

When a Parishioner Dies

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I strongly suggest also reading Thomas Long's article, "Why Jessica Mitford was Wrong."

The Primary Purpose of a Christian funeral/memorial service is:

"Bring glory to God through:

Reaffirming the truth of salvation and the hope of the resurrection;
Remembering the special grace of God in and through the life and ministry
of the deceased; and thereby
Comforting the loved ones."

(In the case of an unbeliever the purpose remains the same but the remembering is more about God's common grace in and through the life of the deceased)

"A Christian funeral is nothing less than a bold and dramatic worship of the living God done attentive to and in the face of an apparent victory at the hands of the last enemy. Though the liturgy may be gently worded, there is no hiding the fact that, in a funeral, Christians raise a fist at death; recount the story of the Christ who suffered death, battled death, and triumphed over it; offer laments and thanksgivings to the God who raised Jesus from the grave; sing hymns of defiance; and honor the body and life of the saint who has died." Thomas Long in "Why Jessica Mitford was Wrong."

- 1 Corinthians 10:31 "So...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
- Philippians 1:20 "...so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.
- See also 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 In death or life, it is to the glory of God.
- Westminster Catechism "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

This is a difficult focus to keep. Most modern funerals/memorials have become largely or only paeans to the deceased, while God has become a minor or absent focus.

How can we bring glory to God in Christian funeral/memorial service?

- Remember God's grace in and through the life of the deceased – emphasizing God's grace!
- Reaffirming the truth of salvation and the hope of the resurrection!
- Comforting survivors – showing true sympathy and genuine kindness.
- Keeping the focus on God as the source of their loved one's goodness and their loved one's future.

Howard Vanderwell, and many others, suggests three parts of a Christian funeral:

- 1. grieving,**
- 2. giving thanks for a life, and**
- 3. celebrating Christ's victory over death**

Secondary but Important Purposes of a Christian Funeral/Memorial Service: (From [Leading Today's Funerals](#))

- Help us grieve
- Help us express sympathy
- Help us accept loss
- Help us remember positive times
- Help us express respect
- Help us find hope
- Help us prepare for death

The pastor with the family during and/or immediately after the death of a loved one:

- Grieving
- Prayer
- Setting a time to plan a service
- Decide who will care for the body: in the home or a mortuary.
- Decisions on embalming (or not), burial or cremation.

The pastor with the family anticipating the mortuary visit (If the family is using a mortuary).

Guiding the family through the many questions:

- Announcements (newspapers, etc)
- Number of death certificates
- Printed programs (mortuary, church or family)
- Flowers and/or memorial funds
- Guest book
- Burial clothing; jewelry, etc
- Casket and vault or urn (or not)
- Cemetery or other
- Service locations
- Pallbearers
- Other services: cars, processional,
- Honoraria for participants
- Visitation/"Wake" (where, when, food? program?)

The pastor with the family planning the funeral/memorial service:

- Location and physical arrangements (printed programs, guest book, flowers, picture display(s), seating of family, pallbearers, etc)
- Purpose and Church policies (see "Purposes" below)
- Program (see "Elements" below)
- Personnel: speakers, readers, musicians, ushers? tech support, facilities set-up, etc
- Placement of the casket: Open before service for viewing (in foyer or main auditorium)? Casket as part of processional/recessional? Family as part of processional/recessional?
- Reception (Where, When, Who provides, Any program?)
- Committal Service (Interment)

Major Elements of a Funeral/Memorial Service:

Remember:

- The purpose of a Christian funeral service.
 - The role of the body (viewed or not) in a Christian funeral service.
 - The structure of a Christian funeral service to accomplish the purpose.
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- Scripture
 - Prayers
 - Obituary / History (by family, preferably, or minister.
 - Eulogy (by family, preferably, or minister)
 - Music
 - Visuals (see policies)
 - Message
 - Processional/Recessional

Scripture:

Use passages short enough that people can stay focused; modernize the language so “un-churched” people can understand. Examples:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

1 Corinthians 15 paraphrased and edited and used in parts

1 Thessalonians 4 (in part)

Romans 8 (in part)

John 11 (in part)

Prayers:

Be brief and focused. Pray often and deliberately. Usual prayers include Invocation; Illumination (before message or major Scripture reading); Comfort (following eulogies or message); Benediction.

Obituary/History:

This is preferably no longer than 5 minutes and covers the major movements of the person's life (birth, schooling, major occupations, most significant hobbies, faith, and family).

Eulogy(ies):

Shorter is better (see policies); anecdotes are most helpful; encourage believers to speak of the deceased faith and faithfulness. How have you seen the grace of God reflected in this person's life?

Music:

- If there are sufficient attendees who are "churched" it is possible to use congregational singing effectively, though usually no more than two congregational songs.
- If the crowd is small and/or "unchurched" it is wise to use no congregational singing or only one if it is well known (e.g. "Amazing Grace").
- Families often want more music than is effective; encourage them to use it as prelude and/or postlude music.
- A maximum of three musical selections (special and/or congregational) is usually sufficient.
- Special music should be vocal only and lyrically consistent with Christianity.
- If the family is selecting prelude/postlude music (live or recorded) ask that it not contradict the Christian message.

Message:

- Be brief! Christians (and much less others) did not come prepared for a full-length Sunday type sermon.
- Anticipating the audience, decide whether the sermon is dominantly reminding believers of the hope that is theirs or whether the sermon is mainly a telling of the gospel.
- In either case a simple declaration of the gospel is appropriate.

A good segue into the gospel might be, “If (name of the deceased) could say one more thing to us right now, what do you suppose it would be?” If you don’t know if the deceased is a Christian, the segue might be, “There is one more thing I think (name of deceased) would like you to hear today. Let me preface it with this: (Name of the deceased) as a person is not dead. Her body has died but she is very much alive. The Bible teaches that she will give an account of her life to God – an exit interview, if you will. We don’t know what happened at that interview, but (name of deceased) knows and God knows. Because of that meeting there are some things (name of deceased) would want YOU to know before you have that meeting and answer to God for the way you have lived.” ([Leading Today's Funeral](#) 69-70)

Gospel facts:

Free Gift

All have sinned

Christ died for our sins

Trust Christ for forgiveness (including repentance) ([Leading Today's Funeral](#) 71)

Processional/Recessional:

Will the casket precede the family into the auditorium or be in place before?
At the appointed hour, pray with the family and then lead the processional (following the casket, if not already in place).

Interment/Committal

The minister precedes the casket from the hearse to the gravesite and then stands at the head of the casket.

When all are assembled the minister introduces the brief service:

Introduction options:

1. Winston Churchill funeral January 24, 1965

He had planned his own funeral to be held at Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London.

The politically mighty were present.

The funeral ended with the mournful playing of “Taps” (the last bugle call at night as the lights go out).

But that was not the final end – Churchill planned another bugler stationed higher above and when “taps” was over, the other bugler played “Reveille” the signal that a new day had dawned because Churchill believed that death marked not the end but the beginning.

2. Many years ago I came across a poem titled “The Dash between the Dates”. Standing amidst many gravestones it is easy to understand what the poet was describing. For on each gravestone there are two dates marking the beginning and the ending of a life here on earth. But what caught the poet’s attention was the dash between the dates. God determines the days of our birth and death but what about the “dash”. That dash represents all the minutes, hours, days and years between the dates. What has been made of all those years? For _____ there were many such years. And she responded to God’s grace. Those years were God-honoring. But now we remember also that the last date that will appear on this grave-marker will not in fact be the last.

Words of committal:

“For we believe as God’s word promised us: He who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit. My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; the body also shall rest in hope. And so in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our sister/brother _____ and we commit his/her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. (paraphrased from the Book of Common Prayer)

The Lord bless him/her and keep her

The Lord make his face to shine upon him/her and be gracious to her.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon him/her and give her peace.

The Lord's Prayer or Confession or Psalm

Benediction

Hebrews 13:20-21 "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Policies:

1. Slides/DVD/etc shall be no more than 4 minutes long **if used in the main body of the funeral/memorial service**. Longer visual/audio presentations may be used as prelude to the service (before the announced start time) or during a reception.
Reason: Lengthy presentations of personal pictures should be reserved for family and close friends rather than for audiences wherein many may not know the deceased that well. There is also a desire to keep funeral services to approximately one hour for the many who may be limited in the time they can give to a service.
2. The casket shall be **open only before and/or after the funeral/memorial service** and shall be closed during the service and following the service.
Reason: As important as it is for loved ones to see the body, not for "closure" but to remember that this is the body that will be raised, an open casket during the service may be especially difficult for those who are already emotionally distraught.)
3. All eulogies combined (formally planned or spontaneously given) shall take no more than 15 minutes of the official funeral/memorial service. (E.g. Three five-minute eulogies; two seven-minute eulogies;

two three-minute eulogies and nine minutes of “open microphone,” etc). When possible the speaker should answer the question, “How have I seen the grace of God reflected in this person’s life?”

Reason: We honor the deceased most by giving glory to God, several eulogies tend to be redundant, and the audience is sometimes comprised of people who know only the living, not the deceased.

4. Military rituals (at the funeral or at the interment) shall be no more than 5 minutes and shall be of a non-religious nature only.

Reason: There are some military rituals, (usually by auxiliary organizations) and usually the longer rituals, that promote a civil religion that is contrary to the Christian faith (See objectionable VFW Burial Ritual below). Secondly, the military element of the funeral/memorial is only a part of the whole and should not consume a disproportionate amount of the time.

5. No rituals of Fraternal Orders shall be combined with the Christian funeral/memorial service.

Reason: Some (most?) fraternal societies promote a civil religion that is contrary to the Christian Faith (in spite of their insistence to the contrary). Also see above re. Military rituals. (see

http://www.freemasonrywatch.org/burial_ritual.html)

6. Through the years we have learned how to order services that honor our Lord and the deceased, respect the congregation and meet the needs of loved ones. We respectfully request the recommended orders of service be observed.

Simple Order of Service

Prelude
 Welcome
 Music?
 Obituary/History
 Eulogy(ies)
 Music
 Scripture/Message
 Prayer
 Music?
 Benediction
 Postlude

Interment (before or after the funeral/memorial service)

Reception (after service or interment)

More Formal Order of Service

Prelude
 Procession
 Opening Sentences (leader and people - antiphonal)
 Psalm or Hymn
 Responsive Prayer of Invocation
 Obituary/Eulogy
 Prayer for Illumination
 Scripture
 Sermon
 Psalm or Hymn
 Creed or Confession (e.g. Apostles' Creed, Heidelberg or Westminster Confession, etc)
 Prayer of hope and comfort (leader and people)
 Commendation of deceased into the Lord's hands
 The Lord's Prayer
 Benediction
 Recessional

Other Liturgies

It is helpful to study funeral/memorial liturgies of other Christian groups to find meaningful variations. Baker's Funeral Handbook edited by Paul Engel is a good source.

Disposition of remains or cremains

<http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/hs/burial.asp>

- There is no requirement that a dead human body or fetus be buried in an established cemetery. Bodies or fetuses may be buried on private land unless local ordinances prohibit it. Cremation is considered "final disposition" and the State retains no control over disposition of the ashes. Ashes may be disposed of as the next of kin desires except for any restriction by local ordinances. It is important to check any federal, county or local laws and ordinances first before disposing of remains.
- A funeral director is not required. However, the funeral director or person acting as such who first assumes custody of the body is the person primarily responsible for the process of completing the death certificate, obtaining the medical certification and filing it with the local registrar in the county of death.
- Embalming is not required if disposal is within 24 hours. However, a dead human body or fetus kept more than 24 hours before burial or cremation MUST be embalmed or properly refrigerated.
- The requirement is not specific concerning type or brand of container. The intent is to preserve the public health and the dignity with which the dead human body is treated. The dead human body or fetus must be in a "tightly sealed container that will prevent the leakage of fluids or odor."

VFW BURIAL RITUAL

Commander: Attention!

We are assembled here to pay a lasting tribute of respect to our departed comrade **(Name of Member)**.

When the call of our country was heard, Comrade **(Members Last Name)** answered; self was forgotten in the cause of the greater good. As a brave man marched away with an abiding faith in God, his country and his flag.

The red of our country's flag was made redder still by his heroism; the white, more stainlessly pure by the motives which impelled him; and, in the starry field of our nation's glorious banner, the blue has been glorified by the service he gave for American ideals.

Commander: "**Parade, rest.**"

Comrade Chaplain you will invoke the divine blessing.

Chaplain: Almighty and Merciful God! Father of us all! Amidst these monuments of the dead we see Thy hand.

In the depth of our sorrow we realize the truth of the inspired words: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

As comrade after comrade departs we march on with the ranks grown thinner.

Help us to be faithful unto Thee and to one another.

We beseech Thee, look in mercy upon all of us here assembled and, with Thine own tenderness, console and comfort those bereaved by the hand of death.

Give them the "oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

Heavenly Father, bless our country with freedom, peace and righteousness, and through Thy Sovereign and Holy Spirit's favor, may we all meet at last before Thy throne of Grace in Heaven. And to Thy Great Name shall be praise for ever and ever. Amen.

Commander: One by one, as the years roll on, we are called upon to fulfill these sad duties of respect to our departed comrades.

The present, full of the cares that beset all nations whether engaged in war or peace, fades away as we look back on the day this comrade left his home to defend his country. Imbued by the spirit of devotion and inspired by an undying love of his land, our comrade gladly went forth and joined with comrades both young and old to preserve our heritage of freedom.

We trust that the example set by our comrade will prove a glorious beacon to the youth of our country, who may be called to uphold the honor of our flag.

As years roll on, we, too shall have finished our fight, shall be laid to rest, and our souls follow the long column to the realms above, as all-enfolding death, hour by hour, shall mark his recruits.

Comrades, let us so live that when the Keeper of the Eternal Records shall have called our names for the last time, those we have left behind may say of us, as we now say of this Comrade . "Here lies all that is mortal of a true-hearted comrade, and a fearless defender of our country and our flag."

And more....

In Life and in Death: A Pastoral Guide for Funerals by Leonard VanderZee
Baker's Funeral Handbook
A Contemporary Handbook for Weddings and Funerals
When Death Occurs : A Practical Consumer's Guide to Burial, Cremation,
Body Donation, Funerals, and Memorials

LEARN MORE

Don't miss Anne Zaki's account of [Christian funerals in Egypt](#).

Listen to Thomas G. Long's lecture "[Accompany Them with Singing: The Recovery of Authentic Christian Funeral Practices](#)." Listen to Thomas Long at http://www.calvin.edu/worship/services/occasion/funerals/accompany_singing.php

Read his *Theology Today* essay "[Why Jessica Mitford Was Wrong: Recovering the American Funeral](#)."

Give yourself an easy crash course on how [Christian funeral rites](#) have changed since the church began, vary by [theological](#) and [cultural tradition](#), differ from [other religions](#), and have changed in the [United States](#).

See: <http://www.calvin.edu/worship/services/occasion/funerals/>

Consult or discuss these books:

- *[In Life and in Death: A Pastoral Guide for Funerals](#)* by Leonard VanderZee
- *[Lament for a Son](#)* by Nicholas Wolterstorff
- *[The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade](#)* by Thomas Lynch
- *[Traveling Through Grief: Learning to Live Again after the Death of a Loved One](#)* by Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. DeVries

The following is from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship
<http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/funerals.php>

Memorial services happen without a dead body, which, to essayist and undertaker [Thomas Lynch](#), “seems like...having a baptism without the baby or a wedding without the bride.”

Thomas Long offered these ideas for how Christian communities can do funerals as baptismal reenactments:

- Ask pall bearers to bring the casket through the front door and down the center aisle.
- Cover the casket with a white pall to recall baptism and symbolize that in God’s eyes, every person is precious. This could be done in the narthex or along with reciting, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27).
- Have clergy meet the coffin at the center aisle, perhaps saying, “Our sister, Elena Garcia, a lamb of God’s own flock, a sinner of God’s own redeeming.”
- The processional could stop from time to time along the center aisle, perhaps while someone announces significant events, such as,

“Elena was baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on January 31, 1928.”

- As you help plan the funeral, welcome family and friends to speak about “how we have seen the grace of God refracted in this particular life.”
- If the dead body cannot be present, then “evoke its presence with language. Don’t just talk about Jane’s spirit. Remember what Jane did with her hands and her feet, how she sat here with us on Sunday mornings.”
- Consider having the pastor lead part of the funeral standing in the pews. Long recalls hearing a pastor say, at the funeral of someone who’d committed suicide, “God, we loved David. He was one of us. Now we entrust him to you.”

The following is from: http://www.calvin.edu/worship/planning/5_09_04.php

WE SORROW/LAMENT/GRIEVE OVER DISEASE AND DEATH

(The title used for this section of the service is usually determined by the circumstances, such as whether the death was tragic and traumatic, or a long time in coming through disease, and so on.)

This section usually includes worship items such as the following:

- Reflections on the journey of the deceased one, particularly if he or she struggled with disease
- Spoken words of lament, through a song or psalm
- Prayers that give honest expressions of pain

- Songs (see below for possibilities)

WE GIVE THANKS FOR A VALUABLE LIFE

This section usually includes worship items such as the following:

- Ministry of music (songs that were favorites of the deceased one)
- Reflections from friends and family members
- Songs sung by all (see below for possibilities)
- A litany in affirmation of the value of life
- Scripture readings
- Reflections on Scripture passages that affirm life

WE CELEBRATE CHRIST'S VICTORY AND OUR HOPE

This section usually includes worship items such as the following:

- Songs (see below for possibilities)
- Scripture readings
- Reflections/meditations on the gospel of salvation and hope
- Affirmations of faith and hope using historic creeds/confessions
- Prayers
- Words of blessing and assurance for the family

At times we have concluded a memorial service with the tolling of the bell seven times to represent the fullness of Christ's work for us and the completion of the life of the deceased.