

Planning a Funeral, Memorial, or Celebration of Life

By Rev. Arthur Wille

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” Psalm 90:12 (NIV)

For people of faith, it is important to mark and celebrate the life of a loved one at the conclusion of their days. The primary focus of a faith-based funeral or memorial service is the worship of God, and the celebration of the life of the departed. Typically, the word *funeral* is used when the body is present, usually within several days of death; and the words *memorial service* are used when the event takes place afterward, with cremains in an urn or not at all.

People of faith have a variety of expectations for marking the transition of life to death for a loved one. The ideal is to have a conversation about this topic prior to death, rather than leaving all of the decisions to family members and/or a designated power of attorney. A worksheet, developed by Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Grafton, to gather important information for a funeral or memorial service is attached at the end of this article.

Shortly following death, a power of attorney or family member needs to contact the pastor or designated spiritual leader with the request to create and officiate at a service. The officiant will establish a time to meet with the family, listen to emotions and stories about their loved one, answer questions they may have about both spiritual and practical matters, and help them plan a service that meets their needs.

The officiant will ask whether the deceased had favorite scriptures, poems, music, or other requests that would be appropriate to include in his/her/their memorial service. Are there memories, musical and spoken word resources, as well as life themes, and interests that should be recognized in the service?

Does the family want the final service to take place in the sanctuary and/or fellowship hall of the church, or is the request to have the service in a funeral home, or an outdoor venue? The officiant will ask the family if they would like a visitation the evening before, or for several hours immediately preceding the service. Will there be a casket with the body or an urn with the cremains present during the visitation and the service? The officiant will ask whether relatives would like to select hymns for congregational singing, or if he/she/they should locate recorded music, or recruit musicians to perform live music during the service.

The family of the deceased should be prepared for a question about how many worshipers will attend. This will help the worship planner know how many chairs are needed, and how much food to provide should the family choose to offer a luncheon following the service. If the church or funeral home is requested to plan a fellowship meal following the service, the officiant may provide the name of an individual who can meet with the family to suggest a menu and discuss the practical matters of offering a meal.

The officiant will want to know if there will be a committal service at a cemetery directly following the service, or if that will occur prior to the service, or sometime later in the day, or in the coming day, week, month or year.

Many clergy who serve as officiants use worship books with suggested liturgies for memorial services, and have additional alternative liturgies that could be considered. Officiants are usually open to working with the bereaved to develop a service that thanks God for the gift of life, especially the life of the deceased, and customizes the service to celebrate the particular individual.

Ask your pastor, a social worker, or a grief counselor to help you develop your end-of-life plans. They are located on the Wisconsin Conference website under Older Adult Ministry. As one helpful booklet says:

“To My Family and Friends, I graciously created this plan as my last gift to all of you. I carefully prepared this plan ahead of time, so you wouldn’t have to struggle with the stress, as well as the many decisions that would need to be made. I hope this will bring you as much peace of mind as it has brought to me.”

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