

GraveTalk: Executive Summary, Discussion and Conclusions

Executive Summary

The Diocese of Lichfield GraveTalk Project was commissioned by the Archbishops' Council to conduct and evaluate a pilot "Café space to talk about death, dying and funerals" for Anglican parishioners. The overall vision was to assist in the development of 'death confident congregations'; the strategy was to stage café style events in which conversation about these difficult questions was facilitated in small groups by the use of 'Conversation Cards'. In all, facilitators staged 32 events across 25 parishes or groupings of Churches, involving a total of 513 participants during January and February 2014. Feedback was gathered from individual facilitators; participants; and during a 'Feedback morning' at the end of the project.

Although the sample was necessarily small and selective, the results were strongly positive across the whole range of measures. GraveTalk achieved its aim of involving a wide range of people (mostly Churchgoers) in conversations about death and dying which they generally found stimulating, useful and enjoyable. This report therefore concludes with a strong recommendation that the project move to a national pilot, and thence (assuming the results are replicated) be made available to the Church of England as a whole. On further analysis of the results, it makes some recommendations for changes; and also indicates issues which require further deliberation and/or decision.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The GraveTalk project in the Diocese of Lichfield was a small enterprise, limited in both generalizability and scope. In interpreting the data, it needs to be remembered that the parishes and groups of Churches that volunteered were a self-selecting sample, who might be expected therefore to respond positively to the challenge; and that at this stage no attempt was made to extend GraveTalk to the wider

community. The 'user voice' was represented by only one interviewee from each event, who was again largely self-selecting, and the interview data (while consistent) do not show the necessary signs of 'saturation': in other words, further interviews would yield further insights.

These limitations are serious, but need to be set against the equally restricted scope of the project. This was not attempting to analyse the range of reactions to GraveTalk or the social psychology behind them, but only to 'road-test' the idea in principle: to discover whether a café-based interaction, based on the use of conversation cards, could help congregations to talk about matters of life and death.

Reviewing the data as a whole, there can be little doubt that for most participants consulted, GraveTalk was welcome and useful. It seems equally clear that the basic strategy, of training Facilitators and Hosts to stage an event through an induction day, providing them with a model but then encouraging them to adapt it, proved valuable as a way of both providing a supportive structure and leaving enough to individual discretion to allow the Facilitators and Hosts to 'own' the process. Finally, the primary tool supplied, the Conversation Cards, seems to have had a major contribution to the success of the project.

Analysing the data in finer detail, the following general points stand out:

1. Taken as a whole, GraveTalk has been a clear success and far exceeded the expectations of its organisers. For both facilitators and participants, it has generally been a rewarding experience and one they would like to repeat or develop further. Concerns that it may raise feelings of deep distress that the facilitators would be unprepared for, or develop into a bereavement counselling event, turn out to have been exaggerated. Although 'there were tears', facilitators seem to have been able to distinguish them from signs of deep distress, and none of the interviewees reported a lasting negative feeling when reflecting on the event. There are good reasons, therefore, for confidence in the overall value of GraveTalk.
2. The most consistently positive comments by both facilitators and interviewees related to the atmosphere or social environment, including the cake! Participants repeatedly referred to the relaxed, organised and often humorous context within which the conversation took place, and linked it to the ease with which difficult subjects could be discussed. It seems clear that the strength of GraveTalk lies principally in its 'sense of occasion': as pastors of all

descriptions know well, people are most likely to risk a conversation about matters of deep concern in a context which appears to be organised and well-ordered, in which they feel safe, thought-about and cared-for. Cake, comfort and calm efficiency seem to be clear measures of these qualities.

3. In turn, it seems clear that Facilitators and Hosts were helped to provide this sort of environment by their experience of the preparation and support provided by the Diocese and the Church of England as a whole, along with the advice and resources prepared for them. Although it would clearly have been more helpful to many to have experience of a GraveTalk evening before the Facilitator Training Day, the experience of both was a positive preparation for most facilitators. Continuing support provided on the BaseCamp platform and from the parish clergy was also appreciated by some.
4. Both the café concept and the use of conversation cards seem to have contributed decisively to a model which could be reproduced by facilitators across the Church of England. Notwithstanding comments about certain details (e.g. the questions on particular cards, or the arrangement of people into appropriate groups at tables) the provision of a format in which momentum was maintained by the interlocutors themselves rather than being dependent on a central figure appears to have been highly successful.

Within these broad parameters, a number of issues have been raised which would repay further thought and possible development:

1. Feedback from facilitators and Focus Groups suggested that some would advocate a more complex structure for the events: a facilitator at each table, perhaps; and/or a plenary session at the end. There is room for further deliberation here, although there is an argument for maintaining as simple a structure as possible to enable facilitators to adapt it to their purposes.
2. A number of facilitators and interviewees reported that they would have liked further resources. Several suggested a follow-up event to discuss practicalities such as finance, funeral planning and Advance Care Plans. One open question is whether this should be included as part of the continuation of GraveTalk, or left for individual parishes to organise in the way most appropriate for their context and to fit local demand.
3. There was some unease about the appropriateness of the name, and also a question about the value of advertising. The existing data on why people

participate implies that this sort of activity would be pointless, since most people participate because of personal contacts and/or personal experience of death; but this may be begging the question, since without publicity there is no other clear route by which people may have been drawn to participate. This suggests that there is a need for a decision in principle about whether Gravetalk should be advertised widely, or spread by word of mouth.

4. In addition, some attendees seem to have arrived with expectations of a different sort of event, such as a workshop or lecture. This issue may be linked to the previous one, in that the way GraveTalk is 'branded' will help to set prospective participants' expectations. If the intention is to advertise it widely, then some further explanation of the nature and scope of these events may be necessary in order to manage these expectations appropriately.
5. Particular question cards need to be revised or replaced. In addition, there is the repeated suggestion that some cards should be set apart as 'conversation starters', and that others would be better for introduction later in the conversation. Finally, a few commented on the fact that each table had different cards, and that some conversations seemed to run better than others. These last two comments raise the question of whether an undifferentiated pack of cards is the best use of the resource, or whether a set of say 10 cards should be constructed in a clear order, from 'conversation starters' onwards.