



Six-session course handbook

Creative arts workshop

Sermon starters

Bible studies

Meditations

Prayer walk

A church's guide
to exploring mortality

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Death & Life

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Death & Life



A church's guide
to exploring mortality

**Joanna Collicutt, Jo Ind,
Victoria Slater and Alison Webster**

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About this book

Why this resource?

As a society, we aren't good at talking about death, and as individuals we may try and avoid thinking about it. This is made easier for us by the fact that these days the process of death has been largely handed over to professionals, so we rarely witness it, and many of us can go through life without ever having seen the body of a person who has died. The Covid pandemic has made surprisingly little difference to this in our collective consciousness. In many ways, it is reasonable for us to try and keep our distance from death, for it is a deeply threatening reality:

- It is fundamentally uncontrollable and unpredictable;
- It involves (unknown and perhaps extreme) physical pain and discomfort;
- It separates loved ones;
- It is undergone alone;
- It interrupts our plans and projects, and may make life seem pointless;
- It seems to annihilate those who undergo it.

Yet we cannot deal with the threat by avoiding it forever, and society is beginning to wake up to this fact. 'Bucket lists' have entered the national vocabulary; death cafés are fairly commonplace; and organisations such as the National Council for Palliative Care ([ncpc.org.uk](https://www.ncpc.org.uk)), Compassion in Dying ([compassionindying.org.uk](https://www.compassionindying.org.uk)) and the Dying Matters Coalition ([hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters](https://www.hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters)) have brought the topic of death and the process of dying out of the shadows and into the public arena. It turns out that many people, especially older people, would value an opportunity to talk frankly about what is sometimes known as 'the last taboo'.

The role of churches

While the religious landscape is changing, churches and faith communities have an important role to play in offering both pastoral care and theological accompaniment to the dying and the bereaved. There is a challenge and an opportunity for churches and faith communities to (re) claim their role – to re-weave religion and death.¹

Churches have traditionally been the place for funerals, but this is becoming less common, as an increasing range of alternative providers enter the marketplace. Between 2013 and 2022, the Church of England's Life Events project developed resources to enrich and refresh funeral ministry. These included materials for a Christian equivalent of a death café – Grave Talk (churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals). There is also a Roman Catholic web-based equivalent of the mediaeval book called the *Ars Moriendi* produced by St Mary's University – The Art of Dying Well (artofdyingwell.org). But, perhaps surprisingly, churches have not invested a great deal of effort in addressing questions of mortality (in contrast, for example, with their concerns around sexuality and gender).

Ironically, this may have something to do with institutional churches' fear of their own mortality. A few years ago, a senior church administrator remarked that churches face a numerical decline because 'we haven't found a way to halt death'. But, of course, in Jesus we have just that. The message that Christians proclaim and try to live out is one of life in the midst of death and hope in the midst of loss. For 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). We have something significant to say about all this.

Nevertheless, it can be hard to communicate traditional Christian teaching on this vital topic in ways that make sense to 21st-century folk, even if they are regular churchgoers. The central truth of our faith seems to be the one that is hardest to communicate. We need to re-learn how to have proper conversations about it.

This book contains resources to help us begin the conversation and then dive deeper into this matter of death and life.

Background

In 2003, my (Joanna's) mother suffered a serious heart attack and at one point was given 48 hours to live. As is so often the case with older people, her 'death trajectory' turned out to be more complicated: she lived another seven years. She spent those years well, regularly visiting churches to pray privately and prepare herself spiritually for the end of her earthly life.

Whether by choice or not, she did this alone and unsupported. When I shared this with a senior church leader, he reflected, 'It's a great shame that the churches don't do more to help people with this important task!' The seed of an idea had been planted.

Meanwhile, I had taken up the post of adviser for spiritual care for older people for the diocese of Oxford. I was reflecting on what 'spiritual care' actually means, and how churches might go beyond tending to the physical and emotional well-being of older people (important though this is) and offer something distinctively Christian.

I had another significant conversation, this time with a young Jewish woman, who pointed out that, unlike many religious traditions, Christianity does not offer a model for how to grow old gracefully; its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, 'lived fast and died young'. This conversation drew my attention back to something I had not noticed before: the New Testament presents older people as faithful prophets rather than knowledgeable sages. The Christian faith sees old age not as a dignified decline into oblivion, but the urgent run-up to its ultimate goal, stepping through the gateway of death to resurrection life.

Yet, outside of Easter services, there didn't seem to be much talk of this sort of thing going on in church circles. Unlike baptism and marriage, there were hardly any courses laid on by churches to prepare folk for this ultimate life event. So, in 2012 I delivered one myself. It was very successful and became a pilot for what turned out to be a much bigger project run jointly by Oxford Diocese and Ripon College Cuddesdon. This ran from 2014 to 2018 and was supported in part by a generous grant from the Henry Smith Charity. It is out of this more substantial project – gathering stories, recording good practice, identifying needs, doing theological reflection – that this resource has been developed.

Evidence

The resources and principles for good practice that we have created are rooted in evidence of their effectiveness.

We are used to the idea of ‘evidence-based’ practice in health care. If you go into hospital for an operation, you rightly want to know the possible risks and benefits of the procedure based on research evidence. We are much less used to thinking about evidence in relation to spiritual care, but it is just as important.

It is simply unethical to waste our own and other people’s time and energy doing something that at best will make no difference to them and at worst might do them some harm. In the area of death and dying, there is a small but real risk of doing harm – of giving people false information, of opening up cans of worms that were better left shut, of taking insufficient care of our and their emotional vulnerabilities. Understanding these risks should not put us off this area of work; instead, it should motivate us to ensure that we engage in best practice. And the basis for best practice is research evidence.

The resources in this book have come out of a process documented in two publications in peer-reviewed journals: *Working with Older People*² and *Practical Theology*.³ It is an example of theological ‘action research’. Action research is used in the human sciences, especially in the areas of health and social care. It:

- Is context-based, addressing real life problems;
- Aimed at collaboration between participants and researchers;
- Sees diversity and complexity as enriching rather than distracting;
- Has a recursive structure, generating new actions from its findings, which themselves lead to new research questions.

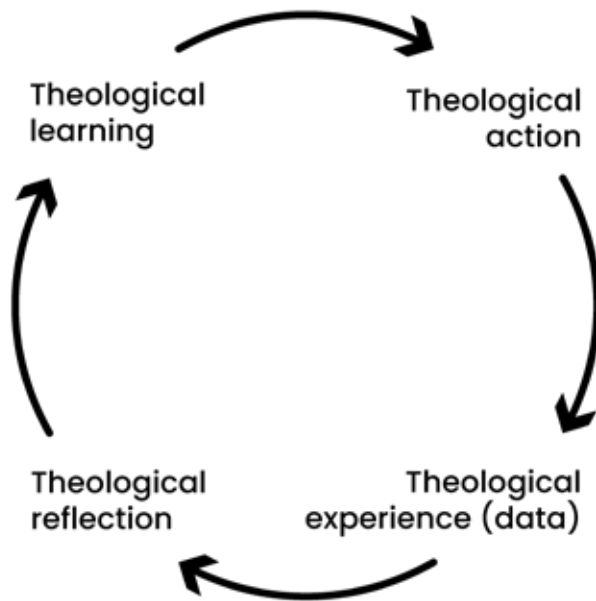


Diagram 1: The recursive nature of health and social care

This research took us into three areas, all of which are covered in this book:

- 1 How to think about mortality in the light of the gospel;
- 2 How to talk well about mortality and prepare for our own death;
- 3 How to live the whole of life well in the light of our mortality.

But before getting started on them, it is important to pause and consider some guidelines for good practice in this area.

Jesus' death was uniquely sacrificial in the sense that it was life-giving for all humanity. He understood it to be the culmination of his mission (John 19:30). He reflected that a grain of wheat falls into the earth in order to bear much fruit (John 12:24). Death and dying are seen to be about creation and re-creation.

As followers of Jesus, we join in that creative and life-giving work through lives marked by sacrifice and praise, and through it we participate in his glorious resurrection.

To follow Jesus is to approach our living and dying as creative acts that bring fullness of life to ourselves and others, to be aware of the time when possessions, agency and treasured relationships are to be let go and to trust the ultimate goodness of God. Our deaths do not need to be heroic; we do not need to be strong; we can cry out to God in pain and distress, and we can be sure that he is with us.

The importance of the last days

Christianity began its life as a renewal movement within Judaism and, crucially, was based on the conviction that a new age was dawning, that the world was standing at a threshold that marked a flip between the existing political status quo and a new inverted and subversive reality (the 'kingdom of God'). The gospels only mention three older adults – Zachariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1) and Anna (Luke 2) – carefully positioned before the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry, as if marking the transition from an obsolete generation. Much of Jesus' conflict with the authorities is an intergenerational conflict between an up-and-coming young man and the establishment of elders.

Yet Zechariah, Elizabeth and Anna themselves subvert expectations about older adults: Luke presents all three as looking eagerly towards the future, sitting lightly to the past, rather than as repositories of wisdom based on previous life experience. This is also true of Simeon (who is often assumed to be an older person). They are all liminal people who respond to the next generation in hope rather than fear.

In Acts, Luke returns to this theme and, quoting the prophet Joel, indicates a special place for older adults as the new age dawns:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

ACTS 2:17 (SEE ALSO JOEL 2:28)

The phrase 'the last days' refers to historical ages, but it can also be creatively read in relation to the end of life. This means that people in their last days on this earth may have the potential to be 'eschatological visionaries' poised on the threshold between this life and a life to come, this earth and a heavenly home (Hebrews 11:14).

To put it another way, we might consider the last days as a ‘thin place’⁶ or a mountain top that affords new vistas, as yet hidden over the horizon from the young, fit and well. The phrase ‘over the hill’ can thus be read in a positive light, inviting the question of what might be learnt if attention were paid to the stories such visionaries might have to tell.

This means that the church may have much to learn from those who are living in their last days, whether they are old or young. Working with those who are close to death will then involve receiving from them as much as giving to them.

It also means that the lessons learned in the last days need to become integrated into the whole lifespan of faith, so that people of all ages and stages of faith can learn to live well in the light of mortality. For example, BRF Ministries has produced Messy Church resources for young and old to begin to talk about death together (find out more at brfonline.org.uk/seriouslymessy).

Talking about mortality

Principles

Our work on enabling people to talk about death and dying is based on some fundamental principles that have emerged from our research:

People should be met where they are. This means taking their beliefs and concerns seriously by listening attentively to them and expecting to learn something. It means bringing God's story into conversation with their story rather than telling people all the answers.

Practice should be positive. Our practice in this area should be effective and not be harmful. We believe in reflecting on our work and, as far as is possible, developing evidence-based practice.

Reflecting on death is for everyone. People of all ages and states of health, not just those who are frail or terminally ill, should be encouraged to consider their mortality and engage with Christian teaching on the resurrection. We see this as an issue of discipleship.

We need to receive the wisdom of 'the last days'. The final phases of life for both old and young can be places of potential learning, growth and prophetic vision from which others can learn. This means gathering stories, documenting insights and encouraging creative expression – receiving wisdom, not just giving pastoral care.

- newspaper to cover tables
- kitchen roll for spills/hands
- scissors
- magazines for collage
- music set-up?

- 7 Do you have the names and contact details of participants held in compliance with the current Data Protection Act in case there are things you need to follow up with people after the workshop?
- 8 Is there a named person that people can contact for pastoral support? Do people know who they can contact and how to do so?

Detailed workshop content

1 Welcome

Suggested text for introducing the workshop:

We're surrounded by images of death and dying in the media and the Christian tradition has at its centre the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ and the meanings that his friends and disciples have brought to those events down the centuries. Yet people rarely have opportunity to come together to reflect on their own living and dying and on the fact that every one of us will have to do our own dying at some point. Although this workshop offers some resources and stories of the meanings that writers and artists have brought to the ultimate question of what death and life means, it's meant to be an opportunity for you to reflect on what it means for yourself – and that might be very different from what it means to others past and present.

This is an opportunity to ask yourself some of the questions that the fact of our mortality poses to each one of us: what do I really believe? What does death and dying mean for how I live my life or want to live my life? What really matters, in the end? Of course, it may be that, as for many if not most of us, there are a lot of things you don't know, questions that have no immediate answers and that just have to be lived.

The workshop is designed to provide you with resources that we hope may help and inspire you in this reflective process but the important thing is to listen to yourself – not to who you think you should be, but to who you authentically are, maybe with many doubts, fears and anxieties – and to accept where you are with things as the only place to be.

It may be that for you, the workshop will be an exploration and that it is only as you start to do something, to make a mark on a piece of paper or choose a colour, that you can begin to know the truth of things for yourself.

The important thing to know is that anything you express in whatever way is valuable and will be valued as unique to you; it is not about being 'good' at anything. It is also important to know that confidentiality will be taken seriously; everyone's confidence will be honoured and we will treat each other and the contributions we make with respect.

Any creative work that people produce will be treated with the same respect and degree of confidentiality as anything that is spoken or written. You are welcome to take your work home with you. If you don't want to do that, we will destroy it once the workshop has finished. We won't share it with anyone without asking your permission.

The structure is simple: after a short introduction we will listen to a song. This will be followed by time for reflection and discussion about what you have encountered before a short break. After the break, we'll have time to engage in some creative work before we share our responses together.

2 Reflection

You can begin the reflection with words like these:

The Christian tradition teaches that in his life, death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated 'the end times'. This is a phrase usually associated with the eschaton – the time when the current age ends, the new age begins and the values of earth give way to the values of heaven. Yet, in our busy, daily lives it is not easy to keep sight of this; most of the time, it feels as though the days, weeks and months will just keep on rolling by. However, as death comes closer through illness, loss, tragedy or the ageing process, we all enter our own 'end times'; we approach the threshold of eternity and this may focus our minds and hearts on the question of how to live well in this period of our lives.

All the great spiritual and religious traditions recognise the importance of paying attention to the fact that we are mortal and will die. St Benedict, for example, advised his monks to keep death always before their eyes. Why? What is to be gained by keeping in mind our own mortality?

Deep inside each one of us, there is a place where we know we will die. Paradoxically, it is this awareness that binds us to every other human being and pushes us not to be content with living on the surface of things and people but to enter the heart and depth of them. When we encounter death or loss, either our own or that of a loved one, we are presented with the essential questions:

Who am I?

What is my life for?

Have I loved well?

Have I truly lived/am I truly living the life that I have been given?

What is my legacy to this life?

What do I really believe?

What do I hope for at death and beyond?

These are big questions and life is so full for most of us that we rarely take time to stop and reflect on them in any depth.

Introduce and read the poem 'When Death Comes' by Mary Oliver.

('When Death Comes' can be found in *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press. There are also versions of it on the internet.)

Pause briefly to allow participants to appreciate the poem.

Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth century bishop, wrote in his book *Holy Dying* (1651) that, 'Dying is an art, and to be learned by men (sic) in health.' But how do we learn to die? Taking time today to think about death and dying and to let these kinds of questions question us is part of that learning. Becoming more deeply aware of our own mortality can enable us to find new richness and meaning in our lives, perhaps a re-ordering of our priorities, a deeper realisation of what really matters – and it is not usually the possession of material goods! Moreover, reflecting on our own living and dying brings us up against who we really are before God, beyond the self we usually project into the world.

So, we consciously encounter the great paradox that reflecting on our own mortality calls us back to focus on what it means for us to be fully alive. As St Irenaeus said in the second century, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

This workshop is an opportunity for us to respond to the awareness we hold together that we are 'living in the end times' and to use that as an opportunity to explore how to live well, how to be fully alive.

We can do that by asking ourselves some simple but profound questions:

Looking back what do I think my legacy will be? What have been the significant events, relationships and encounters that have made my story meaningful? What do I need to let go of from the past and what do I need to cherish and hold on to? What would I like my legacy to be?

What makes life precious, fulfilling and fruitful now?

What do I hope for at death and beyond?

Introduce and play the song 'For a Dancer' by Jackson Browne.

One man's reflection on the meaning of life in the light of the death of a loved one. (A version of this song is available on YouTube).

Follow with a short silence for reflection.

We'll now have a time of silence, to pause and reflect on your responses at this point. This gives people time to reflect and to feel their own responses to what they have encountered.

Invite the participants to talk to each other.

It can be done either in pairs or as a group. It gives an opportunity to discuss what has been encountered and what it has evoked. Give people the opportunity to carry on talking over tea and coffee.

3 Creative engagement

Invite participants to take part in one of several creative activities that are set out on different tables in the space.

Creating wisdom legacy cards. Write on a card something learned through life that a person would like to pass on to others, their own wisdom legacy or something from scripture that is important to them.

Collage. Use the materials to create a picture of your feelings about life and death.

Art. Draw or paint a picture in response to what you have heard.

Theological reflection. Offer a set of reflection cards, available to purchase from brfonline.org.uk/death-and-life-cards.

4 Sharing

Invite the participants to share with the group some of their creative expressions and reflections.

5 Drawing the threads together

Articulate the main questions, themes, insight and concerns that have been voiced.

6 Prayer

End with a prayer, if appropriate.



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*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have died.*

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20

As a society we aren't good at talking about death, and as individuals we may try and avoid thinking about it. But death is part of life, and we must all face it eventually. For Christians, dying and death are not the end but a transition point in a story that continues. Reflecting well on our own mortality can help us to make peace with the prospect of death and to live more fully in the here and now.

This research-based book includes all you need to plan and deliver a course enabling people – old or young, healthy or frail – to prepare practically, emotionally and spiritually for their last months on this earth. The course covers six topics:

- Legal practicalities
- Life stories
- Funeral planning
- Physical aspects of dying
- Spiritual aspects of dying
- The life to come



It also offers a range of materials on the theme of living well in the light of mortality: a creative workshop, sermon starters, Bible studies, meditations, and a set of prayer stations which combine to form a prayer walk.

**'It made me realise that we need to go deeper.
We need to build supporting people into the life of the church,
more so than just when they're bereaved or terminally ill.'**

**'You have most lovingly and effectively removed
my underlying fear of dying.'**



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