

Planning a Funeral

September 16, 2015

First, we want to offer our condolences to you and to your family. If you are talking to us about a funeral, then something terribly sad has happened, and we're sorry! Even if they have been sick for a long time and are now free from pain—even if they were old and lived a long and fantastic life—it is still all very sad, and we pray that God will fill you and your family with His grace and comfort, and we hope that whatever plans we make together will honor God and this person in your life!

We offer this as a simple checklist as you work through this experience. We realize that most families in this situation may have never had to plan a worship service or funeral before, and so we hope that this will help in some way. You are free to plan your own service! But perhaps knowing some of the choices to make will make it easier.

1. **Venue:** The first decision is where. The service may be at another church, a funeral home, at the cemetery in a chapel, or only at the graveside.
2. **Time and Logistics:** Because the church is often busy (and is often rented to other congregations), funerals have to be planned carefully. Make sure that you have complete approval so that you can announce it to your friends and family.
 - a. How much time to allow? Doors should open 30 minutes before the service begins. The ideal service is between 50-80 minutes. Longer than an hour and a half will feel long to some of the family and congregation, and longer than two hours will feel uncomfortable. Remember to allow time for the congregation to greet the family afterwards (can take from 30-60 minutes), and for time to transition to a graveside service if that is planned.
 - b. Some good rules of thumb: Services won't begin until about 10 minutes after the announce time, to get people inside. To speed up entry, have more than one Guest Book. Musical numbers will average about 5 minutes. A good eulogy will be about 10 minutes. A slide show should be 8-10 minutes. The homily may be up to about 15 minutes. The variable is often the testimonies, tributes, or the open mic time. If you give people 3 minutes, they will often take 7-10. They have never timed themselves speaking before. They write up 3 pages, and hope to read them all in 3 minutes! They can't! Choose different representatives from various groups—family, grandchildren, friends from work, etc., and let them represent an entire group. Limit the open mic time to about 12-15 minutes max.
 - c. Once the time has been set, make sure that the Church sets up times for set up for the service, times for the doors to be open, and people are designated for AV, open and close, cleanup if needed, etc.
3. **Options:**
 - a. Funeral Service—With a casket (whether open or closed)
 - b. Memorial Service—No casket, just a picture or collage of pictures (often with cremation)
 - c. Funeral with Graveside following, open to all
 - d. Funeral with Graveside at another time only for family, invited friends.
 - e. Notes: Cemeteries often have rules about set times. Plan for the travel time to the cemetery, etc. Also, Church and/or families often plan a dinner or reception for family and friends after the services—keep all that in mind as you plan for the day.
4. **Personnel:** Discuss with the family who they would like to have involved in the service. There are several slots available if you wish to involve more than one pastor, or other family members or friends, for example—Welcome/Prayer, Scripture reading, eulogy, tributes, homily, Graveside homily, Committal prayer, prayer at the reception. Pastors don't compete over these things—they serve at the discretion of the family, so feel comfortable with your own choices without worrying too much about leaving somebody out or other factors. It is your service, and you are free to plan

a service that will honor God, respect the person who has passed, and be a comfort to the family and friends who attend.

5. **Project:** Often the family wants to designate a project as a memorial to the one who has passed. This can be a favorite charity, or a mission project, or to fund a scholarship, or support a ministry in their church. A note should be put in the program telling people how they can support that Memorial Project. A note can also be put into whatever announcements are sent out about the services—"in Lieu of flowers, the family wishes donations be made to...." Arrangements of course then need to be made with that charity or project to receive those donations.
6. **Setup:**
 - a. Program? Picture on the program?
 - b. Picture on the screen? Or picture at entrance, or by the casket, or on the platform?
 - c. Flowers? Make sure that florists have access to the venue and that somebody arranges them on the platform and graveside site, and arranges for what will happen afterwards.
 - d. Guest Book, pen, attendant?
 - e. Water, tissues?
7. **Program Options:**
 - a. Background music with picture on screen—organ, piano, recorded?
 - b. Beginning—Welcome, Prayer
 - c. Scripture Reading—often texts meaningful to the deceased person or family
 - d. Music—recorded, congregational singing, or performances. Allow 5 min. per song.
 - e. Eulogy (or Obituary or Life Sketch)—meet as a family, one person writing down key events, dates, stories, humor, anything that describes the core of that person! Write it out, plan for about 8-12 minutes, and ask someone who knows the family well to read it.
 - f. Tributes—See note above. 3-4 representatives of various groups—children, grandchildren, work associates, church members. Give them 3 minutes each, knowing that it can easily be 6 or more. 1 page single-spaced will be more than enough. Trust others to cover what one person does not!
 - g. Open-Mic time—Families often want to give others a chance to speak. If in a large venue a roving mic may be needed, with attendant. Have the pastor or somebody who knows the congregation well lead out from the front mic. Allow maybe a maximum of 12-15 minutes, giving people notice towards the end that there will only be time for one or two more.
 - h. Slide Show—A slide show has become very popular. Often the mortuary will help put it together with pictures provided by the family, but of course for a fee. If done privately, make sure that all the technical arrangements are made and practiced ahead of time. Allow 8-10 minutes. It is not a family anniversary or history, but a chance to share the heart and soul of the person who is now missing, and should tell their story to the congregation and family.
 - i. Homily—Invite whoever the family or the deceased was closest to, to share a homily,. Most often pastors will appreciate being nearer the end of the service, so that they benefit from hearing all the stories and information. Budget 12-15 minutes.
 - j. Family thanks—often one family member will be designated to thank everybody for coming, and invite them to the graveside and to the reception, if appropriate.
 - k. Benediction
 - l. Greeting and offering condolences—Most often the funeral director will then invite the congregation to come forward to greet the family. The family sits on the front row, stands, and the congregation is ushered from the back by ushers or funeral home personnel to come forward, pause by the casket, and then greet the family quickly. If a smaller congregation, this can be just 15-20 minutes. If 400-500 people, this can easily take an hour. The pastors will often stand near the casket to greet the congregation and comfort as needed.

- m. Transition—If this is a funeral service, and there is an open casket, the transition from the main service to the graveside is a sensitive time. This is probably the last time on earth that the family will see their loved one, and that is not easy. The funeral home director and the pastor can help say a little prayer, perhaps some last pictures are taken, encourage your family to say their final goodbyes, and then they must close the casket and begin the processional with the casket and flowers to go to the graveside.
 - i. Pallbearers—this is when the pallbearers serve. They may be given gloves. The funeral director will guide them in taking the handles on both sides (3 to 4 on a side, others can be honorary pallbearers), and help carry the casket to the hearse. The pastors will often lead.
 - ii. If going to a graveside service, provide directions to the cemetery
- 8. **Graveside Service:** Traditionally this service is quite short—10-20 minutes. It is outdoors, most will need to stand, it can be quite hot, and everything has really already been said in the main service. This is the final Committal.
 - a. Music—there can be one or two special musical numbers, or congregational singing. If congregational singing, print out the words on the program or in a special sheet to be passed out. Consider just using first and last verses, or the verses that are the most well-known. Designate somebody to lead out.
 - b. Scripture reading
 - c. Message—often five minutes or less
 - d. Committal Prayer
 - e. Flowers or Dirt—at some point the family may wish to allow family and friends to lay a flower on the casket, or throw it down once the casket has been lowered, or throw a handful of dirt. It often helps to have a bucket of flowers to be passed out to everybody, and other flowers can be plucked from the sprays.
 - f. Watching the burial—it has become traditional among many families to stay and watch the entire process of closing the tomb. That is the family's choice, and the funeral director will guide. Insurance policies often dictate that families stay well back of the equipment as they work.
 - g. Announce any reception that is planned, and provide directions.

God bless you and your family as you plan your service, and may the promises and messages shared all be a comfort to all of you!