

# MORE THAN A SHOP

When your number's up:  
it's time to talk about death

**Raegan Drew**

*Funeral Director, Co-op Funeralcare*

**The Reverend Kathleen**

**LaCamera Loughlin**

*Methodist minister, writer  
and film-maker*

**Also featuring:**

*Death Cafe*



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## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Hello and welcome to More Than a Shop, hosted by me Elizabeth Alker. We're welcoming guests with something new and radical to say about the big issues of the day. Well the flavour of the series is a search for new alternative ideas in the spirit of the worldwide co-operative movement, which happens to started in my hometown of Rochdale.

Well, co-ops proudly offer radical alternatives to mainstream ways of getting things done. They are indeed so much more than a shop.

Today we're looking at a subject that many people find difficult to talk about, but which, along with taxes, is famously the only thing we can bank on. And that's end of life, and more particularly how we might go about normalising the conversation around death, dying and improving support on this subject.

Of course, The Co-op has long involvement in this area and I'm delighted to be joined in the studio by Raegan Drew, who is a funeral director with Co-op Funeralcare. And I'm also joined by Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker, who has combined a prestigious career as a filmmaker – often looking at issues around death – with service as an ordained Methodist minister. Welcome to you both, hello!

So Kathleen, tell us a little bit about the films that you've made around laughter and death. They're so heart-warming, but funny as well.

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**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Actually, they came out of my work as a Chaplain in an acute hospital setting, at Bolton hospital. I was asked to be a part of something called Dying Matters Week and we were looking for ways to help people talk about death and dying and bereavement more easily. And because I was also a filmmaker and had been for many years, I said, "Why don't we get people who are living with the prospect of dying in the near future, to tell us how that feels? And to perhaps even tell us a joke about it?"

You know, initially, that idea was received with kind of ashen faces from some of the clinicians that I spoke to about this. But the hospice, in their wonderful, resourceful and heroic way said, "come and talk to our patients come and talk to our service users".

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And that was the idea behind this film *Last Laugh* with Alexei Sayle?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Yes. *Last Laugh* with Alexei Sayle came from this understanding that people who happen to be dying also still want to be living as long and as well as they possibly can. And that includes laughter. And so we got Alexei to talk to four people who all were within a very short period of time, likely to die. And Alexei talked to them with boldness and frankness and with a sense of humour about that experience, and they told the jokes.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Let's hear it, shall we?

***Last Laugh* with Alexei Sayle**

I'd certainly think twice about cracking a joke to somebody with a terminal illness. But then, maybe I'm wrong about that.

You really have got to laugh, it's such an amazing tonic.

You've got to laugh at the situation because it's quite ludicrous.

The Grim Reaper came for me last night, and I beat him up with a vacuum cleaner...

Where I would have stopped laughing...

...talk about Dyson with death.

The initial diagnosis was given by the Registrar, and she just turned to me straightaway and said, "You know, there's no survival rate from this," because I did ask her, I said, "how long have I got?" And she says, "You don't really want to know the answer to that question", and then just send me home.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Humour, as we can hear in the clip there, humour is so much a part of dealing with these things, isn't it? And have you found that with the people that you've worked with?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Yes, I think it's not only just humour, but life generally. I think what happens when people receive a terminal diagnosis, as the people in our film explained, somehow they felt like they were expected to go away to a little corner, lie down on their bed and receive visitors until the inevitable end came. And what they told us is, "I want to be able to say what I'm feeling, I want to be a part of the human race". And I think, unfortunately, in our culture, we think of death and the grieving that comes, and feeling the loss of somebody is something you're supposed to go away, get over, and then come back, when you're all better, because we are just not comfortable if you're not all better from these things, or, obviously, if you've died,

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

This is people around those who are dying, not just the people who are dying?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

So the people around those who are dying, I think, are caught in the same unfortunate cultural taboo around death. So if, in fact, you know, you want to go out for a meal, and you have some medical condition that's, you know, making you look terribly ill, but you still want to go out for a meal and you can, people may just want to sit you in a corner so that all those tubes and all the things that require for you to go out and have a meal like everybody else would like to have, aren't sort of interfering with other people's lives who are out there having that.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Somehow we can't all deal with the fact that people who might have a diagnosis of a terminal illness want to enjoy those last few months. That's still something that we can don't quite get our heads around?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

I think it's really hard. I think we just feel we don't know how to talk about it. When someone gets a terminal diagnosis, or loses a child, what I've been told by people, especially, those parents, is that people avoid them. They don't know what to say, so they say nothing. One woman told me that she saw people crossing the street when she lost her husband. And she said, I think they were afraid they might catch a dead husband from me. We exile people. You know, we don't mean to, but we wait for them to be better, and then say, come back, or not...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And you've worked in war zones as well, haven't you? How has that shaped your attitude towards this subject?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

I'm really grateful to those experiences. I was in Bosnia during the last bit of that conflict in the mid-1990s, and I've been in in Northern Ireland as well during a number of years of the troubles. And I think what those experiences taught me – I was very humbled by the people that I spoke with. I learned to shut up and to listen and to just be present and to not need for them to say anything. Chaplaincy really followed on naturally for that for me.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, I was going to say, yeah, because a similar kind of role in a way you're encountering these situations and people in their relatives who are dealing with death?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

People often say what is it the Chaplains do? And mostly what we say, or often what we say is, we have a ministry of presence. We are there and we have the time to listen and to be a part of someone's experience – good, bad, or somewhere in the middle. Sometimes it's really hard to just stand or sit with a family that is, you know, deeply distressed but really don't want to be alone with that. And that's really helped me in this work around end of life. But you know, the experiences from my years writing and reporting in conflict zones where people's lives, again, were traumatised was incredibly helpful, and it's been an enormous privilege to do both of these things.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah. Okay. Well, we'll discuss more of those ideas shortly.

But Raegan, tell us about what you do because it was... You trained as a beautician to start with, is that right? You became a funeral director – an unusual trajectory. How did that happen?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I left school. I worked at McDonalds and whilst I was there I went to college and studied to be a beautician. I liked makeup, and that was sort of my reasoning behind that. And I started applying to make-up counters thinking that was maybe what I wanted to do. And then just like that I decided maybe make-up on deceased would be an idea.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

From the make-up counter to funeral parlour. How did that idea come into your head?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

I have no idea, I wish I had an answer. I was literally driving home and I was like "Oh, maybe I would like to think about that." So I looked into that and found it was the embalmers that do that here. Cosmetology on deceased isn't really a job over here.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

You mean in the UK? It's an American thing?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah, it is. So yeah, I think that's kind of where I had the idea from. So it's not a job. So it's the embalmers that do that. And at that time, I had no idea what an embalmer was. And I started looking online, and then I went to meet with a local independent funeral director, then they trained me, and I had the name of the manager of The Co-op [Funeralcare], so wrote him every month for the year until he got me a job.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, are they usually family businesses, as well? Are they an unusual thing for a young person to go into?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

I'd say more in the last 10 years, The Co-op especially have opened the doors more, and it was more a case of who you know, not what you know, and it's not like that now.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, tell us how you see your role as a funeral director then and how you think that might be differ to what your perception was perhaps before you went into it or the rest of us the way we think about it?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah, so I started off as a funeral arranger before I got the job as a funeral director. So, as an arranger I would be in office, meet the families, discuss with them funeral arrangements, put everything in place, the day, the time, the minister, the cars, the flowers, order of service, everything. And then I would hand it over to a funeral director to do on the day. And that's the part that I struggled with. I've been with this family for a week now speaking with them on and off and I wanted to be the person to see it through on the day.

So I did finally get a job as a funeral director. So now I'm able to do both parts of it – arranging the funeral and being the person on the day. But with that, as well, we're also on call so we attend care homes and houses to bring loved ones into our care once they pass away. We can meet people to do pre-payment plans to organise their own funerals, and several community activities as well as if you notice that they want you to be a pillar of your community. So, I do the bingo at the care home. Yeah, we did Christmas card making.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Whose number's up!

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah. Oh, no, no, no, no, not at all! And we're also like a Women's Aid drop-off point at our local office. And we also offer support groups and bereavement services at some of our offices as well. So the role is vast and you can adapt it to suit your personality, they encourage you to do things that reflect you. So obviously, we chose Women's Aid in our office.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

How do you work with them?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

We're a drop-off point [for Women's Aid], so we advertise a drop-off point. We just handed over 100 bags [of donations] in July, I think it was.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

It seems quite similar to Kathleen, because, obviously, events management, all these things that you're talking about being a bingo caller, whatever. You can do that in other areas of life, but for you is it's being there for people when they're going through this? When they're facing this issue of death in their family with a loved one?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah. So for me, it's looking after the families. It's been the person there for them to take away the pressure for them, but with the embalming side, for me, it's the last thing I could do for someone that was the idea behind doing that as much as I like the makeup side.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So you're thinking about the person who's died as well as the family.

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

It's the last service I could do for them is, you know, prepare them, you know. A wedding, if something goes wrong, we can all laugh that off; we can't at a funeral. So you're the person making sure their last day, the celebration of their life, goes well, so it's last thing I can do for them. And it's the biggest thing I can do for the family at that point in their life.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay. And with both of you, is this something that gets easier? I have to say, I'm not very good at being around people who are dying. I've experienced it with my grandparents; I found it really difficult to be around them and other members of my family who were around them at the same time. A lot of people must feel like that. Is it something that you took to quite naturally or do you get better at it?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well, I certainly learned – there was a steep learning curve for me. But part of it that comes out of my own experience. A neighbour of mine – I heard through the grapevine that she had Ovarian Cancer and isn't going to be living much longer. And she kept saying “I must go by, I must go by, I must put something through the door”. I didn't know her well, but I knew her well enough to say something. And I just waited and waited and waited. And I just thought... and I did nothing. The good news in the story is that they misdiagnosed her cancer, and she lived. And she and I now speak to each other. But before we got to this point where we now talk to each other, I had to go to her and say, I'm so sorry, I didn't know what to say.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And what was her reaction?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

She was wonderful. She said, I understand. I understand. She'd experienced it with other people, with other people. And I think what I would say to others who feel that way, is even if you're uncomfortable – show up and say that I'm on “I'm uncomfortable, I don't know what to say, I don't want to get it wrong, but I hate this has happened to you”. And I think what I see funeral directors do over and over again – I've learned a lot from this industry and from people like you, really – because what you show people is it matters what's happening. You know, you say on the day, “this is important, this matters, we're going to do this right”. And, you know, you do find over time better language. But people will remember how you make them feel so much more than if you got the word right.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah, absolutely. Raegan, it seems to me that you naturally took to this, this was something actually you were drawn to.

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah. I mean, my brother calls me 'wee stony' he says, I don't have a heart and it's not that at all. It's just if I cried every day at my job, I would be in the wrong job. And as well, we don't know all the families that are walking through our door, you get to know them. And some people take it with humour, you know, some arrangements, you can have a good laugh with people, which may sound horrifying to some people, but sometimes it's really light-hearted. Other times it is really difficult because you got to remember as well, it's not all old ladies in their bed at 99 that pass away. There's children and there's babies and there's people my age and things so every family is different, and the way we deal with them is different. The funeral itself might have a format but for me it's finding ways to personalise it for them. Like I had one recently, they talked about how they loved to do crosswords with her. So I had done a crossword for the back of the order of service and they loved that and it's something so small, that's unique to their service.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Absolutely. Well, you're part of The Co-op, and you have spoken about how you're involved in the community, how you deliver this service to people in your community. With co-op values in mind, how would they apply to what you do and how you serve the community through this?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Their big thing is, one of their main things, is 'be yourself always' that's when you're with your families, anything, you've just got to be yourself, although you're representing the company, we're all different people and they want that to shine through and everything you do. So there's no set guideline for 'you have to do this, you have to go to this care home, you have to do this marketing'. It's all things that you want to do and building relationships in your community and how you want to take that forward.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And Kathleen, how do you think co-operative values, you know, how can they be applied to what you're doing as a minister, as a filmmaker?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well draw on the strengths of the community, allow the humanity and the humanness of who we are together in the good times and in the difficult times, to influence how we do things together. Hard things. You know, clergy are part of, of a funeral, you know, often not always. And when we work together well as funeral director and clergy, a facilitator, it feels like you said, like something amazing we can do that no one else can do together in this last moment of this person's life. But to also bring that humanity. I want people to feel like they can laugh and smile and grimace a little at some embarrassing thing. Bring humanity and life, even into that moment, where someone has died because that's what brings it all together.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And brings it back to the celebration of their lives, I guess, as well.

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Yes, but I love that they asked you to bring yourself to work. It makes so much difference. It makes so much difference.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And this is an area where you really do have to dig deep, don't you, and kind of find resources inside yourself to be able to feel the energy for it, the compassion. Do you find that? There are days when you perhaps don't have that?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah, absolutely I think we're all human, everyone has a bad day. But the people that come in my door are having a far worse day than me. So I'm kind of good at just leaving my stuff at the door and the same as going out to work I have to leave at work, I can't take it home or I'd crack up. You know, I can't go home and cry about every service we do. So I'm quite good at switching off. Some things do pop into your head at night or I might remember do that or, but no, I have to be able to switch off.

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

But it's also not about switching off. It's about knowing you've done something well and important. That is so satisfying. People imagine working in a hospice, being a chaplain being funeral home director would be really depressing. Quite frankly they're some of the most wonderful places because we all have an understanding that life is short. And we're not going to be here forever. So we just better go and enjoy every bit of it even on the bad days, because they're people who would give anything to help one of those bad days again.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

We asked you to both identify a particular challenge in this area. So, Kathleen, would you like to go first? What's the issue that you think most needs to be addressed?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well, this whole idea that, you know, we separate people who are going through this, let's just face it, challenging time in their lives. For instance, my particular faith connection is with the Methodist Church. And I know this, the churches can be incredible places of support. But I also know and I've heard others talk about coming into a church being one of the most painful places on a Sunday morning possible because people don't know what to say to them. They also feel like because they're bereaved, or God forbid, dying, that there might not be anything they might want to do. They wouldn't want to help with the coffee because they're dying. They might have always led done things with the children. But they wouldn't want to do that now because they're dying.

So we have to redefine our understanding of where people who are living with grief, and a health crisis can be actually valued, contributing people as well as enjoying the life that's still theirs to have.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So, coming back to this thing that actually lots of people do find this really difficult even in, you know like you say, organisations like the church, this is still a really difficult issue for people to confront?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Absolutely, it is difficult, and I think there's no shame in it. If we can name it, if we can begin to see and listen to people tell us where it's been hard for them. Where have I felt left out, Where have I just been lost in my desire to sort of connect with people, but still know that I'm in pain, and I'm going to be a little strange. I might be a little inconsistent – I might even be a little grumpy today.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**



And thinking about co-op values... openness is coming to mind. Would that help? Is that something that we're struggling with?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well, you know, I come from the US which is a very extroverted culture and anybody in the US will tell me I'm on the extrovert end of that extroverted culture. So I think we have an advantage because we're used to talking about things with strong emotions. It's not as embarrassing and I think the UK can be a much more careful, culture – reserved place we need to build

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

It's almost cultural.

So Raegan, what are the challenges that you face? What are the hurdles?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

For us it's people not leaving their wishes so when families come in and they have no idea what their mum or dad wanted, so was even not even knowing if they wanted to be cremated. So for us, it's people just not saying what they want. Not talking about death enough. I know it's morbid but not expressing anything to do with their funeral. A lot of people in Britain especially we have that "we are not talking about it" but our thing would always be everyone's dad or granddad would say, "Oh, just chuck them out with the bins!" Everyone's been told that from someone...it doesn't help when we come down to it, it doesn't help the family. They have no idea what they want. And it's the worry that they do the wrong thing. Because deciding someone's final resting place. That's a massive thing.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So what do people do in that instance? Have you got any examples?

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**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Well, obviously I have to make the decision on burial or cremation. There's lots of people that, they'll maybe go with cremation and then they'll say, you know, I've still got my granddads, my granny, my two dogs in my cupboard in the bedroom because they don't know what to do. And even if people haven't expressed a final resting place for their wishes.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

This is the ashes?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Yeah. They've got the ashes in the cupboard and they don't know what to do with it. They've just got this massive collection of ashes and they can't decide the final resting place for them. When I began, and I was on a training course, we were talking about this and what people do and they were talking about someone getting cremated. And someone said this "can their dog go with them?" and everyone was like "Yeah, that's fine". And I genuinely thought they were going to kill the dog.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

I was going to say! That was my question!

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

They meant, you know, they still have the dog ashes in the cupboard so the dog ashes can go on with the person. But for me, I just assumed that everyone was condoning the death of the family pet to go in the coffin. But it was, they have all these collections of ashes and some people do leave the wish of “When I go, my dogs coming with me”. They mean ashes!

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, that’s good to know, good to have that cleared up.

Well one of the places where it's possible to talk about issues around dying and in a very informal way, is your local Death Café. And Death Cafés now are in countries all over the world. They're places where people gather to perhaps eat cake but chat about any issues on this tricky subjects. Well, our producer Geoff Bird went along to a Death Café in Manchester to find out why people want to attend.

**Debbie Jones, Death Café organiser**

My name is Debbie Jones. I'm a funeral celebrant in my day job. But I run the Death Café every couple of months here in Chorlton voluntarily. For me I came because I was quite fearful of losing loved ones. So yeah, that was one reason why I wanted to do the job that I do and to start the death cafe and to build a community. I think people, well I enjoy facilitating it, just to create a space in which local people are building a community regularly around the one topic that might be close to their heart but difficult to talk about.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And what kind of age range is common?

**Debbie Jones, Death Café organiser**

It's a spread, I'd say between 18 and 80 something and we've had up to 45 people and sometimes only around 12 – so it varies each time.

**Death Café participant**

I went to four funerals in 18 months, and a fifth friend died as well, so I was a bit overwhelmed by it and needed some opportunity to talk about it. Debbie and I have a mutual friend who recommended I come to it, and this cafe is just around the corner from me. So it was just, well, it was meant to be.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And to what extent has it allowed you to accommodate those events when they do happen?

**Death Café participant**

It's been very helpful, but it's more than that. What I find so interesting is that I feel uplifted. You wouldn't think it talking about death you'd feel better afterwards. But I do. It's as if, like, talking about the topic takes some of the

stress out of it. And, so, I've started doing things like trying to prepare my affairs for my family when I die. Trying to not have too much clutter. And I've written a note of what to do if I'm dying and things like that. So, thinking through how to make it easier on the family.

#### **Death Café participant**

Well, in my experience growing up in a Christian family, I don't feel that death was comfortably talked about. So, this is completely outside of that. I don't know that there was a place to talk about it within religion, it's almost a continuity of 'this is out of our hands, it's God's will'. So I could see people of different faiths really appreciating this kind of a space, and maybe finding more of a connection with it with their faith practice. But in the, in the traditions that I grew up, I don't feel that it was a conversation or something, especially as a child, you'd try to shelter children from talking about these things. And it's not helpful when a grandparent dies or a pet dies or anything like that.

#### **Death Café participant**

I think I first decided I'd like to come because I was still feeling a little bit of grief about my mum's death. It had been several years before, but I realised that I had quite an aversion to the idea of death; the normal society's values about death. I was scared of it, couldn't understand it, and I wanted to just normalise it. Hearing about these cafés where people just talking about death, it seemed to me to be a really sensible attitude as I was getting older myself anyway.

#### **Geoff Bird, producer**

I guess some people might say, it's sensible, but perhaps a little macabre?

#### **Death Café participant**

I'd say try it. I found through coming here, it hasn't been macabre at all. I've gone away, sometimes with quite a joyful sense of coming to terms with the idea of death. You know, we've had some really uplifting discussions about it, which does sound a bit odd. And I've picked up some very practical ideas as well about dealing with it.

#### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Death Cafés... the whole concept of the Death Café is something I'd not come across before I started working on this project. Are you both aware of the Death Café? What do you make of it?

#### **Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

I wasn't till now and I think it's a great idea. It's kind of like their own sort of bereavement group but in a more relaxed setting. And I think when people are going through challenges everybody you know, comes to the house when someone passes away, they come to the house prior to the funeral, maybe for the week after. And then everyone sort of leaves you alone and they go back to their lives and you're sort of left still hurting and you maybe feel that people don't want to talk about it with you anymore. You maybe feel you're boring people with talking about it continually, uncomfortable talking about it in the setting of your immediate family and friends. So somewhere like the Death Café is people that are feeling the same issue and are happy to still talk about it and share your grief with you and help you through that.

#### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And Kathleen is it was interesting there, there was a woman who was a Christian and she said that she felt growing up in a Christian home death was something that was taboo. I find that quite surprising. I mean,

Christians talk about comforting mourners. And you said, you know, the church seems like an obvious place to go sometimes. But what do you make of that?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

In a particularly Christian context, I once gave a talk about how people are really happy to have the Easter Bunny and all that stuff. But they like to skip over the part that led to that – the death part –because that's just really uncomfortable. Let's just get to the happy new life and the chocolate afterwards. Again, it's just another place where there's a disconnect, and a Death Café is a great idea because it means people can go there with whatever it might be. But whatever it is, it's a safe place to do that. And I know people have backed away from me at a party, they asked me what I do, and I start to tell them...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

That's interesting! So even just to talk about what you do, people find that difficult. I mean, I'm fascinated by it, even though I find it difficult to be around people who are dying, but you encounter people who actually don't want to deal with a subject at all.

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Oh my gosh, this man said to me, please don't talk to my wife about this. And he meant well, because she had been... her mother had died recently and he was trying to protect her. But sometimes people are protecting people from the very thing they're desperate to do.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, interestingly in the tape as well, there were people talking about going to Death Café, just to think about their own death, even if that wasn't imminent, or you know, and they hadn't experienced it with somebody else in their family, and also planning their funerals as well.

Which leads us on to the solution to these challenges that we're talking about. Raegan tell us what do you see as the solution to the challenge that you mentioned.

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

As little as just saying if you want buried or cremated, just having the smallest conversation about. Whether there'd be a song on the radio and you say, "oh, like I would like that my funeral", or there's a funeral on a soap, it opens the door to lightly to talk about what you want. There's no easy way to dive in with someone and say, "you know, what do you want for your funeral?", but if the opportunity comes up – a song or it's on TV, take that opportunity to talk about it. That's why we do things like this and we do the big music release 'the funeral chart'. It's a way to help people ease into the conversation because it makes a big a difference in a family coming to me not knowing at all, what to do, and a family that someone's actually had a pre-payment plan, they've left all their wishes. There's really not much for them to do. And they're coming in just having a cup of tea with us and doing the smallest of details.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And do you find that the family don't perhaps think about this too much until they're in that situation? And then actually, they realize it's really important to them,

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

And most people, so most people who come in and their loved one's taken out a plan. They always say, "I'm going to do this for me" whether or not they come back as another thing, but most people leave and say, I'm going to do this. So my children don't have that worry, or people that come in and they really not got a clue. They say I'm going to sort mine out because I'm not going to have my son or daughter go through what I'm going through just know because it's awful people are torn, not knowing what to pick.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And this is because they want to give that person... that they feel a huge burden of responsibility.

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Absolutely. And deciding, you know, where you rest them for the rest of their days, you know. And just the smallest detail, even if they just have one thing that they know that you really, really wanted. If they knew there was a song you wanted, if they knew you wanted to be buried somewhere, with a nice view or your ashes to go into the sea - something like that, having that small detail makes all the difference.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Have you done it?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

I've not! I've thought about it. I'm quite liking the new way of doing things. Some people are opting for the direct crematorium. So it's not having a service at all. I quite like not to have anyone there for a funeral service but for whoever I leave behind to have like a big party after. I like to make everyone playlists on Spotify. So I'd like to have my funeral playlist ready of all good songs and they can all just sit and do what they want. But at the end of the day, when I'm not here anymore, it's whoever I leave behind. It's wherever they take comfort from, so I wouldn't be offended if they decided to do something completely different.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Is this a growing trend then? What is it?

**Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

Direct to crematorium – it's a new lower cost option. And unfortunately for some people, it's the only option because they haven't planned for it and they don't have money. But some people it's their wish that they don't want the big funeral, they don't want the big day. Other people want the horse and carriage. We're all different. We should all have something that caters to that and if you plan for that, you know, you're getting what you want, like a wedding.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And are you doing it for you? Or are you doing it for your family or both in equal measure?

## **Raegan Drew, Co-op Funeralcare**

For me, yeah, I don't want the funeral. I would like to know that I've left this playlist and they're all gonna have bottles of wine, a meal and, or whatever, and do it that way and celebrate my life a different way. Other people they know that they want a funeral. They know they want a minister to say a prayer. They know they want their favourite track or their favourite hymn. So, it's reflecting a life that you live. We all have unique individual lives. So, your funeral should represent that as well, so you can leave your wishes or take care of the financial side and pay for it. I mean, you can pay small amounts over a long period of time. But I mean you can pay £15-20 pounds a month and spend more on that on sweets and a bottle of wine on a Friday night you know? Or if you have the money to pay for it, yeah pay for it. And that's the box ticked. A lot of people that come into us to do that say "This is that's it done. I've been thinking about it for a long time. That's done. I feel better just knowing that and I can forget about it now."

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay. And Kathleen, tell us the solution to the challenge that you're bringing.

## **Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well, you know, I work in mental health as well and I see so much pain around loss and bereavement. And even if you're looking for help with bereavement, it's really, really a hard thing to find those resources available to you. So my big idea is a whole network of bereavement support groups. Not run by professionals, but peer-to-peer. People who know loss, talking to each other. And I see this in a kind of 12-step AA-style availability model. I'm not saying it's a 12-step meeting, I'm saying in that way that you can go to any city, or the country, and find a place where you can drop in on a group and spend time with people who know what you're living. To be able to go into a group where others will go, "I really get that, I'm struggling with that". And I believe that GPS, whose practices, quite frankly, I know are overrun with people who are struggling and presenting with all kinds of basically bereavement-related issues – they would bite our hands off to be able to refer people to groups like that locally.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Where do you see them being run then? How would this work?

## **Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

Well, again, I don't want to just say this is an AA model, but where are the places where you find as AA meeting? They may be in a library, a church hall, it could be in a temple, it could be in the community centres, it could be many places. I'd like to see those groups that perhaps host them not always renting to them, but maybe being partners in this as a good thing for the community. We all work together and support people. You know, there is a really good model of this in a group like this much more specialist though. It's a group of survivors of bereavement by suicide, finding support in each other for 20 years these groups meet around the country, once a month, usually. And people drive hundreds of miles round-trip just to be able to be with other people who know what that's like. You know, there's lots to learn from that model. I think this is absolutely doable. We're not talking about intense resources. We're talking about enabling people to come to a place and then share that experience and share leadership.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

It's being able to connect them, isn't it? One of my other questions is, I guess, if you know, everyone's experience is quite complex. Like you say, it might be somebody who's lost a child, somebody who's lost a partner. Are you thinking of matching people up with the exact same experience? Or is it more of a general loss?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

I think that would really depend. It's an organic that comes out of the people's experience. It's that welcome, as well as being able to share. It's the welcome and being able to share knowing that you're not going to embarrass somebody that you're going to be in a place where people want you there. I think it's really doable.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah. How would you start with it? Would it be connecting people online maybe initially, or through your GP surgeries?

**Kathleen Loughlin, Methodist minister, writer and film-maker**

I actually have thought about this a lot. I would say that I think we want to start with a couple of pilot projects in the Greater Manchester area. Different kinds of communities of people, you know, across different maybe ethnic, economic, cultural lines. Just start small and see how these work. And also, really start to talk to people who are who are doing these bereavement groups. I'm sure there are others. And I think when the facilitators, I think facilitators would also be of course people who have who have been bereaved, but probably not people in the middle of an active bereavement.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Thank you to both of you for such an inspiring and enjoyable conversation around this difficult topic, such an important topic.

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