

## Kildare and Leighlin Diocesan Funeral Conversations Report A Compilation of the Key Findings

### THREE DEANERIES– THREE CONVERSATIONS

Conversations were held as follows:

19 February, Mount St Anne’s Retreat Centre, Killenard, Co. Laois

7 March, Parish Centre, Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow.

19 March, Osprey Hotel, Naas, Co. Kildare

### WHAT FORMED THE CONVERSATIONS?

Over two cycles of round table conversations the following questions were addressed by those who attended.

- What do you think is important for people about funerals in general?
- Have you seen any changing patterns in how funerals are celebrated over the last ten years?
- What is the changing reality of funeral practice specifically in relation to parishes and in this are there losses and/or gains?
- Remembering the solid foundation of our celebration of funerals, are there responses that parishes and the diocese could consider to meet these changes? /Are there examples of responses already that can be built on?

### WHO CAME TO THE CONVERSATIONS?

Over 250 people, from 46 of the 56 parishes of the diocese, attended the three gatherings.

Attendees included Funeral Directors, Parish Funeral Ministers, Parish Pastoral Council Members, Liturgy Group Members, Music Ministers, Parish Pastoral Workers, Parish Sisters and members of the Clergy as well as some parishioners who had experienced bereavement in recent years.

The conversations were hosted by Bishop Denis and members of the Commission for Liturgical Formation.

### RECORDING OF CONVERSATIONS:

***The host at each table kept a record of what was said by people.***

***At the end of each conversation cycle every table made a key statement to the whole gathering. These statements were also recorded by the table host.***

***The content of this report is drawn exclusively from the records of what was said in the three deanery conversations.***

THESE FUNERAL CONVERSATIONS WERE AN INITIATIVE OF THE DIOCESAN COMMISSION FOR LITURGICAL FORMATION. FOLLOWING A SURVEY OF PARISHES, FUNERAL MINISTRY WAS NAMED AS ONE OF THREE TOP PRIORITIES FOR THIS GROUP TO ADDRESS DURING ITS TERM OF OFFICE. THE CONVERSATIONS FORM PART OF THE BEGINNING STAGES OF WORK.

*This report records what was said in each conversation, starting with the most frequently mentioned. This report is available for download on [www.kandle.ie](http://www.kandle.ie).*

## WHERE WE ARE NOW...

### CONVERSATION 1: FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE WHAT DO YOU THINK IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE ABOUT FUNERALS IN GENERAL?

Key elements that were considered important for people about funerals included the following:

- The support of the family by clergy, the parish community, neighbours and funeral directors in a way that is respectful, caring, sensitive and compassionate. The importance of some form of personal connection between the family and the priest, with an accompanying support and sense of welcome, was highly valued and was seen to help families in being able to participate in the rites.
- Sensitivity to the particular circumstances and needs of the family, particularly in the case of sudden death or suicide, as well as in the case where members of the family may have little or no faith, may be distanced from the Church or where internal family relationships may be difficult.
- Some form of guidance for families to help them through the process of arranging and celebrating a funeral. This can come from a variety of people including the local priest, parish sister, funeral director as well as a growing number of parish based lay funeral ministers, drawing on written material that can be left with the family. This needs to be partnered by good communication between all those involved.
- Ritual/liturgy that is well planned, meaningfully celebrated and that allows for the participation of the family to their ability was frequently cited. Elements of the funeral liturgy that were named of particular importance included music (appropriate to the liturgy and the circumstances); bringing forward of symbols of the person's life at the beginning of Mass or at the Reception of the Body (concern was expressed at the appropriateness of some symbols on occasion & that only the Cross/Book of the Gospels be placed on the coffin itself); Eulogies/ words in remembrance of the deceased (again there were some mixed views expressed); the homily, prayers and readings. The dilemma of personalising the liturgy while remaining faithful to the spirit and prayer of the liturgy was clearly recognised and named.
- The time between death and the funeral Mass is very significant. Great value was placed in the family time together with the deceased, either in the funeral home or increasingly in the family home, and the practice of the wake. It was felt that this time should not be rushed. Time spent together as a family as well as neighbourly support, the support of the parish in preparing for the funeral rites and prayer (including the rosary), were all seen as important during this time.
- Care of the family throughout, including at the time of sympathising, at the time of leaving the church and at the graveside.
- The role, support and professionalism of Funeral Directors as well as a good working relationship between them and the priest.
- The benefit of trained lay funeral ministers whose role is clearly defined and communicated.

**CONVERSATION 1: HAVE YOU SEEN ANY CHANGING PATTERNS IN HOW FUNERALS ARE CELEBRATED OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS?**

- The single greatest change named was the increasing incidence of the one-day funeral, with reception of the Body taking place at the beginning of the Funeral Mass.
- Change in the faith levels of people and familiarity with the liturgy.
- A greater involvement of the family in the celebration of the liturgy itself.
- Use of symbols of the person's life & Eulogies
- People coming to celebrate the life of the person (akin to memorial services) rather than to pray for the person; funerals more celebratory / personalised.
- The practice of cremation is increasing with time.
- A growing importance of music, change in the musical style and an increasing use of popular music, including a favourite song.
- A swing back to the traditional wake in the home with the rosary still popular and a growing incidence of 9 p.m. rosary in the home.
- Presence of funeral ministry teams; people other than priest leading prayer in the home.
- Hospitality offered after the burial.
- More deaths of young people and tragic deaths.
- Growing number of humanist/ non-faith ceremonies as well as funerals going straight to the graveyard/crematorium.
- Other changes named included changing patterns of families; greater involvement of funeral directors; more Post-Communion reflections; having a photograph on the coffin; donations to charity rather than flowers; changing dress of mourners with black beginning to disappear; Use of webcam as well as social media and Facebook; Use of a Book of Condolences; Embalming of the body; funerals seem much longer; priests may feel like an MC at an event; differing standards being employed by priests.

**SOME OF THE STATEMENTS SHARED...**

A funeral is a personal experience for the family; we need to balance the dignity of the bereaved with the dignity of the liturgy. The key elements must be support and hope.

We have something unique to offer, Christian hope that also allows the bereaved to grieve.

That the bereaved family get the care, love and support they need and that they are helped to have a meaningful celebration of the life of their loved one which they feel they deserve.

Ministry is happening; despite the change in the faith reality and the change in the family reality, as Church we are blessed to be invited to share these intimate moments with families in our communities.

**CONVERSATION 2: WHAT IS THE CHANGING REALITY OF FUNERAL PRACTICE SPECIFICALLY IN RELATION TO PARISHES AND IN THIS ARE THERE LOSSES OR GAINS?**

- In relation to one day funerals the need for something in the home/funeral home for family and community the night before was frequently cited. While the practice will suit many families, there is awareness that with the loss of the removal the night before the community have less opportunity to offer support and that the family may be rushed in their letting go of their loved one.
- The changing level of practice among the bereaved means that there is often a lack of familiarity with Mass and ritual, accompanied by differing expectations of what will happen during the funeral liturgy, this is coupled with a far greater desire for families to be involved in preparing and taking part in the funeral.
- Fewer clergy is a reality that impacts and will continue to impact on parishes while at the same time clergy have become more involved in working with families in planning funerals.
- Funeral directors have become very professional and work well with clergy.
- Eulogies can be good but need to be short and appropriate placed.
- Funeral lay ministers is a positive growing reality in parishes, as well as deacons.
- The placement of Symbols can be a loss or a gain depending on how it is done and their appropriateness.
- The increase in cremations poses challenges: direction is needed regarding appropriate ritual for burial of ashes.
- Lack of resources especially around liturgical music and availability of musicians mid week alongside a gain of technology including webcam, RIP.ie, local radio.
- We offer Christian hope and comfort to the bereaved in the context of a society more uncomfortable with the language of death and a changing sense of what is appropriate.
- There is a need for a civil alternative to the religious funeral ceremony where the church is merely a venue.
- While the informal support of community is very important, people are fitting funerals into a busy life while a growing number of new families in parishes may find less support.

**SOME MORE STATEMENTS FROM THE FLOOR...**

To celebrate the funeral with a strong sense of calmness, reverence, prayerfulness; a dignified celebration that allows a family to feel cared for and supported. Good preparation will allow for the aforementioned elements to be realised.

To respect, accommodate, support and give an experience of being listened to, these are the most important experiences that any family should have after the funeral of a loved one. In general, we think funerals are being celebrated very well at present.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE....

### CONVERSATION 2: ...ARE THERE RESPONSES THAT PARISHES AND THE DIOCESE COULD CONSIDER TO MEET THESE CHANGES? /ARE THERE EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES ALREADY THAT CAN BE BUILT ON?

- The single greatest response named was the provision of diocesan guidelines or 'universals' which all parishes and clergy could live with. These would offer families, funeral directors and parishes a step by step guide through the process of planning a funeral while suggesting best practice in regard to music, readings, symbols, eulogies, ministries within the liturgy, times of funerals, policy around Sunday funerals and other aspects, as well as listing the variety of options available to families. Contact numbers to help families at the time and beyond the time of a funeral might also be included. Every funeral is different in that each loss is unique to this family. In light of this, any guidelines would require a degree of flexibility and great sensitivity in their application while holding onto core practices that all involved could support and promote. Once created and endorsed by priests and parishes of the diocese they would then need to be made freely available via publication in a variety of forms as well as via the website. Promotion of any guidelines and awareness of them among people across the diocese would need to be part of the response also.
- The future role of lay funeral ministers featured highly. Any future ministers would need to be very carefully selected and receive initial and on-going diocesan training. At a diocesan level the role and status of these ministers would need to be clearly communicated to people. How ministers would operate from parish to parish would need some flexibility to take into account particular local circumstances and traditions.
- With the increase in cremations, there is a need for clarity and guidelines for parishes, funeral directors and families on practices around cremations, including perhaps the option of combining a ritual for burial of ashes at the time of a Month's Mind, as well as exploring the provision of a greater number of columbarium (where the urn containing the cremated remains is placed) within the diocese.
- The need to follow up with bereaved families was also regularly mentioned, making the distinction between funeral ministry and bereavement ministry. A list of bereavement support groups, especially of suicide support when required, should be available to families. The value of annual cemetery devotions and November liturgies for the dead was also highlighted as a positive response.
- Leadership and guidance for ministering in highly sensitive situations, for example suicide, death of a young person/infant, separated/divorced families would be of help.
- The variety of prayer options at the time of death needs further exploration. The suggestion was made to explore the reason for the growing loss of the night removal as well as providing some form of prayer ritual for the evening before the funeral and /or a prayer card for families who may wish to lead prayers themselves in their home. On a number of occasions the suggestion was voiced that we do not always have to have a Funeral Mass and that a funeral outside of the celebration Mass may better suit the needs of some families.
- Already existing good working relationships between funeral directors and clergy, as well as other parish staff, was highlighted as something that can be built upon. In this there was an acknowledgement of the importance of the work of funeral directors as well as the ongoing need for priests to work closely with families as they prepare to celebrate the funeral in a meaningful way.

- Other responses for consideration included:

Encouraging people to have end of life plans for funerals; Facilitating an awareness among parishes of the differing traditions and customs around funerals and burials that in the case of foreign nationals; Acknowledging and drawing upon existing practices in individual parishes that are very meaningful; Guidelines of Mass offerings for the priest; Offering the use of a Blessed Sacrament Chapel for a family to wake their loved one; Concern was expressed at the question of hospitality which can result in great expense for families; Offering faith formation in regard to the Christian understanding of death and how the death of a Christian is celebrated for young as well as older generations; Recognising funerals as moments of evangelisation and moments to say something about the Christian life.

#### FROM THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH...

*In this moment of sorrow the Lord is in our midst and consoles us with his word: Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall be comforted.*

*Into your hands Father of mercies, we commend our brother/sister N. in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, he/she will rise with him on the last day.*

*God of all consolation, open our hearts to your word, so that, listening to it, we may comfort one another, finding light in time of darkness and faith in time of doubt.*

## THANK YOU

**Bishop Denis and the Diocesan Commission for Liturgical Formation would like to thank all those who took part in these conversations. What was said in these conversations will help guide our work in the coming months.**

**In the Autumn we will begin offering resources to parishes.**

**We look forward to continuing the work begun in a spirit of on-going partnership with the people of the diocese as we build on the good foundations of local funeral practice.**

#### THE MEMBERS OF THE DIOCESAN COMMISSION FOR LITURGICAL FORMATION ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Ms. Eileen Good (Chair), Ms. Hazel O'Connor (Secretary), Sr. Mary Murphy, Sr. Anne Walsh, Ms. Julie Kavanagh, Fr. John Cummins, Fr. Liam Lawton, Fr. Thomas O'Byrne, Ms. Cora O'Brien, Sr. Eileen Deegan, Fr. Gerard Ahern, Fr. Joe O'Neill, Sr. Dolores Fitzgerald, Ms. Noeleen Lynam, Ms. Geraldine Moore, Ms. Margarita Bedding, Fr. Liam Morgan, Deacon Pat Roche.