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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Same but Different: The Perceptions of Faith-Based Funeral Providers in a Pandemic

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Media reports, academic research and anecdotal evidence detail the changes in dying, death and funerals since the COVID-19 pandemic commenced in late 2019. We could find no evidence of the experiences of faith-based celebrants in regard to funerals they had conducted.

**Method:** Forty-eight funeral celebrants from six Christian denominations plus members of Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish faiths, predominantly based in Victoria Australia were interviewed individually by video conference or phone. The researchers separately analysed all transcripts before reviewing the themes together. The results are informed by a discussion of the anthropology of religious rituals and the term 'pararitual' is introduced for those performative aspects which "complement the formal liturgy".

**Results:** The participants reported that formal faith-based rituals had only changed subtly, though the almost universal use of live-streaming meant that respondents had to interact with those on-line plus the congregation. They reported much greater changes in the pararituals, especially in the absence of a post funeral gathering and were concerned that these absences might impact the grieving processes of the bereaved.

**Conclusion:** Although the rituals of faith-based funerals were not found to have changed significantly the participants considered that there would be ongoing changes in funerals after the pandemic including live-streaming, minimal rituals or even none. The impact of such changes remains to be seen in both personal and community expressions of grief.

**Keywords:** Funerals, faith-based, ritual, pararitual, COVID-19, wakes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research on Pandemic Funeral Practices

As the COVID-19 pandemic developed and lockdowns affected funerals our academic interest in the religious rituals around death encouraged us to explore faith-based celebrants' perceptions of funerals conducted in the strict COVID-19 regulations in Victoria. We became aware that there were no reports in the academic press, mainstream media or social media on the experiences of the members of faith communities who conducted funerals during lockdowns. For this paper we consider a religious funeral to be one where the body was present<sup>1</sup> and that the funeral was conducted by a person of religious faith qualified to conduct funerals. There were reports of the changes noticed by secular funeral celebrants<sup>2</sup> and reports of the disruption of religious services by the pandemic<sup>3</sup> as well as a report on the concerns of the bereaved who were unable to use sacred spaces for funerals or mourning due to the closures of churches, temples, mosques and synagogues<sup>4</sup>. Other research considered the perspective of the bereaved in relation to religious funerals "the unprecedented disruption of cultural and religious rituals that provide many mourners with a supportive cultural context"<sup>5</sup>. Several articles and documents provided information on the practices that were set up for religious services and funerals in COVID-19 situations<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>. Interviews conducted in the UK by Simpson and colleagues included representatives of religious groups. Questioned about their communities' experiences of deaths due to COVID-19, community leaders, including faith celebrants said they were willing to change their practices to meet the health requirements of the pandemic<sup>10</sup>.

Australian research discussed the mandating of small numbers of mourners at funerals, plus the issues of funeral directors and mortuary staff being required to attend work as essential workers but did not include the experiences of any faith based funeral celebrants<sup>11</sup>. Several papers reported on

the direct transfer of the dead, especially those who had died of COVID-19, to a cemetery or crematorium, often without the family being aware until after the disposal of the body<sup>12,13,14</sup>. In contrast Muturi and other Canadian researchers explored the benefits and disadvantages of conducting funerals wholly online from the perspective of possible mourners<sup>15</sup> while McNeil and colleagues reviewed the literature on the use of virtual funerals<sup>4</sup>. Frisby, a historian of funerary practices, suggests that COVID-19 related changes in funerals simply represent the latest variations of 'human resilience and creativity'<sup>16</sup>. Articles in weekly magazines provided commentaries about the grief of those who were unable to attend a loved one's funeral plus reflections on the benefit of a proper (i.e. religious) funeral<sup>17,18</sup>. Gaisford's article praised the innovative practices of secular funeral directors in the COVID-19 crisis<sup>19</sup>. Social media posts discussed the grief suffered by those unable to attend funerals in person, however without comments about the rituals. Gould discussing the effects of COVID-19 on funerals, mentioned the efforts of families to ensure that the funerals were memorable without remarking on the celebrants' (faith-based or secular) perspectives<sup>20</sup>.

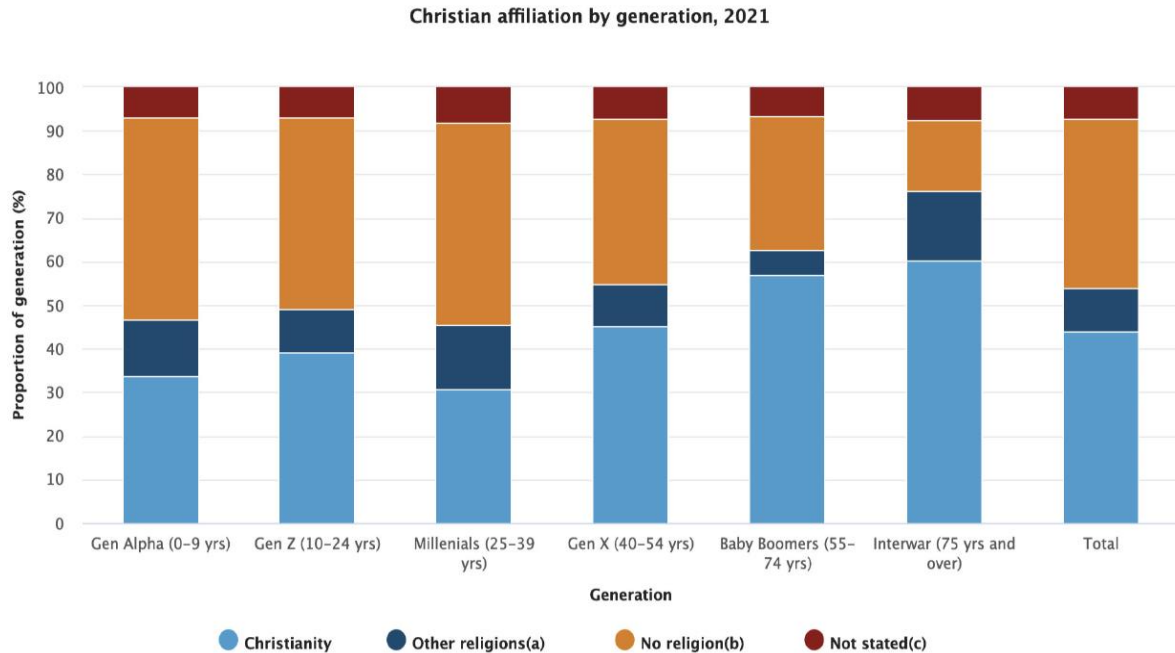
Research from Aotearoa/New Zealand discussed the effect of the Covid-19 lockdowns on the funeral practices of the Samoan community there, a mixture of grief for the lack of ability to perform the expected actions mixed with some relief at a lessening of expense and travel for those involved<sup>21</sup>. Other research describes the family members' distress at the lack of their ability to perform the usual domestic rituals of dressing the body and siting a wake with the deceased at home before burial, these were particularly mentioned from Spain, the Philippines and Ireland<sup>22</sup>.

### 1.2 Religion in Australia

The proportion of Australians who profess a religious faith has changed from 88.2% Christian and 0.8% no religion in 1966, to 43.9 % Christian and 38.9% no religion in 2021<sup>23</sup>.

Religion	Percentage
Christian	43.9
No religion	38.9
Islam	3.2
Hinduism	2.7
Buddhism	2.4

**Table 1** Religious Beliefs in Australia from 2021 Census. Australian Bureau of Statistics



a. Comprises Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Other Religions.  
b. Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation.  
c. Comprises religion not stated or inadequately described.  
Source: Religious affiliation (REL), Age (AGEP).

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Religious affiliation in Australia 4/07/2022

**Figure 1** Christian Affiliation by Generation. Census 2021

Figure 1 shows people aged over 75 were more likely to report they were Christian. This fact combined with the average age of death in Australia (pre COVID-19 ) of 82 means that the funerals of older people are often faith-based even when younger family members organising the funeral do not profess a personal faith. Also this lifespan means that “many people do not experience the death of a close relative or friend until their elderly parents die” which has implications for their expectations of funeral rituals and grief<sup>24</sup>.

### 1.3 Funerals and Disposal in Australia

Australia is a multicultural nation where more than half of the current population were either born overseas themselves or whose parents were<sup>25</sup>. Many of the older migrants come from the United Kingdom with religious backgrounds similar to the dominant Anglo-Celt group in Australia. The funeral traditions of the Anglo-Celt group developed from those imported by the early British settlers and are often church based<sup>26</sup>. Australian funeral practices have been modified since the arrival in the late 1950s of large numbers of southern European migrants from Catholic and Orthodox Christian backgrounds whose cultural traditions include more demonstrative expressions of grief<sup>24</sup>. More recent migrants from South and Southeast Asia, the Middle

East and Africa have brought their predominantly non-Christian religious beliefs and practices: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Like previous migrants they have adapted their cultural practices to the Australian environment, while maintaining their rituals<sup>26</sup>. An example of the changes in funeral practice across cultures and time is the washing and dressing of a body after death. Usually now performed by funeral service providers, within the authors’ living memory it was the norm for rural Anglo-Celts and is still performed by Muslims and older Southern European Christians.

Until the late nineteenth century disposals in Australia were burials, initially in-ground with some twentieth century mausolea. Cremations, introduced in 1890 for hygiene reasons, were a very small percentage of all disposals until the mid-twentieth century<sup>27</sup>. They now account for 69.23% of disposals of bodies after death<sup>28</sup>. A South Australian study demonstrated a 28% increase in cremation in the twenty years to 2010 without providing any explanation for the change<sup>29</sup>. Death certificates were modified to include cremation certification during the early 2000s in Victoria as a marker of this change. Exceptions to the increasing preference for cremation occur in those who practise Islam or Judaism as well as those from regional areas where there are fewer crematoria and land for burial is readily available.

Increasingly over recent years cremation occurs without mourners, especially if there has been a church funeral service. This may be to ensure that funerals are carried out 'with as little fuss and as economically as possible' or the desire of the family to spend informal time with family and friends immediately after the ritual, or because the family care more about the time spent with the deceased before death<sup>30,31</sup>.

The traditional faith-based funeral includes a religious service followed by a graveside committal. As well as in churches religious funeral rituals are also held in chapels, in funeral homes and crematoria, or at the grave site in a cemetery. Some Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians also attend a vigil service on the evening prior to the funeral<sup>32</sup>.

After most funerals (both religious and secular) there is a gathering of family and mourners, often called a wake, either directly after the service or after the disposal of the body. Food and alcohol are commonly provided and there may be speeches about the deceased. These events provide a time and place for the mourners to grieve publicly, celebrate the life of the deceased and meet other people in the deceased's life.

#### 1.4 COVID-19 Experience in Australia in 2020

The impact of COVID-19 in 2020 in Australia was minimal compared to many other countries. The worst outbreak occurred in Melbourne where there were 20,000 cases and just over 800 deaths over a period of several weeks from June. However the rise in case numbers led to Victoria being placed in lockdown March 30 to May 12, 2020 (43 days) and then July 8 to October 27, 2020 (111 days). The lockdowns closed schools and religious buildings, placed severe restrictions on visiting people in hospital or aged care residences, encouraged people to work from home, and mandated those with a positive Covid-19 test to isolate at home. There were also bans on travel between Australia and the rest of the world and variable bans on travel between Australian states. During these lockdowns in Victoria only 10 people were allowed to attend funerals and this was subject to social distancing and mandatory mask-wearing. Similar measures were also introduced for most other Australian states. Because all states had different rules there were periods when state borders closed so abruptly that people were unable to attend a funeral or even to return home from one they had attended.

## 2. RITUAL and PARARITUAL

The interviewees' experiences of conducting funerals in the initial Australian COVID-19 lockdown revealed that the *actions* performed both during the funeral and especially afterwards were the most meaningful ones for the celebrants and the bereaved. In many cases, interviewees also reported that the *absence* of certain customary acts and activities was equally meaningful. The findings led us to two theoretical approaches. First, we found parallels in the actions mentioned by the respondents in studies of pararituals that emerged in the medieval period. The medievalist Roberta Gilchrist formulated the term pararitual to describe the activities and actions that medieval *lay* people performed to express fundamental beliefs. Having defined pararitual behaviour as 'material practices which complemented the formal liturgy,' Gilchrist instances such examples of actions as processions or the dressing of statues<sup>33</sup>. Whereas specialists perform rituals, lay people devise pararituals, often unconsciously, and these activities may prove more consoling than the formal rubrics or rituals. In this research our approach focusses particularly on 'what people were doing' more than on the meanings of the actions for the interviewees<sup>34</sup>. In regard to the rituals Van Genep's model describes rituals accompanying major biological or social changes<sup>35</sup>. He postulated that such rituals display a tripartite structure of separation, transition and reintegration. In a funeral the transition occurs during the funeral and burial followed by reintegration involving griefwork which enables the bereaved to re-connect to society. However Van Genep's theory does not explore specific historical situations. The more recent development of practice-based ritual theory examines particular actions performed in a specific social context. Exploiting Pierre Bourdieu's<sup>36</sup> insights, Catherine Bell emphasises the practical or instrumental 'logic' of a variety of human activities<sup>37</sup>. Practice-based theory moves away from a focus on abstract logic to particular ways in which activities generate meanings for people. Unlike those who argue that the efficacy of ritual derives from formal features practice-based theory argues that the act itself provides meaning for the participants<sup>36</sup>. Many of the respondents reported having experienced just such an emergence of meaning during and after the funerals they had conducted.

## 3 METHOD

We used individual video or phone interviews. As a basis for the project and its analysis, we used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because the researchers come to the project without any preconceived notions about the possible

findings<sup>38</sup>. Neither of us had personal experiences of funerals nor had we discussed them with faith-based celebrants at this time, so we had no preconceptions about changes in faith-based funerals conducted during this COVID-19 lockdown. In an interview set based on IPA the interviewer approaches the participants using a curious and facilitative approach, asking open questions and allowing the responses to drive the questions. IPA captures the personal experience of each participant (phenomenology) and considers the meaning of these experiences (hermeneutics). Because there are no preconceptions the researchers develop the codes and themes inductively from the data. Using this approach allowed us to get first person accounts of great richness from the interviewees.

### 3.1 Recruitment

The participants were recruited by various methods; notices on the University of Divinity alumni page, emails to members of the Spiritual Health Association, personal contacts, contacts provided by academic colleagues, and snowballing.

### 3.2 Interviews and analysis

The interviews were semi-structured: commencing with an open question asking the participants to describe or discuss any funerals they had conducted in lockdown. They were then asked how they felt about these funerals. The final two questions asked about any differences they had observed in these funerals compared to ones they had conducted

prior to COVID-19, and their opinions about what changes might continue after the pandemic. The interviews were conducted by video conference or telephone with each researcher interviewing individual participants, except for one interview of two participants. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional third-party transcription service. The transcripts were read several times by each author and coded separately. The researchers then compared each code and discussed them until reaching a consensus about themes.

### 3.3 Participants

Although we tried various methods to contact members of all faiths who had conducted funerals in this period, most of the respondents came from mainstream Christian denominations. One participant, suggested by a faith group member as another member of that faith, chose to identify as a secular funeral celebrant. There were more men than women, partly explained by the large number of Catholic priests. Most of the funerals were conducted in Melbourne, with small numbers in urban Tasmania and regional Victoria and New South Wales. The number of funerals conducted by individual participants in the period of the study ranged from 1 to 35, though the great majority conducted less than 5. Most of the deceased were older people, and the majority of funerals were for people who had died of other causes than COVID-19.

Religion	Gender	Funeral Locations
Catholic	15 M 1F	Melbourne
Uniting Church of Australia	3 M 6 F	Melbourne, regional Victoria & regional NSW
Anglican	5 M 6 F	Melbourne, Tasmania & regional Victoria
Salvation Army	3 M	Melbourne & regional Victoria
Baptist	2 M 1 F	Melbourne & regional Victoria
Macedonian Orthodox	1 M	Melbourne
Buddhist	1 M 1 F	Melbourne
Hindu	1 M	Melbourne
Jewish	1 M	Melbourne
Secular	1 M	Melbourne

**Table 2** Participants

## 4 RESULTS

The religious rituals the participants described were predominantly those of the mainstream Christian churches in Australia as well as Orthodox Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Respondents reported that

because fewer Christian funeral services took place in churches, which during the first lockdown were locked tight, the ceremonies had to take place at the funeral provider's chapel or else at the graveside. There were also reports of families

deciding not to have a funeral at the time of the death but intending instead to hold a church memorial later, when it would be possible for a 'proper' congregation to attend. Participants, including respondent 28, mentioned that sometimes the bodies of the deceased were taken straight from an aged care home to a crematorium with no funeral service, either religious or secular: "people ring the funeral director and say, can you deal with the body, full stop." This occurred particularly at the start of COVID-19 period when people believed that if the deceased had died from COVID-19 the body must be cremated. Given that the 'relationships between the living and the dead have been the subject of scholarly conversations throughout the twentieth century'<sup>39</sup> several participants considered that to omit all ceremony might well lead to difficult grieving later: it was 'much easier for the family but much worse for the long-term emotional process' (respondent 41). The participants provided very reflective and reflexive discussions of the changes in the rituals and pararituals they had noticed, several commenting that the interview had helped them become more aware of their reactions to their own and others' actions during the services and to their own feelings about COVID-19 funerals. Several, including respondent 4, noted that when the regulations were first announced 'it was all very new' and 'everyone was looking to me a little bit as to "where do we go from here".'

#### 4.1.1 Changes in Christian Rituals

Most faith-based practitioners interviewed tended to report that formal liturgies remained predominantly the same as before COVID-19. However, what emerged from the interviews was the changes some participants observed in their own reactions and sense of identity as a pastor because of the regulations imposed by the government around social distancing and hygiene. A minister spoke of the personal comfort he derived from his role in helping a grieving family plan a funeral liturgy that had to be adapted to meet the pastoral and spiritual needs of the family. For many interviewees, COVID-19 changed ministers' role from that of support and facilitator to one of regulator and 'policeman.' As respondent 26 noted: one of the funeral directors I work with a lot, ...he's now saying no to families all the time...all of a sudden we're the rule enforcers... and that's really hard.

Overall, the liturgy kept its formal character. Often respondents sensed a family's decision to hold a graveside service resulted from pragmatism due to restrictions on mourners. In country areas the

complications of state border checks, as respondent 24 mentioned, influenced the liturgy a family opted for 'the graveside service was in the open, more people can attend. A funeral in one town, and the burial in another over the border.' Respondents' reflections on these 'pared down' services suggest a desire for a more austere ritual where often mourners were restricted to 20 at graveside committals or 10 at services held in churches or funeral homes. Several respondents tended to associate a 'simplified' service with an underlying emotional experience of an absence of connection with a wider social circle of extended family and friends of the deceased which was not simply a result of lack of numbers, although this was certainly a factor. Respondent 4 noted that the requirement to observe social-distancing which perforce excluded physical gestures of consolation and comfort was associated with a perception that in addition to the formal structure of the liturgy the informal language of gesture within the service impacted mourners' and ministers' experience of the liturgy:

[the] ritual itself isn't different...but I think there's this reticence, maybe the word I might use...it's so strange [people] sitting apart.... People were happy the ritual remains the same.... even though the setting is so different.

This desire for a 'simplified' service might also express a hope noted early on in the pandemic by respondent 26

proper, funeral service would be held later... feeling people want to simplify things .... and then when all this COVID thing is over, we'll have a proper funeral.

Some people in respondent 26's experience successfully negotiated a desire for the structure of a formal service while also adapting to the sudden changes imposed by changes in regulations: 'Some families are looking for more direction....they know the framework. Now it's ok...we felt like the sands are shifting and how do we do this?' Another minister negotiated with a mourner to celebrate a liturgy with the mourner as sole member of the congregation. While respondent 38 was apprehensive about the liturgical and pastoral impact of the service she noted:

She [the mourner] wanted a full service.... the traditional Anglican service. It was such an intimate service...it was really, really lovely...[the service] was challenging....yet it was still a prayer book service. You know with softness built-in.

Respondents overwhelmingly identified the rapid uptake of live-streaming and recording of services as a major adaptation stimulated by COVID-19. Largely, respondents experienced the impact of live-streaming in terms of becoming much more conscious of how they engaged with a remote congregation. The necessity of live-streaming prompted respondent 26 to change formal elements of the funeral service: 'finding new words and new ways of introducing funerals and beginning [with] a wish to include physical and virtual congregation.' The need for the celebrant to engage directly with the camera caused several to focus consciously on addressing the congregation, whether present physically or remotely, rather than emphasizing the words or the mandated gestures. As respondent 31 expressed it,

also being very careful to make sure that I was looking down the barrel of the camera regularly because I think ...really, really important step to make sure there was an inclusion visually as well.

Music, especially congregational singing, features in Christian funeral services across denominations. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown this familiar and reassuring expression of faith disappeared from all services. As transmission of the virus occurs through air-borne particles, community singing indoors joined the list of prohibited activities. It was only during a funeral that one celebrant realised the small congregation's hymn-singing was not permitted. Respondent 32 identified the absence of singing as a major change – 'no hymns a big difference.' Respondent 30 experienced the lack of hymn singing as a diminishment of the role of the congregation in the liturgy; '[the] ban on singing prevented people from participating.' Respondent 26 suggested that for regular church-goers who actively took part in the liturgical life of a congregation, being unable to sing as a member of a church choir conflicted with their habitual experiences; 'for regular church goers not singing is a change...big change if you have always been a member of a choir.'

Respondents often raised the significant impact of the restrictions on touching and the enforcement of social-distancing. Without exception, they expressed the lack of physical contact as among the most challenging changes to their liturgical and pastoral care of the dead and bereaved. For respondent 36 in an inner-city congregation not being able to sing dramatized the impact of a lack of sensory engagement on worship. Together with the absence of other physical reminders of embodiment, it was above all the lack of singing that prompted her to lament all that was missing,

'but not in the ways that we would normally, so with a hug or that kind of thing ...the actual ways we do this.'

How respondents characterised the effect of COVID-19 on funeral liturgies emphasises, as we noted previously, that by and large the structure and order of the funeral service did not change. Several respondents commented that the familiar order of the service provided the comfort and reassurance that ritual offers. Indeed as theorists of ritual explain, the stable, predictable character of ritual establishes order in the midst of the disruptive impact of death upon the life of the bereaved and their community<sup>40,41</sup>. Only three respondents reported significant changes to either the content or structure of the funeral liturgy within the COVID-19 lockdown. Respondent 35, a Catholic priest, reflected on his motivation for making significant adaptations. In his account of changing the liturgy by substituting the coffin for the altar table he notes that sensitivity to the particular pastoral context guided his innovation. He explained:

I felt comfortable enough with them just to take the bread and wine down and put them on the casket and use the casket as the table, because they were initiated enough to feel very comfortable.

#### 4.1.2 Changes in Jewish Practices

The interviews with faith-practitioners of non-Christian religions helped highlight the ways in which culture as much as religious attitudes shaped faith adherents' experience of the rituals around death and dying. Respondent 2, a Rabbi observed about his practice: 'there's the social element and there's a spiritual element' stressing that the physical presence of a faith community in the ritual enabled it to be efficacious. By participating in the ritual events the mourner's presence not only showed respect for the deceased, but also expressed solidarity and support for the bereaved<sup>42</sup>. The rabbi recounted how at the end of a normal funeral the departing family are surrounded by groups of men and women, which he likened to giving the family a big group hug. The cyclical nature of Jewish funeral rituals creates therapeutic pathways for the bereaved to negotiate grief and then to resume living. In COVID-19 families had to abandon the ritual of 'sitting Shiva,' where family immerse themselves in grieving, remain indoors and avoid their usual routines being supported by friends and family for seven days. Respondent 2 manifested anguish when he had to explain to a grieving family that they would have to forego this:

You're missing these institutionalised rituals that have been around for arguably, thousands of years, which you've been doing your whole life to other people, and they're not being reciprocated.

#### 4.1.3 Changes in Buddhist Practices

Interviews with Buddhist practitioners revealed that a Buddhist funeral exists more as a cultural than a religious ritual. Variations across the different traditions make it difficult or even impossible to speak of a normative 'Buddhist funeral.' Respondents suggested the ritual giving of gifts of food and water to Buddhist monks before the cremation or burial of the deceased could be seen as the 'funeral.' The preparation for death and a funeral depends on the specific Buddhist tradition of the person in question. The Tibetan tradition requires the Lama to perform the ritual of touch on the person as soon as possible after they have died but within six hours. This was prevented in almost all cases by COVID-19. For the families of the deceased the absence of this ritual for a loved one was very traumatic. Grief becomes compounded by layers of complex emotional responses to the absence of this ritual. Respondent 44 explains:

'Almost all the different kinds of grief, the disenfranchisement...because they weren't able to do that, that means that their (the deceased's) reincarnation is going to be affected.'

From a pastoral perspective one of the respondents compared the disruptive impact on funerary rituals caused by COVID-19 to that experienced in natural disasters such as bushfires or tsunamis. The ritual acts of generosity done by the family after a death both support the monks of the family's 'monastery' and lessen the negative impact of the deceased's karma on the 'best rebirth possible' Crucially, these actions which cause a transfer of merit to the departed do not require a person to be physically present at the disposal.

#### 4.4 Changes in Pararituals

All the participants reported they had observed changes in the activities that family members or other bereaved people would commonly perform in addition to the faith-based funeral rubrics. These changes in pararituals were often the most memorable features for the respondents, especially noticed when expected activities did not occur or were severely constrained. Our analysis shows three sets of activities which were impacted; those related to physical contact with the body or the coffin, eulogies performed in conjunction with the funeral rites, and ones related to the bereaved

persons' need to connect to their family and community after the funeral or disposal of the body.

##### 4.4.1 Touching the body or coffin

The main family interactions with the deceased before the funeral were washing, dressing or touching the body. Respondent 7 spoke for several others in discussing how the handling of bodies after death, whether from COVID-19 or not, had to be performed by funeral providers with bodies put in body bags which were not to be opened 'the bodies are in body bags, and it is no longer allowed to have open coffins.' Respondent 9 saw the inability of the bereaved to attend to these actions as a major break with tradition which caused distress 'families can't even dress the person for the funeral. And now you are not able to do that. It is killing the people.' While respondent 16 noted how the inability to touch the deceased removed an important element of the whole funeral for the family 'prior to the funeral they didn't even know if they could have a viewing, but they could with the body being in an open casket- open coffin- but covered in Perspex. So they weren't able to touch her.' For many Christian Southern European immigrant groups and for Hindus it is normal for the coffin to be open during the service and for family members to place flowers on the deceased's body or touch the face or hands. Several participants who mentioned the inability of family members to perform these actions were concerned for the welfare of the mourners banned from performing normal actions. Some respondents reported that mourners were not able to touch the coffin during the service while others reported that family members touched the coffin as they moved around the chapel to perform a reading or a eulogy. The importance of being able to touch the coffin was mentioned by respondent 33 who said she touched the coffin because 'that's where I've learned over the years to touch the coffin....to show that the deceased is part of us, that we're together.' Finally, carrying the coffin out was also banned, coffins were wheeled out by the undertakers. Respondent 27, who provided this response recognised the collision of symbols in the family's inability to perform a final action for a loved person by likening transporting the coffin to a mundane daily event rather than a final sacred activity for the family 'this business where no one is allowed to carry out a coffin now, it's got to be wheeled out like a supermarket trolley, I can't bear it.'

##### 4.4.2 Eulogies.

Eulogies given by family members were the norm in almost all the Christian services. The participants provided great insights into the eulogies at these



'quite intimate' services. Many reported people who would not usually have spoken were less constrained, especially if the funeral was not live streamed: (respondent 22)

Greater freedom for, if you like, a shared eulogy where people in front of 10 people would be willing to say some things, whereas they might not if it was a larger group. (respondent 25)

I encouraged people to do it this way, to say look, just whoever would like to say something and that actually worked beautifully.

Others reported that in streamed funerals the eulogies were more standard, presenting all of the deceased's life.

#### 4.4.3 Wakes or Gatherings

The greatest change in the pararituals was the ban on any gathering after the funeral. While the lack of a wake was particularly commented on by the Catholic priests it was also noted by members of all the Christian denominations. Respondent 16 reflected: 'What's the normal thing after a funeral? You get together, you talk, you cry, you drink,' and Respondent 20: 'the time spent together telling the stories.' Family and friends missed telling stories about the deceased. Respondents particularly noted that family, friends, neighbours, and workmates could not share with bereaved family members and with each other:

people were like lost sheep because they couldn't all go back to one place (respondent 35),

refreshments between the church and the cemetery.... soften the blow a bit on families (respondent 18)

you're not allowed to express your grief in the way you normally would, because you can't touch, hold, embrace (respondent 22)

Several including respondent 16 specifically mentioned the problems that they noticed because people weren't allowed to touch, 'Even if you come from an Anglo-Saxon background, touch is important, and they're robbed of it at this time.' Wakes were mentioned by respondent 13 as the beginning of a healing process for the bereaved the lack of which might cause extra or prolonged grief, 'this farewell is unfinished.' Providing a wake was valuable pastorally plus a source of income for some congregations:

the catering for funerals is a major fundraiser because we do quite a few funerals in the year. So a huge change for them, feeling like that's their ministry area not being there. (Respondent 26)

The importance of these gatherings was acknowledged by participants who mentioned the quasi wakes that they observed, including some that seemed to be breaking rules. Examples included ones where the family stayed back in the church or the carpark to talk to each other, 'a wake without any refreshments in the car park' (respondent 17), another where the widow had provided 'little care packages, all standing at a distance from each other, but the grandchildren started to eat, so we all ate' (respondent 33). Several, including respondent 36, mentioned cups of tea and cakes at funeral homes, 'some of the chapels.... have got round it by saying it's part of the service.' Respondent 29 was concerned about the following event; 'standing on the road. Visitors and people that couldn't come to the funeral and they were just passing the food around and they were having a full picnic.' The most blatant breach occurred for respondent 23 who was told as he arrived to conduct the grave-side funeral: 'Oh we've ordered a food truck with coffee for afterwards.' His reaction was to leave immediately after the funeral.

#### 4.4.4 Respondents' Feelings about the Funerals

Many of the participants discussed the feelings of the bereaved rather than their own feelings, not surprising given that the participants were people whose daily activities centre around providing support to other people. When they did allow themselves to become reflexive and talk about their own feelings several of them, including respondent 32, mentioned that they had been bereaved themselves during this period and were able to both empathise more with the families and be aware of what comprised a 'good' funeral in COVID-19: 'what is going to be the best way to do these rites, not so much an emphasis on rites, but their pastoral effectiveness.' Many commented on the challenges they faced in planning and conducting these funerals, including respondent 33, 'I'm not sure whether the COVID funerals gave me a bigger challenge and responsibility because it was so intimate.' In general their perceptions about the funerals they had conducted ranged from the very best to the very worst they had ever conducted: '[it] was just dreadful' (respondent 14) to 'So it was a very beautiful experience actually (respondent 36).' Respondent 18 captured the feelings of many in commenting on the lack of interaction with the bereaved 'it's tending to get a little bit brutal in that you come to church, we have mass, we go to the cemetery and that's it and everybody disperses.' Though the overall impression was that almost all the funerals had witnessed moments of grace.

## 5. DISCUSSION

We devised and carried out this study because we could not find any other studies that analysed the experiences of faith-based funeral providers in COVID-19. The research and media responses to date have focused on the grief of those who could not attend their relatives' funerals, descriptions of changes in secular funerals, or the changes in the pararituals especially the wake, and the government expectations around the conduct of funerals, both religious and secular.

Using the IPA framework for the interview where each participant was asked four open questions about their experiences of funerals during COVID-19 lockdowns, the participants were encouraged to reflect on their lived experiences of organising and conducting funerals in this time. They provided deep reflections on the funerals they had conducted in COVID-19 lockdowns, focusing predominantly on their concerns for the bereaved rather than on any personal anxieties they may have felt about the very unusual situations in which they found themselves. They commented on their concerns when family members seemed uncomfortable, particularly when families had to make invidious choices about who could attend the ceremony.

Given the religious background of the current Australian population, it is to be expected that very many, possibly the majority, would choose a secular funeral service for themselves or their family member. However, the pandemic seems to have changed the dynamic considerably, by almost normalising the option of no funeral. This choice often seemed to be made by the deceased -- judging by the death notices in the local and national newspapers. There were also many death notices which showed that the choice of no funeral at the time of the death was made by the family who planned a celebration of the life of the deceased to be held at a time when all those who wished to be physically present for such an event could attend. This suggests that those family members recognised the benefits to the bereaved provided by a public gathering to mourn the deceased. Everyone could then join with those who had known the person well sharing reminiscences as well as sharing the sadness of the loss of the person<sup>48</sup>.

Although many people chose a secular funeral or none, many religious ceremonies were conducted during the pandemic, particularly after the period of our research. This was mainly because in the early phase of COVID-19 deaths there was an expectation that the dead should be either buried

quickly with minimal ritual ceremony or cremated without any ceremony<sup>11</sup>. These religious funerals were predominantly for older people which is consistent with the fact that older members of the society are more likely to practise a religious faith as shown in Figure 1. Even though the next generation may not have followed the faith practices of their parents, they would know that members of that generation would expect their funerals to be conducted in the religious rituals with which they had been familiar all their lives. It has been shown being part of a familiar funeral ritual helps the bereaved 'accept the reality of death and, perhaps more importantly gives the bereaved some structure during this chaotic period'<sup>43</sup>. The positive impact on the bereaved of participating in familiar rituals was born out by our participants. They commented that the bereaved expected the funeral rites would come from "the book" although they also mentioned that the mourners appreciated the softening of rituals that occurred in the much smaller congregations present for these COVID-19 funerals.

The disruptions to funeral rituals for the celebrants and the bereaved might be expected to have increased the inherent levels of stress in unpredictable ways. The participants' responses showed that they were very aware of possible stresses, predominantly those impinging on the bereaved but also on themselves. They described their ways of alleviating these stresses for the mourners and for themselves by modifying how they conducted funeral services. When describing their experiences of conducting funerals under the duress of the COVID-19 restrictions, the informants noted that it was neither the structure nor the perceived traditional aspects of funeral rituals that stimulated their reflections. Instead, it was the *actions* that unfolded within the funeral itself, both before and after the ritual, that interviewees found both meaningful for themselves and for the bereaved. In particular, they discovered new meanings that resulted from the *absence* of certain customary acts and activities particularly the wake. The impact on the bereaved of the absence of the wake, as reported by members of all the Christian denominations, shows that pararituals (those aspects of a funeral almost always performed by the laity which complement the rites) are often the aspects best remembered.

Almost all the respondents worried that the lack of the pararituals before and especially after the formal funeral were likely to trigger unresolved grief in the mourners. The discussions about the changes in wakes include both the traditional

viewing and sitting with the deceased before the funeral and the gathering of family and friends after the funeral<sup>22</sup>. Without a post funeral gathering, the study participants considered that the bereaved were unable to grieve together with family and friends and to acknowledge both their loss and the life of the deceased. They reckoned that the lack of these activities would harm the bereaved and might become a source of distress to them later.

Some recent research suggests that the grief of the bereaved who attended 'COVID funerals' may not in fact be worse than those who attended 'normal' funerals and that the bereaved in COVID-19 related situations actually demonstrated great resilience. This was particularly noticed when the bereaved had been involved in a personally meaningful ritual around the death of their family member or loved one<sup>4445</sup>. Other research suggests that there will be a lot of unresolved grief in the next few years for those whose family members or friends died of COVID-19 or during the pandemic lockdowns<sup>464748</sup>. There has not been enough time yet for these findings to be proved one way or another as there are still increased numbers of older people dying of COVID-19 in many countries, Australia included. Also the celebrations of life that were planned for a post pandemic world are only now occurring. It is known from earlier research on grief after bereavement that it is often more distressing and prolonged where the deaths were unexpected to the bereaved or were considered traumatic. Since many of the early deaths from COVID-19 were unexpected and some would have been considered traumatic by the bereaved then it may be that complicated grief will continue in this cohort in the years to come<sup>49</sup>.

The participants tried hard to devise ceremonies that would provide meaning and comfort for the bereaved, while maintaining the rituals with which they would be familiar. While the participants reported fewer changes in the rituals than in the pararituals, subtle and not so subtle modifications occurred in formal liturgies. These adaptations were introduced to meet the pastoral needs and expectations of the rituals for the bereaved within the lockdown regulations. Their reports of adapting the services by listening carefully to family members and encouraging them to participate demonstrated their awareness of the need for families to be involved. Evidence shows that 'the benefit of after-death rituals including funerals depends on the ability of the bereaved to shape those rituals'<sup>50</sup>. Many mentioned their concerns about their use of streaming services to maximise the involvement of

those watching, and the participants' knowledge that these filmed funerals would be watched later by other people.

The process of being interviewed assisted several participants to identify how their conduct of funerals met the pastoral needs of the bereaved in difficult circumstances. Several commented that this was the first time they had ever reflected on their own feelings rather than those of the bereaved. They acknowledged how the challenge of describing the funerals and their emotional responses helped them to process their experiences. Likewise those respondents who themselves had suffered a bereavement during this time remarked on how certain aspects of a funeral service they had attended had helped or hindered their own grieving. They commented that their answers to the questions had helped them to understand the pastoral needs of the people whose family funerals they were conducting. Thus the research may have helped the respondents to better understand not only the obstacles they faced but also to identify the solutions that they creatively evolved.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

This paper presents the responses of predominantly Christian funeral celebrants in three Australian states so the findings may not be generalisable to other countries or other religions. Although we used several approaches in recruiting participants, we were unable to interview any Muslim funeral celebrants and only small numbers of non-Christians. While the non-Christian funeral providers reported the same issues as the Christian ones, the small numbers may mean we have not captured this cohort in appropriate depth.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 abruptly changed centuries-old rituals and social customs around death and dying. The experience of the respondents showed that while formal liturgies still functioned even when abbreviated, the more informal gatherings over food and drink known as wakes were sorely missed. The absence of these communal celebrations of the deceased, traditionally abounding in story-telling and physical expressions of sympathy and support, aggravated the social isolation of the recently bereaved from family and community. Nevertheless, many celebrants reported creative and life-giving ways they modified rituals and encouraged appropriate pararituals to provide comfort to the bereaved.

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