

Lay Funeral Ministry

Last Summer, Edith Wills - who has been a Pastoral Assistant for 18 years at St Stephen's Tonbridge – was licensed as Rochester Diocese's first Licensed Lay Funeral Minister. 12 months on, I was keen to find out how Edith was finding this ministry, so I met with her and her Vicar, Mark Barker to ask them both to reflect on the year.

There was no doubt that Edith is really enjoying her role, she said:

“As a pastoral person this feels like a natural extension of pastoral ministry. It has been rewarding, encouraging and fulfilling. I've met some lovely people, experienced that not all of funerals are straightforward, and have had some very positive (and completely unexpected) spontaneous feedback.”



Lay Ministers conducting funerals is not unusual, and approximately 100 Readers and LLMs in Rochester Diocese have trained to conduct funerals, but Edith was the first person we have licensed specifically as a funeral minister.

Some of those 100 can be frustrated that they rarely get the opportunity to take funerals because “the vicar wants to do them all”, so I asked Mark Barker, Vicar of St Stephen's how he was finding the addition of a Lay Funeral Minister on his team, and he said:

“Edith has been fully involved in pastoral care over many years, both for people within the church and also in the community. Taking funerals is a natural progression from this and flows from her pastoral heart. It is therefore, a fitting and positive addition to Edith's ministry, and from my perspective wonderful, as she is gifted at such pastoral care, is sensitive to the needs of the bereaved, and it is a real help within the church to have another person trained and available to take funerals. It has been interesting to see how many of the funerals she has got involved in she has had a connection to having lived in Tonbridge for many years.”

Pastoral Assistants were not trained for preaching – so I asked how it had felt taking funerals where some sort of talk or sermon is required, but Edith has taken that in her stride – and has joined St Stephen's Preachers club. She is aware that (especially for non-church families) the message needs to be a simple one of encouragement, hope and compassion. I asked if Edith robes for funerals – she said she finds it's about half and half – robing and not robing. Sometimes she asks families which they would prefer, sometimes gauges it herself.

Edith reflected that a couple of years ago when she was manning the church office in a Summer Holiday time, there were no clergy around when funeral calls came in, and she felt really sad the church couldn't help. Edith says “This was an important factor in divining God's calling as it was at the same time parish clergy numbers halved... and 'coincided' with the email from the diocese asking if PA's would be interested in funeral ministry!” Now the church is better able to help because funerals are not dependent on clergy presence.

As a Lay Funeral Minister Edith also has the advantage of having more time to devote to a funeral than most clergy could manage – she often has several meetings with a family before the service and tries to maintain a link afterwards and follow them up. She has arranged the annual bereavement service at St Stephens for many years, and has made good links with the local Funeral Directors.

There are two more trained Lay Funeral Ministers soon to be licensed – both in the Tonbridge Deanery, but I'm sure there are other people in other deaneries who God is calling to this ministry. If you are already a Pastoral Assistant or an Evangelist, talk to your incumbent about whether they see your ministry developing in this way, then sign up for the next Bereavement and Funerals module.

If you are not currently an authorised minister but think this could be your calling – sign up for an “It's Your Calling” day and find out more.