. Perhaps more surprisingly, just 29% of C2DE respondents felt prepared in legacy and achievements compared to 40% of ABC1 respondents. At a lower level of significance, C2DE respondents also felt somewhat less spiritually prepared than their ABC1 counterparts (36% vs 41%).[2]

— **Employment status**: Further suggesting the importance of socio-economic factors in how we think about death, unemployed respondents felt less prepared than workers across all categories apart from funeral arrangements. As we might expect, the biggest range here was on finances. For example, 71% of unemployed respondents felt financially unprepared compared to 54% of workers (and 16% of retired respondents). Yet they also reported lower levels of preparedness than workers according to personal relationships (24% vs 33%), legacy and achievements (11% vs 29%), and spirituality (29% vs 35%). When read alongside the emotional impact of unemployment outlined in the previous chapter, these data imply that our working lives may have consequences for a whole range of more deeply existential concerns – even our sense of spiritual worth – which in turn impacts how ready we feel to die.[3]

Unemployed respondents felt less prepared than workers across all categories apart from funeral arrangements.

— **Religiosity**: At some level, both relationship status and socio-economic grade could be indicators for the sorts of life events and achievements we feel we 'should' have before we die (though as the previous chapter illustrates, relationships also have a more profound significance in

shaping our explicit concerns around dying). Religiosity does not obviously have this status effect, but it did still shape feelings of preparedness. First, then, religious *affiliation* correlated with a somewhat greater sense of death preparedness in all categories across the whole population – though only in terms of spiritual preparedness among respondents aged 55 or older (where 53% of religious respondents felt spiritually prepared compared to 37% of their non-religious counterparts). To this end, we found some evidence that religiously-affiliated people may prepare for death earlier, as the effect also re-emerged (with a lower level of significance) in some cases when taking younger age categories in isolation (see figure 9). For example, among 18 to 24-year-olds, 18% of religious respondents felt ready according to their achievements and legacy, compared to 10% of their non-religious counterparts. However, more research would be needed to establish this link – and whether any proven link is a life-cycle or cohort effect.

We found some evidence that religiously-affiliated people may prepare for death earlier.

Figure 9: "How well prepared, if at all, do you feel when you think about death in the following respects?" (Percentage net preparedness by age and religious affiliation).

Net Preparedness		All	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Financially	Religious	50	12	23	31	44	71
	Non-religious	42	10	23	30	43	71
Legally	Religious	48	10	24	25	37	70
	Non-religious	34	1	12	21	36	67
Spiritually	Religious	47	28	41	44	48	53
	Non-religious	34	25	34	31	36	37
In my personal relationships	Religious	45	19	20	30	43	61
	Non-religious	36	14	21	26	39	58
Achievements and legacy	Religious	41	18	24	22	32	58
	Non-religious	32	10	15	20	36	56
Practical funeral arrangements	Religious	21	9	19	9	8	32
	Non-religious	13	3	6	7	8	27

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All (n=2,569); All religious (n=1,022); All non-religious (n=1,461).

Meanwhile, religious *attendance* was correlated with higher preparedness according to spirituality, and (at a lower level of significance) according to both relationships and legacy. This was true among younger and older respondents, suggesting it was neither a proxy for age nor a matter of early preparation alone. For example, 22% of frequent attenders aged 18-24 felt prepared in their achievements and legacy compared to just 9% of their never-attending counterparts – but even among 55-and-overs, 64% of frequent attenders felt prepared in this way compared to 56% of non-attenders, implying the power of faith to give a sense of inherent self-worth.

Why should it matter how prepared we are? First, though we are more likely to be prepared than not by the time we die, significant numbers of older people still do not feel prepared for their deaths. Secondly, we found death preparedness correlated with emotional responses to death in a way that suggests real pastoral implications.

To this end, at first glance the emotional picture around preparedness is relatively encouraging: as above, nearly half of us feel accepting of our own mortality (though acceptance may not always be experienced positively) and relatively few of us actually feel in denial about it (though nearly one in 10 do, and arguably those who are most in denial are least likely to admit it).

However, digging deeper, higher levels of anxiety, fear and depression when considering one's own death were all associated with lower levels of preparedness. And across every category of preparedness, those who felt unprepared were also more likely to say they were in denial and less likely to say they felt acceptance. For example, 67% of respondents who said they were very spiritually prepared felt acceptance at the prospect of their own death, compared to just 27% who said they were not spiritually prepared all, and 62% of respondents who said they were very financially prepared felt acceptance, compared to 35% who said they were not financially prepared at all. As figure 10 shows, higher levels of preparedness are also evident among those who said they felt the more positive emotions when thinking about death.

Figure 10: "How well prepared, if at all, do you feel when you think about death in the following respects?" (Percentage net preparedness by emotion when contemplating own death)

Net Preparedness	Among those who said they felt...										
	Denial	Fear	Anxiety	Anger	Sadness	Depression	Acceptance	Happiness	Hope	Fulfilled	Other
Financially	34	35	38	43	46	32	55	43	51	60	38
Legally	29	30	33	38	38	29	47	38	48	53	38
Spiritually	25	25	27	27	35	23	55	56	67	62	29
In my personal relationships	25	26	28	34	38	24	52	49	54	61	36
Achievements and legacy	20	25	28	29	35	24	47	38	50	58	30
Practical funeral arrangements	8	10	12	20	15	16	20	21	23	23	16

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All (n=2,569).

We can't know whether this correlation implies a causal link – still less, in which direction a causal link might run (i.e. whether those who feel negative about death are less likely to prepare for death, or the reverse). What we can say, taking the findings of this chapter as a whole, is that making preparations for death should be approached as a pastoral issue, potentially signalling a range of emotional implications for our response to death and dying – and especially being associated with more positive emotional reactions to the prospect of our own deaths. Naturally, a sense that loved ones felt prepared to die may also help bereaved people as they come to terms with their loss.

As above, simply being exposed to death or thinking about it more often does not guarantee we will feel more at peace with our mortality, but working actively towards "preparedness" might. Yet we are again a society that is unclear on death; most of us are not well prepared, and the fact even non-economic forms of preparedness are shaped by factors such as employment status illustrates the role of market forces insidiously affecting how we feel about the most profound questions in life.

1. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 18-19, 25-26; Savanta, "Dying Matters Death and Dying Survey", *Savanta*, 15 May 2011. www.savanta.com/knowledge-centre/poll/dying-matters-death-and-dying-survey-3/; Annmarie Nelson et al., "Public attitudes to death and dying in the UK" (Marie Curie Palliative Care Research Centre, 2021), 21. Available at: www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/public-attitudes-to-death-and-dyingreport-final.pdf.
2. Significance: $p<.10$
3. See above, pp. 24-25.

4. Funeral plans?

So far we have explored people's emotional responses and preparedness up to the point of their own death. However, some of the most striking changes in British attitudes to death and dying relate to how we navigate grief and bereavement. Here, the place of the funeral is especially shifting – with emotional and spiritual consequences for us all.

Decline in funerals

Where funerals are concerned, the focus of the public conversation (including previous Theos research) has usually been on the rise of secular "celebrations of life" and the decreasing popularity of traditional Christian funerals, as well as the increasing popularity of cremation over burial.[1] These trends are indeed transforming the funeral industry in this country: the proportion of deaths marked by Church of England funerals fell from 37% in 2009 to 23% of funerals in 2019, while SunLife's 2023 Cost of Dying Report found that 68% of funeral directors had seen a drop in the number of "traditional funerals" (a rise of 3% since 2021).[2]

However, less attention has been given to the growing trend to forego any form of ceremony at all. In this regard, a separate but equally significant revolution is taking place with the rise of "direct cremation" – where a deceased person is cremated without ceremony. The demand for this service was accelerated by tight restrictions (and even prohibitions) on funeral gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the legacy of

> **Less than half (47%) were sure they wanted a funeral at all.**

lockdown remains: direct cremation is now chosen for 18% of all deaths.[3]

Our polling suggests this trend could grow further, translating into a crisis for the funeral industry as a whole: when we asked respondents, less than half (47%) were sure they wanted a funeral at all, 24% said that they did not, and 28% didn't know or were not sure.

Figure 11: "A funeral is normally defined as a ceremony or service held shortly after a person's death, usually including the person's burial or cremation. Do you want a funeral when you die?" (Percentages across general population)

Funeral Y/N	Percent
Yes, I do	47
No, I don't	24
Don't know/not sure	28
Prefer not to say	1

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

This is not a neutral trend, but may have significant implications for how effectively grief is managed across society: a 2020 cross-study review concluded that there was a particular connection between those funeral ceremonies which feel meaningful to those bereaved and are accompanied by feelings of social support in their time of distress, and positive bereavement outcomes (including a reduced risk of unresolved grief).[4] In a society which generally tries to push death away, the funeral is one of the few places where it is explicitly acknowledged

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– often a key step for bereaved people as they come to terms with the reality of their loss. Theos' earlier work on this topic also noted the widespread recognition of the importance of ritual frameworks for farewell during the pandemic, when they were not always possible, but now the same pattern is growing more insidiously, driven by choice rather than imposed from above.

What, then, is driving these choices? We found that responses were not meaningfully affected by either death exposure or preparedness, but did diverge along a range of demographic markers:

— **Gender**: Female respondents were slightly more likely than their male counterparts to want a funeral (49% vs 44%). Over a quarter of male respondents (26%) do not want a funeral.[5]

— **Age**: The demise of the British funeral is not a trend driven by the upward cultural pressure of younger age cohorts. Under-35s were more likely to want a funeral than 35-and-overs, with a sharp drop-off after that point: the proportion of those who said they did want a funeral was relatively stable among the over-35s, rather than increasing steadily across cohorts, though levels of respondents not wanting a funeral was somewhat higher in the 55-and-over category (see figure 12). Thus, 32% of 55-and-overs said they did not want a funeral compared even to 24% of 45-54-year-olds. This seems like an active decision being made among (relatively) older citizens.

Figure 12: "Do you want a funeral when you die?" (Percentage by age)

Funeral Y/N	All	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Yes, I do	47	58	57	43	43	44
No, I don't	24	11	13	25	24	32
Don't know/ not sure	28	27	29	31	32	24

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569). 18-24 respondents (n=227); 25-34 respondents (n=355); 35-44 respondents (n=535); 45-55 respondents (n=401); 55+ respondents (n=1,051).

— **Economic markers**: Once again, socio-economic forces are significant. Across a range of economic markers, respondents who wanted a funeral were more likely to be financially comfortable. Around 49% of workers said they wanted a funeral compared to 38% of unemployed respondents, and 51% of ABC1 respondents wanted a funeral compared to 42% of their C2DE counterparts. So too, at a lower level of significance, 40% of those with a household income below £20,000 (and 43% of those with a household income under £30,000) wanted a funeral compared to 56% with a household income over £100,000.

> **Around 49% of workers said they wanted a funeral compared to 38% of unemployed respondents.**

It is not surprising that financial considerations play a role: SunLife now calculates the average 'cost of dying' in the UK to be £9,200 when funeral fees, professional costs and send-off costs are all taken into account. This is not a problem unique to the UK,[6] but has been the focus of various campaigns to bring down the cost of dying, from the Quaker "Down to

Earth" programme to the government's establishment of Funeral Expenses Payments and a Children's Funeral Fund for England to cover the cost of funerals in cases of child bereavement.[7]

More recently, the 2021 Funeral Market Investigation Order was passed in the wake of a landmark report of the Competition and Markets Authority, introducing a whole range of 'sunlight remedies' to regulate the funeral industry (for example, greater transparency around pricing) which the CMA has since found successfully to be constraining funeral prices.[8] However, funeral costs themselves are only one element of the total cost of dying, and despite the reduction of actual funeral costs in real terms, rising professional fees and send-off costs mean that overall cost has still increased.[9] As with the realignment of the British postal industry and the privatisation of Royal Mail, funerals have moved from the domain of a single, trusted provider to an open market, which does not always protect the interests of individual consumer. Within this market, direct cremation is the cheaper option, costing an average of £1,511 compared to £3,673 for cremation and £4,794 for burial.[10]

The cost of dying needs to come down, and coverage of the decline in funeral ceremonies across mainstream media has similarly focused on financial pressures.[11] However, any assumption that faltering demand for funerals is merely financial is false. Rather, we found the biggest marker was a religious and spiritual one:

Any assumption that faltering demand for funerals is merely financial is false.

— **Religiosity**: 76% of frequent worshippers (those who attend religious worship at least once a month) said they wanted a funeral compared to 38% who never attend, and 59% of self-identified religious respondents wanted a funeral compared to 39% of their non-religious counterparts. Religious respondents were also more likely to have decided one way or another: only 12% of frequent attenders said they were unsure compared to 31% of those who never attend.

> **76% of frequent worshippers said they wanted a funeral compared to 38% who never attend.**

Figure 13: "Do you want a funeral when you die?" (Percentage by religiosity)

Funeral Y/N	Frequent attenders	Infrequent attender	Never attenders	Religious (net)	Non-religious (net)
Yes, I do	76	55	38	59	39
No, I don't	8	18	31	15	31
Don't know/not sure	12	27	31	24	30

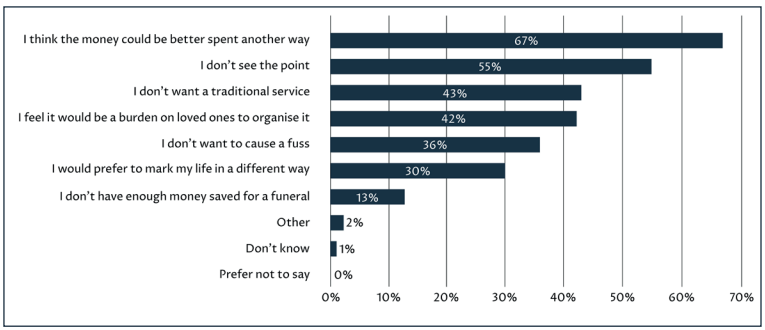
Emotional Response to Death survey by YouGov. Base: All respondents (n= 2,569). Frequent attenders (n=255); Infrequent attenders (n=752); Never attenders (n=1,515); Religious (n=1,022); Non-religious (n=1,461).

More subtly, we also asked people what they thought funerals were for (see pp. 51-55 below), and those who felt the funeral had an explicitly spiritual purpose were also more likely to want a funeral than those who did not choose a spiritual answer for this question (58% vs 41%). Those who did not select any of the spiritual answers when asked about the

purpose of a funeral were roughly as likely to say they wanted a funeral as those with a household income under £20,000 (41% vs 40%), though less likely to say definitively that they did not.

These data suggest that those who do not invest funerals with a spiritual or sacred significance are far more likely to decide against one altogether – a picture confirmed when we asked those respondents who did not want a funeral why not, allowing them to choose from a range of possibilities (and to select all that applied). As above, financial considerations clearly play a significant part. Just over one in 10 (13%) of those who did not want a funeral explicitly identified that they did not have enough money saved. However, this was the least common reason of the options available. The far more common response, and the most popular response overall, was "I think the money could be better spent another way" (67%). This was followed by "I don't see the point" (55%) and "I don't want a traditional service" (43%).

Figure 14: "You previously said that you do not want a funeral. What are your reasons for this? (Please select all that apply)"



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Those who stated that they did not want a funeral (n= 625).

This is not to say that the cost of funerals is unimportant, either in practice or ethically. "Deciding to spend the money another way" still implies limited financial resources affecting the way we grieve. That anybody should want to forego what they *may* still view as an important part of the grieving process only because they don't have the money saved is a damaging consequence of the exorbitant cost of dying in modern Britain.

Nonetheless, these data suggest the trend away from funerals is more profoundly sustained by a faltering conviction regarding the purpose or importance of the funeral itself. Without such shared conviction, other considerations take precedence, and the funeral landscape starts to be navigated by consumers, rather than held sacred as shared ritual space, or prioritised as a place to acknowledge loss and facilitate grief. It is then that economic factors become significant. Even where people might technically be able to afford a funeral, if money is tight and other possibilities are available, they will choose accordingly. And money also plays another role: companies offering direct cremation have invested large amounts into advertising their product, for example with television adverts from company Pure Cremation.[12]

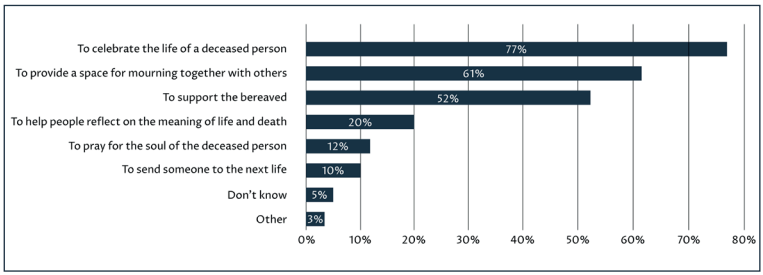
"These data suggest the trend away from funerals is more profoundly sustained by a faltering conviction regarding the purpose or importance of the funeral itself.

The purpose of funerals

We also asked our sample what they felt a funeral was for, allowing them to choose up to three options from a list of six possible ways to think of a funeral's purpose. This level

of choice acknowledged the likelihood that most people view a funeral as having several functions, but still required some degree of discernment. The most popular option, chosen by 77% of respondents, was "To celebrate the life of the deceased person".

Figure 15: "Which, THREE, if any of the following would you say best describes the purpose of a funeral? (Please select up to three options)"



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

Notably, while 'celebrations of life' are generally framed as a secular phenomenon, this was also the most popular response among religious respondents, chosen by 73% of them. Likewise, it was the most popular response among frequent religious attenders (61%), albeit in lower numbers than among never attenders (80%). This should warn against a false dichotomy between 'religious funerals' and 'secular celebrations of life', not least to pit one against the other.

On this, the British public are agreed: a funeral should celebrate the life of the deceased.

On this, the British public are agreed: a funeral should celebrate the life of the deceased. The real question is therefore what else it should do – and how. Afterall, bereavement brings with it a complex range of emotions, and

celebration is not always the primary emotion in response to loss. As one participant in Theos' earlier qualitative research in this area reflected,

> *You can't impose a mood on a bereavement... It's not like the older you are, the less sad people will be... And there are other circumstances, when a teenager dies by suicide, where you can't say: "It's a celebration of life"... There should be space and time made for the sadness, or the rage, and also for the joy and the gratitude.*[13]

To this end, pastoral options were the next most popular in our study: 61% thought the funeral was "To provide a space for mourning together with others" and 52% thought it was "To support the bereaved." In practice, then, our respondents recognise a pastoral need to make space for emotions other than celebration – including an explicit recognition of "mourning".

Our respondents recognise a pastoral need to make space for emotions other than celebration – including "mourning".

Overwhelmingly, explicitly religious purposes were the least popular options: just 10% thought the purpose was "To send someone to the next life", and 12% thought it was "To pray for the soul of the deceased person". Only 20% thought a funeral was "To help people reflect on the meaning of life and death". This is not a wholesale rejection of the spiritual dimension of funeral rites: that one in 5 of the general population do still view reflecting on the meaning of life and death as a key purpose of the funeral, rising to over a third (34%) among frequent religious attenders, indicates that at least a sizeable minority of the population still view

the funeral rite squarely within a 'transcendent frame'. Even among the youngest and least religious respondents – never attenders under the age of 55 – who are so often assumed to be uninterested in faith, 19% felt that funerals should help people reflect in this way. These responses represent the continued opportunity for religious communities to engage the public in the meaningful questions at the heart of faith, right across the country.

Again, demographic factors were at play when respondents considered the purpose of the funeral rite:

— **Gender**: Men were more likely than women to think a funeral should help people reflect on the meaning of life and death (25% compared to 16%), and less likely than women to choose the pastoral options: 58% of male respondents thought the purpose of a funeral was to provide a space for mourning with others compared to 64% of their female counterparts, and 48% thought it was to support those bereaved compared to 56% of women. That said, these options remained among the most popular responses even among men.

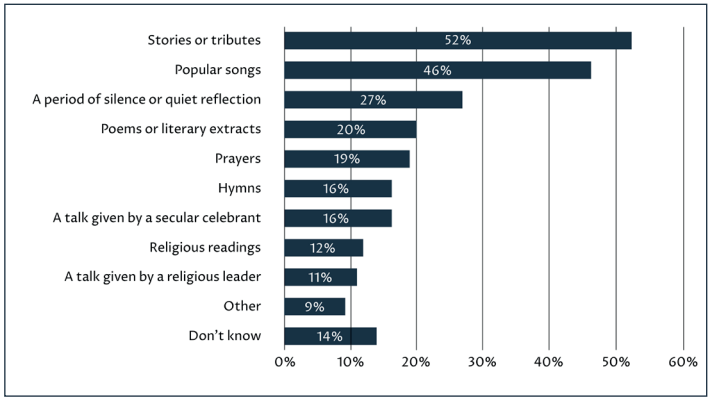
— **Socio-economics**: ABC1 respondents were more likely to emphasise celebration of life than C2DE counterparts (80% vs 73%) and more likely to emphasise pastoral options: 56% of ABC1 respondents understood the funeral as providing support for bereaved people compared to 47% of C2DE respondents, while 66% of ABC1 thought it was to provide a space for mourning with others compared to 55% of their C2DE counterparts. Meanwhile, 64% of unemployed respondents understood the funeral as a celebration of life compared to 78% of workers.

Taken as a whole, these responses suggest that people are primarily concerned that the funeral should reflect shared memories, honour relationships, and celebrate life, rather than making any particular philosophical statement on the nature of life or death – though the high support for pastoral options suggests that in practice funerals are expected to hold space for a far wider range of emotions, including explicit mourning.

The content of funerals

A strong focus on celebration of the deceased person was reiterated when we asked people what elements they would like to include in their funeral if they were to have one. Here we first asked people to choose from a list of generic possibilities, then tested the popularity of some known common choices taken from the Coop Funeralcare "Funeral Music Charts" and our own qualitative research.[14] Across the whole population, the most popular options again prioritised a personal touch. From the generic list, stories and tributes (52%) and popular songs (46%) attracted the most respondents – and when asked about specific possibilities, "My favourite song" (41%) was more popular than any of the suggested options, again indicating the primary concern for a personalised ceremony.

Figure 16: "For the following question, please imagine that you were to have a funeral. Which, if any, of the following would you like to be included in the funeral ceremony?" (General population)



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569).

More respondents wanted a talk given by a secular celebrant than a religious leader (16% vs 11%), also implying a greater focus on tribute than religious instruction. That said, a period of silence or reflection (27%) and prayers (19%) were more popular than either, indicating the continued desire for communal reflection to mark the passing at a time of grief. And after "my favourite song", the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 were the most popular choices in the specific list, albeit only attracting 13% and 9% of respondents respectively.

Christian options are not being outcompeted by an alternative belief framework, so much as the desire to personalise.

Christian options are not therefore being outcompeted by an alternative belief framework, so much as the desire to personalise and choose whatever feels

personally meaningful. In this sense it confirms what our qualitative research suggested: where universal language is sought at all, certain religious texts are still perceived as "culturally" salient.[15]

Needless to say, religiosity (especially religious attendance) had an effect here. Very few non-religious respondents expressed the desire for a religious leader's talk, hymns, religious readings, or prayers at their funeral – and even among those who said they attend infrequently, 18% chose a talk by a secular celebrant compared to 13% who chose a religious leader's talk. At the same time, the most popular options even among religious respondents remained "Stories or tributes" (49%) in the generic list and "My favourite song" (37%) in the specific list. That said, a quarter of religious respondents chose a talk by a religious leader, 42% chose prayers, and 29% specifically chose the Lord's Prayer – and among frequent religious attenders, just over half wanted a talk by a religious leader, hymns and religious readings. 70% wanted prayers, 46% wanted the Lord's Prayer, and 31% wanted Psalm 23.

Figure 17: "For the following question, please imagine that you were to have a funeral. Which, if any, of the following would you like to be included in the funeral ceremony?" (Percentages by religious attendance and affiliation)

What do you want at your funeral?	Frequent attenders	Infrequent attenders	Never attenders	Religious	Non-religious
Stories or tributes	41	54	53	49	54
Popular songs	22	47	50	39	51
A period of silence or quiet reflection	33	34	23	32	24
Poems or literary extracts	19	23	18	19	21
Prayers	70	28	6	42	3
Hymns	55	25	5	34	4
A talk given by a secular celebrant	5	18	18	12	19
Religious readings	59	14	2	28	1
A talk given by a religious leader	54	13	2	24	2
Other	5	5	11	5	12
Don't know	6	12	16	11	16

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Frequent attenders (n=255); Infrequent attenders (n=752); Never attenders (n=1,515); Religious (n=1,022); Non-religious (n=1,461).

Overall trends

When asked about the purpose of funerals, UK adults (including religious people) want them to celebrate the life of the deceased, meaningfully reflecting their legacy, personality and values. While secular celebrants have responded more effectively to this concern in the framing of their ceremonies, 'celebration of life' is not itself a secular sentiment: religious

respondents also believe their funerals should be (and presumably are) celebratory.

Yet fewer than half our respondents said they want a funeral at all. Financial factors significantly shaped these responses, but religious and spiritual commitments were even more influential: we no longer have a shared conviction on the importance of ritual frameworks to say goodbye, and it would seem market forces have a bigger impact on how we grieve when we no longer approach grief itself through a 'transcendent' frame. In an age of declining formal religious affiliation, this is driving a significant realignment of British bereavement practices.

Herein lies a paradox: it would seem for all we view celebration as important, increasing numbers in fact don't choose to celebrate at all, as they turn away from formal funerals altogether to say goodbye privately and without "fuss", through direct cremation services. Perhaps ironically, given the strong association of celebration with secular funerals, it is among the religious that this trend meets with most resistance.

At the same time, death brings with it a complex range of emotions, and the data in this chapter also present a clear recognition across the population that in practice, funerals also need to hold space for mourning and pastoral support. This highlights the vast emotional range provoked by the loss of a loved one – and, potentially, a significant pastoral gap left in the wake of a decline in formal funeral ceremonies.

1. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 55, 76.
2. Church of England, *Statistics for Mission 2019*, 15; SunLife, *Cost of Dying: 2023 Report* (SunLife, 2023), 37.
3. SunLife, *Cost of Dying*, 16.
4. See, for example, Alexander Burrell and Lucy E. Selman, "How do Funeral Practices Impact Bereaved Relatives' Mental Health, Grief and Bereavement? A Mixed Methods Review with Implications for COVID-19", *OMEGA – Journal of death and dying*, 85, 2 (2020), 345-383.
5. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 15, 29.
6. See for example, sources from Japan, Belgium and the USA: Erica Yokoyama, "Long burdened by costly funerals, Japan embraces simple goodbyes", *Japan Times*, 26 September 2022. Long burdened by costly funerals, Japan embraces simple goodbyes - The Japan Times; "Le Pax Funèbre". Le Pax Funèbre ASBL - Philanthropic funeral directors (lepaxfunebre.be); "US States with the highest funeral costs", *Nowpatient*. Now Patient - Costly States.
7. "Down to Earth: Practical support with funeral costs", *Quaker Social Action*. https://quakersocialaction.org.uk/we-can-help/helping-funerals/down-earth; Ministry of Justice, "Bereaved parents spared children's burial and cremation costs", 30 June 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bereaved-parents-spared-children-s-burial-and-cremation-costs
8. "Funeral costs lower for bereaved families following CMA order", *Competition and Markets Authority*, 27 January 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funeral-costs-lower-for-bereaved-families-following-cma-order
9. SunLife, *Cost of Dying*, 2.
10. SunLife, *Cost of Dying*, 3, 11.
11. See for example, Charlie Jones, "Cost of living: 'I don't want a funeral, it's a waste of money", *BBC News*, 21 February 2023. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-64376094; Jo Tweedy, "Rise of the No-frills Funeral", *Daily Mail Online*, 28 February 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11802541/Would-consider-direct-cremation-funeral-costs-down.html; ITV News, "What is 'direct cremation' and why are more people choosing one instead of a funeral?" *ITV*, 25 February 2023. https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2023-02-25/what-is-a-direct-cremation-and-why-are-more-choosing-it-instead-of-a-funeral
12. See a description of the offline strategy and success of this advertising campaign at "Targeting the over 60's Market", *PDV*, 2022. www.pdv.agency/portfolio/pure-cremation/; and an example of a television advert, emphasising the cost of funerals and the "peace of mind" of "no hidden costs", at Freedom to Choose | Pure Cremation - YouTube. Meanwhile, the Church of England disbanded its own central Life Events team, providing

support for funeral ministry, in 2022. Sandra Millar, "Big News, Big Challenge from Life Events", *Church Support Hub,* 2022. www.churchsupporthub.org/life-events/life-events-articles/big-news-big-challenge-from-life-events.php

13. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 78-79.

14. Choices on the specific list were the two most common funeral songs overall, the two most common religious songs, the most common "popular song", a famous poem, and the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 – both of which our qualitative participants noted were commonly requested even where the deceased was not religious – as well as the possibility of a free choice of favourite song or "none of the above". Choices selected from: "The top music played at funerals", *Coop Funeralcare*, 2023. https://www.coop.co.uk/funeralcare/music/charts; Rozario and Shimada, Ashes to Ashes, 77.

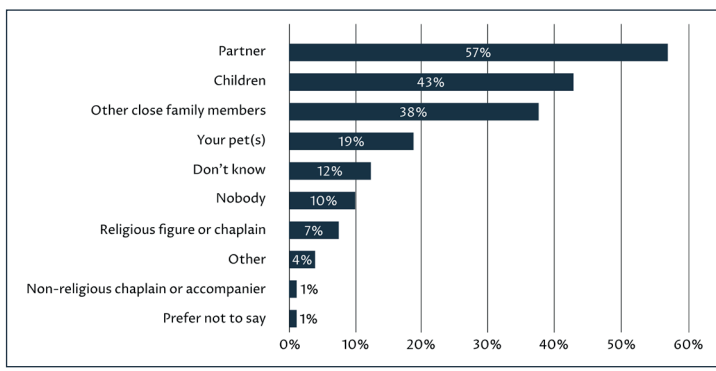
15. Rozario and Shimada, *Ashes to Ashes*, 77.

5. Support for the dying and bereaved

Exploring practical support for the dying and bereaved further, we asked people who they would like beside them when they die and what sorts of support they think are most important following a bereavement.

By far the most common people to want at one's deathbed were close loved ones. Over half of all respondents said their partner while 43% wanted to see their children – rising to 63% (the most common response) among actual parents. Around 38% hoped to see other family members (a more popular choice among younger groups, suggesting it could include parents). Once again, this underlines a close connection between death and love: death may be more professionalised than ever, but in our final moments we generally want to be close to those who matter most. That said, one in 10 respondents wanted to die alone, and it is well-documented in clinical practice that people do quite commonly 'wait' until their loved ones have left the room to die.[1]

Figure 18: "Who would you like to see besides you when you die? (Please select all that apply)"

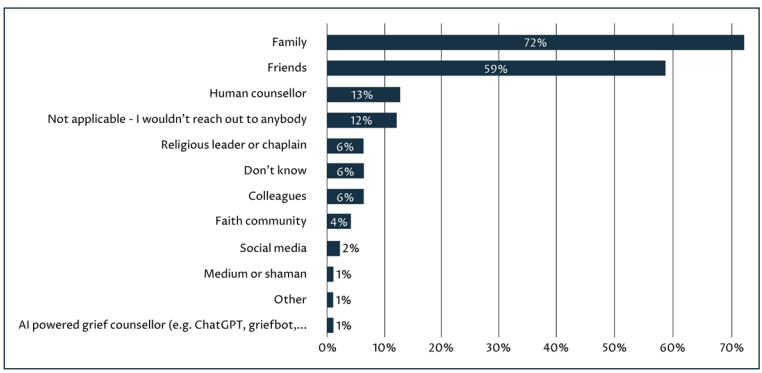


Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

Just 7% of the total population wanted to be accompanied by a religious figure or chaplain, though this obviously varied significantly by religious affiliation: 16% of self-identified religious respondents expressed this desire, rising to 35% among frequent religious attenders – and over 40% among those who attend a religious service at least once a week.

Turning from dying to bereavement, when asked who they would approach for support following the death of a loved one, nearly three quarters (72%) would speak to family and 59% would speak to friends. Again, most people look to those closest to them to navigate death and bereavement (though 12% said they would not reach out to anyone following a close loss).

Figure 19: "Who would you reach out to for emotional support following the death of your loved ones? (Please select up to three options)" (General population)



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

Of the professions, more than twice as many people would seek out a counsellor than a religious leader (13% vs 6%). Few would seek out their faith community (4%), and roughly equivalent levels would reach out to colleagues as would

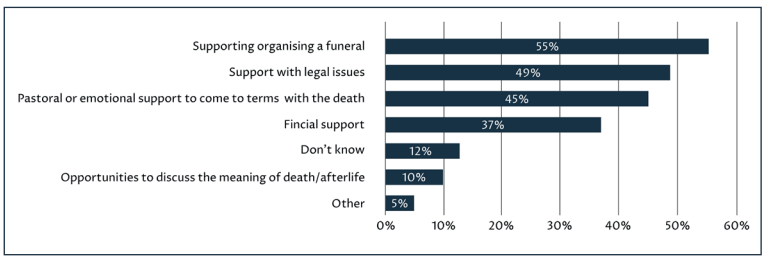
approach a religious leader. This coheres with recent research from MetLife which found that only 3% of people approached their employer for comfort and support after bereavement.[2] As we discuss further in chapter 6 below, in our own polling almost nobody chose "AI-powered grief counsellor (e.g. ChatGPT, griefbot)".

Naturally, these statistics obscure differences across religious identity. Those without any faith engagement were almost guaranteed to imagine they would not reach out in this way, while religiously engaged respondents were far more likely to say they would, with the highest uptick among those who are actively engaged in their faith: 31% of frequent religious attenders said they would reach out to their faith community, and 38% of the same group would reach out to a faith leader, compared to 0% and 1% respectively of those who never attend. Across all those who affiliated as Christian (regardless of practice) 15% would reach out to a faith leader and 9% would turn to a faith community – and 12% of those who said they attended worship just once every six months would reach out to a faith leader.

The overall picture is that few outside formal faith communities would currently approach them for formal bereavement support (though it is worth noting the question posed here is about intentions before the point of actual bereavement, not what happens in practice – and many more non-attenders, albeit a reducing number, do of course engage with religious groups through the process of funeral planning). At the same time, there is still some association of faith communities with emotional and practical support for the grieving population even among those on the edges of them.

Finally on this topic, we asked respondents what sorts of support they found important following the death of a loved one. Respondents could select up to three options from a list of five, acknowledging the likelihood that most people would view a range of support as necessary, but still disentangling people's competing priorities. Over half of respondents said that support organising a funeral was most important, and slightly under half said that support with legal issues was most important. Despite the capacity for choosing more than one option, only one in 10 respondents said it was important to have opportunities to discuss the meaning of death/the afterlife.

Figure 20: "What kind of support do you feel is most important for someone, following the death of a loved one? (Please select up to three options)" (General population)



Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Base: All respondents (n= 2,569)

Emphasis on practical support only grew with age, perhaps reflecting greater familiarity with the vast logistical burden of bereavement. Thus, 27% of 18-24-year-olds selected legal support as most important compared to 59% of 55-and-overs, while 60% of 18-24-year-olds selected pastoral and emotional support as most important compared to 42% of 55-and-overs. Social grade also affected responses: over half of ABC1

respondents (52%) selected pastoral and emotional support as important compared to 36% of C2DE respondents.

Across the population, those who frequently attended a religious worship service were notably more likely to prioritise both emotional *and* spiritual support: 62% of frequent attenders felt pastoral and emotional support to come to terms with the death was important compared to 39% of those who never attend and 45% of the general population. In our sample this reflected a particularly high value placed on pastoral and emotional support among frequently practising Christians, 73% of whom selected this option, though the sample of frequent attenders in other religions was too small for robust comparison across faith groups. Meanwhile, 22% of frequent attenders of all faiths felt opportunities to reflect on the meaning of death/afterlife were important compared to 8% of those who never attend.

Those who frequently attended a religious worship service were notably more likely to prioritise both emotional *and* spiritual support.

Figure 21: "What kind of support do you feel is most important for someone, following the death of a loved one? (Please select up to three options)" (Percentage by religious attendance)

What kind of bereavement support is important?	Religious Attendance		
	Frequent	Infrequent	Never
Financial support	36	37	38
Support organising a funeral	51	59	54
Support with legal issues	39	51	50
Opportunities to discuss the meaning of death/afterlife	22	10	8
Pastoral or emotional support to come to terms with the death	62	52	39
Other	4	4	5
Don't know	8	8	13

Emotional Response to Death survey (YouGov). Frequent attenders (n=255); Infrequent attenders (n=752); Never attenders (n=1,515).

Reflecting on the data in this chapter as a whole, people overwhelmingly lean on those closest to them when dying or bereaved. Most of us turn to our family and friends to grieve our losses, just as we want to be accompanied by our loved ones at the end of our own lives. As above, we intuitively sense that grief in some way is really about love. For many religious people, these close networks include their faith communities – and the data also show particular concern for pastoral and emotional bereavement support among frequently attending religious respondents (and within this, perhaps especially Christians) – though most people outside faith groups would not currently reach out in this way. As we shall see in chapter 7, there may be theological forces underlying high concern for pastoral support, which have not only shaped the Church's historic approach to grief but can continue to shape its engagement in this area moving forward. For now, however,

we turn to part two of the report, first considering the future of grief in the UK through a very different lens: the emergence of new technology.

1. See for example, Lizzy Miles, "Time of Death: Some Patients Prefer to Die Alone", *Pallimed,* 28 March 2016. https://www.pallimed.org/2016/03/time-of-death-some-patients-prefer-to.html

2. MetLife, "Chapter 1", *The Last Word: Tackling the death and funeral planning taboo* (MetLife, 2023), 4.

PART TWO:

Responding to the changing grief landscape

6. Emerging grief technologies in the UK

Part one has painted a picture of a society that is largely unclear about death: we are generally not (directly) exposed to it, mostly unprepared for it, and ambivalent about how to mark it. As religious belief and practice continues to recede in British society, a sense of the sacred around death is also disappearing – and in the void left, the market is all too ready to step in. This is driving a significant realignment of our grieving practices. In part two we therefore turn to consider the future of this grief landscape more explicitly. One potential force shaping future bereavement support is the emergence of new technologies, ranging from products and services for digital commemoration and management of social media profiles, to more futuristic proposals, such as the creation of AI-powered chatbots or interactive avatars based on the digital footprint of the deceased.

The intersection of digital technology with death is explored amply in popular culture, in films and television series such as *Transcendence* (2014), *Upload* (2020), and *Altered Carbon* (2018). Through the medium of fiction, they showcase different technological capabilities – some current, others highly implausible – and engage the emotional and ethical complexities they raise. A good illustration of this is the episode titled "Be Right Back" in season two of Netflix's popular drama series *Black Mirror*. The story revolves around a grieving woman named Martha who, after her boyfriend Ash's sudden death, discovers a service that enables her to communicate with an AI version of him. Over the course of the episode, she moves from sending a few texts to a chatbot to purchasing a lifelike robot in her boyfriend's image. The episode poignantly explores loss, grief, the role of the body in human identity and relationships, raising powerful questions about technology's ability (or lack thereof) to help with the

grieving process and compensate for the loss of embodied human relationships.

What does our polling suggest people really think about technological 'solutions' to the experience of bereavement?

In short, a clear majority will have none of it. As above, when asked "Who would you reach out to for emotional support following the death of your loved ones?", only 1% of respondents to our survey chose "AI-powered grief counsellor (e.g. ChatGPT, griefbot)". This figure grew to a modest 2% among 25 to 44-year-olds. Overwhelmingly, and unsurprisingly, people prefer people over machines when first dealing with the loss and separation wrought by death.

Judging by these responses alone, 'grief tech' (as the emerging sector is sometimes called) does not have a market, and therefore a future, at all – and indeed, griefbots are not a commercially mainstream service at present. But can we imagine an uptick in these answers as the technology becomes more advanced and widely available?

The story of Joseph Weizenbaum, a pioneer in AI research and the inventor of ELIZA, the world's first chatbot, is instructive here. Weizenbaum built ELIZA as a psychotherapy bot that would direct open-ended questions based on what people would disclose. Compared with ChatGPT, it was a rudimentary machine. What took Weizenbaum by surprise was that people invited to take part in the research would ask to be left alone with the robot and share their deepest secrets with it. It did not matter that ELIZA did not truly understand or feel – that it was, as editor of *The New Atlantis* magazine Ari Schulman put it, "just a few hundred lines of dirt-stupid computer code".[1] The conclusion Weizenbaum drew was that people are extremely susceptible to believing they are

genuinely understood by these machines. This readiness to reach out to machines for relationship can be seen in a recent poll which surveyed attitudes to AI among Americans, showing that 56% of respondents thought that "people will develop emotional relationships with AI," and 35% said they would be open to doing so if they were lonely.[2]

Time will tell, but a larger share of our own respondents were also open to the use of more futuristic grief technologies when asked directly about specific examples. We asked our sample about creating digital versions of themselves to live on after they die, and whether they would find interaction with digital avatars of their deceased loved ones comforting.

Some 2 in 3 respondents (67%) still disagreed that "I would like to create a digital version of myself that could live on after I die", but 11% agreed and 11% were not sure – already a potential market of 1 in 5 people for this service. (Men were notably less closed to the idea than women: 46% "strongly disagreed" that they would like to do this compared to 58% of women, while 61% of male respondents disagreed overall compared to 72% of women.) Meanwhile, when respondents were asked whether it would comfort them to "interact with a digital version of a loved one that died", agreement rose slightly higher: this time, 14% agreed and 13% were not sure, while 62% said they would not find this comforting. Based on this alone, we notice marginally higher levels of support for the idea of digital versions of others, and slightly greater aversion to the idea of creating digital doubles or avatars of oneself.

These responses indicate a greater degree of openness to the use of grief technology than was immediately apparent. Furthermore, the highest level of openness to the idea of interacting with an avatar of a deceased loved one was among

respondents aged between 18-24 (21%). Those aged 55 and over were least convinced, with only 10% agreeing with the statement. Meanwhile, 15% of 18-24-year-olds said they would like to create a digital version of themselves that could live after their death, compared to only 7% of those aged 55 and over.

In short, and unsurprisingly, the younger you are, the more likely you are to be open to digital means of softening death's blow on relationships. In the absence of longitudinal data, we cannot say if this is a cohort or life-cycle effect – whether those now aged 18-24 will continue to be open to tech solutions as they grow older, or whether tech positivity in relation to death is a function of young age – but if the former, we can expect a future where the combination of further advances in technology and people's openness lead to far more technologically-mediated experiences around death and dying.

The younger you are, the more likely you are to be open to digital means of softening death's blow on relationships.

1. Ari Shulman, "Why This AI Moment May be the Real Deal", *The New Atlantis*, summer 2023. https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-this-ai-moment-may-be-the-real-deal

2. Jacob Kastrenakes and James Vincent, "Hope, fear, and AI", *The Verge*, 26 June 2023. https://www.theverge.com/c/23753704/ai-chatgpt-data-survey-research

7. Christian theology and memorialisation in the UK

The previous chapters suggest that faith impacts how we approach death in a number of ways – including some ways that may have a positive pastoral impact. Yet the fact remains that religious affiliation (and especially Christian affiliation) is declining, with significant implications for the way we think about our own death and grieve the loss of our loved ones. Perhaps more than any other factor, this is driving the realignment of approaches to death and dying in the UK. Looking to the future, then, how can the Church continue to make a positive contribution to this changing culture around death and dying in the UK? What pastoral and theological gifts do Christians still have to offer society at large as it navigates the painful realities of human mortality?

At one level, the answer to these questions concerns the Church's practical assets, and how those assets can be deployed most helpfully in a modern context. Polling commissioned by the National Churches Trust at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020) asked what the public felt the most important use for churches and chapels would be after lockdown was eased. The most popular response was to provide a place to remember those who died during the pandemic (46%). This was closely followed by providing a quiet place for reflection or prayer more generally (44%) and marking significant life events, including by conducting funerals (42%).[1]

In an increasingly pluralist world, the Church will always be one voice in a wider conversation. But these data indicate that churches' buildings and pastoral provision can still have a meaningful impact on the ground, and the public still expects these resources to be directed towards helping people grieve. This expectation was perhaps also reflected in public

scrutiny of decisions to close churches during the pandemic: public worship was banned during the strictest lockdowns, though some churches were more resistant to this measure than others (including a successful legal challenge in Scotland allowing worship spaces to reopen) while many stayed closed long after it was legally required.[2]

Our own polling outlined in previous chapters indicates that using buildings more explicitly as reflective spaces for bereaved people may well be supported by Christian congregations themselves, who place a high value on pastoral and emotional support following bereavement (above, p. 67). And of course, these congregations are assets in their own right: while most people turn to their immediate family and friends following a loss, a significant proportion of frequently practising religious respondents said they would (also) turn to their faith community to process their grief (above, p. 65). The Church is not just a collection of buildings, but a community that bears one another's losses.

The Church is not just a collection of buildings, but a community that bears one another's losses.

None of this is to diminish the importance of the Church's continued role in funeral provision – and the fact that nearly half of respondents in the National Churches Trust survey still wanted the Church to conduct funerals indicates a continued public expectation of Christian ministry in this area. However, as increasing numbers of people forego formal funeral ceremonies, access to informal reflective spaces will become an increasingly important service to the nation in its own right. Here, churches and other faith groups are uniquely well-placed to respond to the emerging pastoral need because of their

historic witness in this area, alongside their continued assets in the community. This is a distinctly modern opportunity to meet people in their grief.

> **Access to informal reflective spaces will become an increasingly important service to the nation in its own right.**

At the same time, these assets (and their traditional association with death and bereavement support) have not appeared out of thin air, nor are they maintained out of habit, but are the outworking of religious beliefs lived in the world. This is what gives them their resonance. On this note, death is hardly a tangential issue for Christians but a series of claims about the relationship between life and death lie at the heart of the faith. However the events of the Gospel are interpreted by Christians (and they are interpreted in a variety of ways), Jesus' own terrible suffering and death on the cross, and his later resurrection and victory over death, are understood somehow to open up the possibility of "eternal life" for us all in the present day. In this sense, the Christian response to death and bereavement cuts to the heart of who Christians believe God is, and Christianity itself is one answer to, or interpretation of, the question: what's religion got to do with death? Or even: what's life got to do with death?

Of particular relevance to the emotional focus of this research, the interplay of love, grief and hope in Christian belief holds space for the many complex emotions provoked by dying and bereavement – from anxiety about one's own death to mourning for departed loved

> **Christian belief holds space for the many complex emotions provoked by dying and bereavement.**

ones, anger at the injustice, and the agony and loneliness of separation, to celebration of life in all its glory. Christian theology particularly gives voice to our intuition that grief is really about love. This emotional 'capacity' is a further gift the Church can offer still, even as one voice among many, as explored briefly below.

First, then, everything Christianity teaches is really a comment on the all-encompassing love of God, who does not turn away from the world but knows each of us down to the number of hairs on our head (Matthew 10.30). Ours is a market-based culture in which those with less economic power have less influence and status. Throughout this report we have observed that socio-economic factors shape our responses to the deepest existential questions, perhaps reflected most uncomfortably in the lower level of affinity with the idea of "celebration of life" among unemployed respondents (above, p. 54). Yet through God's eyes, every individual has inherent and incalculable worth – each of us worth celebrating and redeeming – and the Church is called to love others in the same way (John 13.34).

Second, and for this reason, every loss is deeply grieved. Christian belief does not deflect from the painful implications of human mortality: while death is a natural part of life, it can be unjust, unbearable, devastating. God does not rest at a distance from this suffering, instead sharing in our pain through the cross. More radically, this includes sharing in the distress of separation wrought by death: from the cross, Jesus not only undergoes physical torture but calls out to God in distress, "why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34). Our polling suggests that the end of relationship is what people find

Every loss is deeply grieved.

most concerning about death: as in the popular saying, "grief is love with nowhere to go" (c.f. above, p. 27). Christ gives voice to this same feeling as he dies. Death ruptures the relationships which make us who we are, and are the most precious element of life. This is the tragedy Christians believe Jesus addresses.

To this end, even as he is crucified, Christ foreshadows the ultimate healing of separation, by drawing his mother and disciple into a new family together (John 19.25-27). At the crucifixion God embraces even death itself – the unavoidable experience of all finite and fragile creatures – with his love. This is the ground of Christian hope (above, pp. 21-23), because Christians believe that when death is embraced by the one who is the source of all life, it is transfigured into resurrection life. Christ's own risen body is understood as the "first fruit" of God's plan for his whole creation, repairing these fractured relationships and making them whole. Consequently, it has cosmic implications: "the sting of death" is broken, no longer entailing the final separation it did, but now more analogous to sleep (John 1.11-14, 1 Corinthians 15.20, 55-57, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). In the end, "all who are in the tombs will hear his voice" (John 5.28) and "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21.4). More simply, "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5.4).

> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5.4)

For now, death is the painful reality of life and Christians are called to 'the foot of the cross' with those who grieve. But the Church is also called to embody hope as it mourns,

Grief is powerful because love is powerful – but love is more powerful still.

ultimately looking forward to resurrection life beyond death. In short, grief is powerful because love is powerful – but love is more powerful still.

As the epigraph to this report notes, this theological conviction has led Christians naturally towards deathbeds and gravesites throughout history, not only out of pastoral concern but in worship – and it is the legacy of this connection that embeds the Church in the wider material and ritual culture of grief in the UK, from the placement of cemeteries in churchyards to the traditional role of the priesthood in conducting funerals.

This is not, as is often suggested, merely an emotional crutch to help religious people come to terms with their own mortality – what Philip Larkin famously called a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade Created to pretend we never die".[3] Rather, it is an outward-facing and pastorally-minded conviction about the nature of reality, not even just concerned with preparing for one's own death but with the transformation of the whole creation – and, as our polling suggests, with concrete emotional support for others, whether Christian or not. The same conviction can continue to shape the Church's pastoral engagement with death and dying today, in a way that is both faithful to the heart of Christian faith and connects with the changing needs of the broader public.

As above, part of this engagement is simply holding quiet space for others to explore and come to terms with their own complex emotions around death and loss – but there is also a place for more pro-active facilitation of conversations on these themes too. Existing resources such as the Loss and

HOPE Project by Christian bereavement charity AtaLoss, and the Church of England's GraveTalk scheme, provide models for such conversations.[4] Particularly given the relatively low concern for existential questions in earlier sections of this report, a notable observation from the CEO of AtaLoss Yvonne Tulloch is that:

> *Few people attending The Bereavement Journey programme from non-Christian backgrounds intend to come to the [optional] final session on faith when they sign up, but 90%+ choose to attend once it comes to it, as their prior needs have been met. It is only then that they are in a position to consider their questions and they come to the fore. In this, we have found almost everyone today to have the same searching questions....*[5]

AtaLoss was recognised as the Best Bereavement Signposting Service and the Best Bereavement Information Provider in the UK in 2023, illustrating the potential for Christian engagement to make a real difference in this area. The Catholic project *The Art of Dying Well* also provides a wealth of resources to help people come to terms with their own mortality.[6] And where opening buildings is not possible, examples of digital remembrance such as the St Paul's Cathedral "Remember Me" project (an online space to remember victims of the COVID-19 pandemic) illustrate other forms of church leadership in providing such grieving spaces.[7]

At its best, then, the Church has been (and can be) a loving, grieving and hoping community: not shying away from the painful realities of separation wrought by death, but sitting alongside those who grieve and bearing one another's sorrows; celebrating the dignity of the deceased as precious and unique in the eyes of a God who loves (and supplies life for) all humanity; and looking forward to the life-affirming arc of the

biblical story, which does not end with death but resurrection. This vision recognises the full emotional range involved as humans come to terms with their mortality – which is not surprising as it reflects a belief in a God who becomes flesh to share in the full range of human experiences. It is this vision which has historically drawn the Church to direct its buildings, leadership, and community networks to those who mourn – and which it can still aspire to embody as a practical witness, even in a changing culture of grief.

At its best, then, the Church has been (and can be) a loving, grieving and hoping community.

1. "Churches and Covid-19: Opinion Poll", *National Churches Trust,* 30 May 2020. https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/news/churches-and-covid-19-opinion-poll
2. "Covid in Scotland: Places of worship can open now after court win", *BBC News,* 24 March 2021. Covid in Scotland: Places of worship can open now after court win - BBC News
3. Philip Larkin, "Aubade", *Poetry Foundation.* Aubade by Philip Larkin | Poetry Foundation
4. "Churches & Community Bereavement Support (including The Bereavement Journey)", *AtaLoss.* https://www.ataloss.org/how-churches-can-lead-the-way-in-community-bereavement-support; "What is GraveTalk?", Church of England. https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/after-funeral/what-gravetalk
5. Yvonne Tulloch, formal submission to the researchers.
6. "Talking about death", *The Art of Dying Well.* https://www.artofdyingwell.org/talking-about-death/
7. "Remember Me", *The Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral,* 2023. https://www.rememberme2020.uk/

6

Conclusion

The report has considered how we emotionally reflect on, and prepare for, our own deaths and the deaths of our loved ones in light of rapidly changing approaches to death and dying in the UK.

It confirms the historically unusual phenomenon that many of us now experience bereavement without direct exposure to death itself (either through presence at the moment of dying, or time spent with the dead body) and may find ourselves unprepared when at a deathbed for the first time. It also indicates that we are not generally well-prepared for our own deaths, though preparedness rises significantly with age, and that while nearly half of us do feel accepting of the fact we will die – which itself may be accompanied by a whole range of emotions, both positive and negative – we otherwise mostly feel negative about our own mortality.

It also finds we are a nation of paradox when it comes to memorialisation of the dead. Religious or not, Brits agree that a funeral should celebrate life but in practice increasing numbers of us would prefer to go gently without "fuss" or fanfare, and without a funeral, altogether. Given the high recognition that a funeral should also provide a shared space for mourning, this not only foregoes that celebration, but the opportunity to mark our own grief within the community – potentially leaving a significant pastoral gap in its wake.

Partly this shift is driven by the cost of dying – and more certainly needs to be done to bring this cost down. However, our data indicate that religious and spiritual markers have an even greater impact on the desire to have a funeral or not. Falling religious affiliation and the hiddenness of conversations around death and dying have contributed to a broader lack of shared public conviction around the place of shared ritual

space in the grieving process. Market forces become more important where a sense of shared conviction about the role of a funeral is lost. It is among the religious that demand for funeral ceremonies remains overall highest.

More than simply addressing the economics of funerals, then, this less tangible shift also needs addressing if funerals are to continue to be an assumed right of every grieving family, rather than a luxury or niche requirement for a few. This requires a new kind of public conversation around death and dying. End-of-life professionals across the sector can all play a part in encouraging more engaged discussions about the components of a healthy grieving process, including the purpose and potential benefits of a funeral.

In a religiously plural society, the Church is rightly one of many voices in the conversation and cannot take its perceived credibility in this area for granted. Indeed, many of those currently leading the public conversation around death and dying are secular voices. At the same time, churches are especially well-positioned in this conversation, given their rich history of support for those who grieve and their continued witness on issues of meaning and purpose in public life.

This report consequently finds that, at its best, the Church can still make a positive and much-needed contribution, not only through its practical assets (above all, by making church buildings available as informal, reflective spaces for bereaved people) but more deeply as a loving, grieving and hoping community: sharing in one another's sorrow 'at the foot of the cross', embracing those who mourn in their suffering, celebrating the dignity of the deceased, always grounded in the personal love of God, and looking forward to the life-affirming arc of the biblical story, of death followed by resurrection.

As indicated by the higher levels of hope among religious respondents, and by particular concern for emotional and spiritual support among frequently worshipping respondents, religion here is not simply a coping mechanism, but the ground of real hope lived in the world.

This report began by noting the distinctive relationship humans have with their own mortality: nature may be "red in tooth and claw" in the oft-quoted words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, but it is only humans who dread the ebbing of life so deeply and grieve it so painfully. As our polling reflects, this pain emerges out of our capacity to form relationships with one another: we grieve those we love, and fear for those we leave behind. Sure enough, Tennyson's own reflection comes as part of a poem inspired by his own close bereavement – the early and tragic death of his friend from a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of 22. Yet finally, it is also perhaps unique to humans that we place trust in an alternative future, and despite his personal experience of loss Tennyson ended his poem with hope. At its best, it is this hope that Christians can still communicate in modern Britain today.

No longer half-akin to brute,
For all we thought and loved and did,
And hoped, and suffer'd, is but seed
Of what in them is flower and fruit;

Whereof the man, that with me trod
This planet, was a noble type
Appearing ere the times were ripe,
That friend of mine who lives in God,

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,

And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.[1]

1. Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam" in *Tennyson Poems 1830-1870* (1936), 447-48.

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Madeleine Pennington

Love, Grief, and Hope

This report examines emotional responses to death and dying in the UK, presenting the findings of a nationally representative poll commissioned by Theos and conducted by YouGov.

It confirms that ours is a society which keeps death at arm's length and out of sight. Many of us experience bereavement without direct exposure to death, and most do not feel well-prepared for our own deaths. We are increasingly likely to grieve for others behind closed doors too, as more and more of us choose not to have a funeral. Financial pressures play a part in these decisions, but religious and spiritual perspectives are even more significant; in this sense, reducing religious affiliation has made greater room for market forces to shape how we grieve.

The report also considers the continued role of the churches in this rapidly changing landscape. It argues that they are still well-placed to make a positive contribution as one voice in this conversation, not only because of their practical assets and historical engagement in this area, but also because of their continued theological witness. The interplay of grief and hope in Christian theology also holds space for the many complex emotions people feel as they face dying and bereavement – and ultimately, gives theological voice to our intuition that grief is really about love.

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