

Dying and Grieving: A Guide to Pastoral Ministry, Alan Billings (SPCK 2002), 166 pp, £12.99 pbk

Billings is both a clear and incisive thinker and an experienced priest and pastor. Both of these qualities are evident in the text of this excellent book. Aimed at those engaged in or training for funeral ministry, the book outlines a sense of how the place of religion, the nature of the funeral service and patterns of dying mourning and grieving have changed in Britain over the past fifty years. It also offers some pointers to good practice for today. The text is well organized into three parts. Part one explores the place of religion in contemporary society and offers some thoughts about what Christianity can say about death. Part two reflects on the recent past and asks what has changed in respect of the way we die: the way we understand death and conduct funerals and the way we mourn and grieve. Billings draws out trends in this overview. Finally, in the light of parts one and two, part three looks at the nature of pastoral care and how we should both conduct a funeral and offer pastoral care to the bereaved. There are helpful pointers to further thought and discussion at the end of each chapter.

The book deserves to be a standard and compulsory read for all those wishing to integrate their own experience of death, pastoral care and our contemporary culture. The text also happens to be a model of good practice in both doing and writing pastoral theology. There is a creative and constructive dialogue between the theory and experience.

The book has certainly stimulated this reviewer into further thought. In the first place, it remains to be seen whether the Christian churches will continue to have such a hold over the conducting of funerals as the effects of decline and secularization impinge on all aspects of this work. And there are some important questions about how far the language of Christian theology connects with the experience of those grieving. We underestimate the gap and the oddly privatised nature of our grammar. Second, this book reminds those engaged in the exercise of theology in an area such as this that our work must always be interdisciplinary. Those who shape our liturgy must open themselves up to pastoral experience and theology otherwise their work runs the danger of being dislocated and irrelevant. Further, not only are traditional matters such as damnation and hell far outside people's horizons, but a growing number of Christian individuals nowadays feel ambivalent about the reality of any life beyond the grave. Our pastoral journey continues and Billings has provided a useful map for our work.

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