

Advance Preparations for a Christian Memorial Service

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Death is an inescapable part of life. We would all benefit immensely if we were able to accept that fact along with all the other immutable laws of nature, but instead we often avoid, deny, or gloss over its inevitability. Then, when death occurs we are not prepared to deal with that final reality.

Being able to confront and accept the reality of our own death allows us to focus more fully on the quality of our lives here and now. To admit a finite end to this earthly life can most effectively alter priorities. All of a sudden, relationships assume prime importance, time becomes precious, principles of faith are re-examined, values are revised, and all the attributes of mortality are more fully appreciated. These are very real benefits.

To admit the reality of one's own physical death can also allow you to prepare your loved ones for loss. Even young children can learn to accept death if it is presented to them in a caring and factual way, and not cloaked in hushed voices and conspiratorial whispers. It is important to include them in grandparents' and relatives' funerals, and to encourage and allow them to feel sad along with the rest of the family.

It may not be easy for some family members to talk about the death of those they love so deeply, but seeing your acceptance can ultimately facilitate their acceptance as well. It would be very beneficial to find a time to sit down with your family and find out how they feel about everything you are contemplating: e.g., will they concur with your wishes as expressed in a Living Will, how will they feel about organ donations, do they prefer traditional burial or will they be comfortable with cremation, are there any elements they would very much like to have included in your memorial or funeral service? You need to be clear concerning your desires. Although some of your wishes may not exactly coincide with theirs, be sensitive to the fact that they will be the survivors and the ones most in need of comfort.

These are some of the most important reasons for planning ahead. This packet will cover some of the ways to do so.

WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION UNDERSTANDING A CHRISTIAN MEMORIAL SERVICE

PURPOSE

A Christian funeral or memorial service is a public service of worship, which gives witness to the central understandings of the Christian faith. The purposes are as follows:

1. To celebrate the unique gifts of life that God has given us through the person who has died;
2. To proclaim the central promises of resurrection that complete the promises of baptism;
3. To embrace all the human emotions associated with physical death – grief, sadness, loss, anger, guilt, relief, hope;
4. To reassure those who are worshipping that “both in life and in death we belong to God,” and “that nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

THE MESSAGE OF RESURRECTION

The two central teachings of Christianity that separate it from other religions are Incarnation and Resurrection. Incarnation proclaims that the Word became Flesh. God became human in a particular time and place. God came to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ so that we might meet and know God, and God’s unconditional love, face to face. And then through Resurrection, that unconditional love became a universal power accessible to all, embracing us eternally after our physical death. Resurrection is a promise – a great mystery we cannot “know” but only trust.

The two sacraments, baptism and communion, remind us of this promise throughout our physical lives. At baptism we are incorporated “into Christ.” We “put Christ on” through the symbol of water and the promises of the community of faith. Because we are “in Christ,” the resurrected Body of Christ, our unique self, or energy, continues to be embraced by that spiritual presence after our physical death. In some churches, the casket is covered with a white funeral pall, the baptismal robe that continues to “clothe” the person who has died. In our sanctuary, the Christ Candle next to the baptismal font is lit during every service of worship, including funerals and memorial services.

In communion, 1) we are fed throughout our lives with symbols of Christ’s living presence, 2) we are given a foretaste of the eschatological banquet, when all will be one and reunited, and 3) we are reminded that we share our family meal with the “communion of the saints” who have gone before us.

Traditional scripture texts read during memorial services and funerals remind us of this central and powerful promise of resurrection: I Thessalonians 4, Romans 8, II Corinthians 4, John 14, I Corinthians 15, Psalm 23, and others.

PARTS OF THE MEMORIAL SERVICE

1. Call to Worship that proclaims the promises of the faith, names the one whose life is being celebrated, and points the worshippers toward God.
2. Hymns and special music that underline the celebration of life, the power of the promise, and the victory of God's power of life over the human power of death.
3. Scripture passages that embrace the emotional complexity of death, the promises of resurrection, and lift up particular qualities of faith that were embodied in the person who has died.
4. Words of Thanksgiving for the one who has died that include memories, stories, and accomplishments. This is most effective when it is done by family, friends, and colleagues of the deceased.
5. A pastoral prayer that lifts up the blessings and gifts of the one who has died, acknowledges the pain and loss of death, as well as the mystery of resurrection, that asks God's healing presence in the lives of those who have lost a loved one, and commends unto the Almighty the resurrected spirit of the one who has died – a "letting go" into the mystery of God's grace.

As our Presbyterian Directory of Worship suggests, memorial services/funerals are services of worship, giving glory to God. Consequently, reverence, joy, and thanksgiving are the appropriate moods for the service. Garish flowers, secular music, sentimentality, boasting, or excessive emotion can draw attention away from God and can cause unnecessary anguish for those who are grieving.

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A memorial service/funeral is the beginning, not the ending, of the grieving process. Its purpose is to enable a family to give thanks for the life of the one who has died, to "let go" of the physical remains, and to hear promises of God's love and care that can help in the long difficult process of grieving. It is also a community experience, where a wide range of friends and acquaintances can offer respect and thanksgiving, and can once more come face to face with their own mortality.

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN

Quite simply, it is appropriate for children of all ages to be included in the process of death as well as in the celebration of life during a memorial service. It is essential for children aged seven and older to be part of the memorial service of a relative or close family friend. Children of this age have the intellectual and emotional maturity to understand the "finality" of death, and they need the spiritual and emotional resources that the church can provide to help them begin to come to terms with death. If they are left out, they may develop unhealthy fears or superstitions about death and may feel that they are being excluded from an important family time because they did something wrong. To see adults cry and mourn is important. To have their parents share feelings, doubts, and memories openly and honestly can encourage children to be honest about their own feelings. Generally speaking, children handle death more easily than adults, and their presence and resilience can be very healing for the older people around them.

Susan Andrews was Moderator of the 215th General Assembly (2003), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
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FOR YOUR FAMILY AND MINISTER

A person's will is customarily not read until sometime after his or her death; thus the will is not the means by which to convey your intentions for death arrangements. In order to facilitate such events immediately following your death, you may choose to complete the following form, discuss its provisions with your family and/or friends, and leave it in an easily accessible place. Since we are a mobile community and many of us are without family in the immediate vicinity, the minister will maintain a confidential file of this information, if that is your wish.

PERSONAL INFORMATION, including information needed for death certificate:

Name _____

Social Security No. _____

Address _____ City/State/Zip _____ Phone _____

Date of Birth _____

Place of Birth _____

Marital Status: Never Married _____ Married _____ Separated _____

Widowed _____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Remarried _____

Father's Full Name _____

Mother's Full Name (Include Maiden Name)

Service in U.S. Armed Forces: Yes _____ No _____

Dates: _____

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

I. Guidance for the family and others who survive as to the disposition of the body:

Have already made arrangements (specify details)

Prefer cremation (indicate if and where ashes are to be buried, deposited, scattered, or otherwise disposed of)

Prefer burial (indicate place of burial, including lot number, if known)

Have made arrangements to donate my body to a medical school (specify details)

Have made arrangements to donate body organs (specify details)

Have executed a Living Will/Five Wishes/Advance Directives. Copy is with

Last Will and Testament: I have no will _____.

I executed a will; location of my will is

II. Memorial or Funeral Service.

Desire a memorial service, without body present (specify preference as to place, minister preferred, and other details)

Desire a funeral service with casket or urn present (Specify preference regarding embalming, funeral director desired, location of service, minister preferred, etc.)

Favorite hymns/music Organ/piano/other

Favorite scripture, prayers, or readings

Preferences regarding flowers: ____ No flowers. ____ Yes, I would like flowers. Kind, colors: _____

Prefer that memorial gifts be sent to the following causes (include addresses):

Church: _____

Others: _____

Desire that arrangements be left to survivors _____

Limit expense to: Minimum _____ Low Average _____ Average _____
Immaterial _____

OTHER INFORMATION

Family:

Present spouse:

Date and Place of Marriage, and Domicile at time of Marriage:

Children by present marriage (Name, sex, and birthdate. If children are married, state married name also and include addresses and phone numbers):

Previously married? ____ Yes ____ No. If yes, indicate the following: termination date, by death, divorce, annulment; name of former spouse (before marriage to you); children by former marriage (Name, sex, and birthdate. If children are married, state married name also and include addresses and phone numbers):

Persons to be notified at time of death (including next of kin, minister, attorney, executor, etc.):

Name and Relationship	Address	Phone
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Other Information for Newspapers: Time lived in this community, occupation, employers, organizations of which you are a member, schools attended and degrees or honors received, military service showing honors or decorations, other items of interest as well as names of those who would survive you as of this date.

(Don't be bashful; tell about your life; it will be a big help to your survivors.)

THIS PERSONAL INFORMATION WILL BE CONFIDENTIALLY HELD.

These instructions indicate my desire in regard to the above arrangements.

Signature _____

Address _____

Date compiled _____

(Change as revised)

NOTE: If you need additional space for any answer, please attach a separate sheet. This is only a guide!