



Worksheet 13: Funerals

Everyone dies. It is one of the great truths of life - it comes to an end. When it does, a well-conducted Christian funeral service is able to offer hope to all those who mourn.

A Christian funeral service has four purposes: to witness to God's faithfulness in life and death; to thank God for the life of the deceased person; to comfort those who are mourning; and to dispose reverently of the body. Only after the final disposal of the body is the funeral concluded.



1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

We do not grieve as those who have no hope

Christian funerals are conducted in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Christians believe that death marks a new beginning in our relationship with God. At a funeral service we give thanks to God for God's faithfulness in life and death. We commend the person we love into the hands of God sure that God will receive them with love. It is an essential part of the role of the celebrant at a Christian funeral to proclaim this hope, and it is important that the Scripture readings and music chosen reflect it. All Christian funerals are proclamations of the resurrection.

Because of the resurrection, Christians can be utterly honest about the fact that the person we love has died. They have not merely fallen asleep, passed on, or slipped into another room. Their soul has not simply left their body. They are dead. As Jesus stood outside the grave of Lazarus and wept, so we weep. We acknowledge that the death of someone we love is a shattering loss.

Trusting in the infinite mercy of God

As we thank God for the life of someone we love, we do so with integrity. The service in *Uniting in Worship 2* includes a Prayer of Confession that contains the lines: 'Father, forgive us if there have been times when we failed N. Enable us by your grace to forgive N anything that was hurtful to us.' We acknowledge the times when we were hurt by the person we loved and the times when we failed them, knowing that God forgives both their sins and ours.

A Christian funeral recognises that we do not earn our place in heaven. Even someone whose life was destructive and depraved can be commended to God in a Christian funeral. The 'Introduction' to the funeral service of the Uniting Church offers a form of words that can be used at the funerals of anyone for whose life we find it difficult to thank God: we acknowledge their death. Just as no one is beyond God's mercy, so no one is deprived of a Christian funeral.

Civil rituals, for example those conducted by the RSL or the Freemasons, may be important ways of remembering the person who has died, although they are not alternatives to the central hope offered by a Christian funeral. Whatever our achievements in life, ultimately what matters is that we are loved by God.



This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is prepared for the Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Doctrine website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/cudw

Questions

Read the funeral service in *Uniting in Worship 2*, including the notes. Which elements of the service resonate with you? Which surprise you?

What preparations have you made for your funeral? Have you chosen Bible readings or pieces of music? Have you talked to anyone, family, friends, minister, about what you would like?

The funeral service in *Uniting in Worship 2* suggests special prayers for the funeral of a child; or where the funeral follows death by suicide, or violence or in especially tragic circumstances. Have you attended one of these funerals? Was the service a helpful response to such tragedy?

Describe a particularly meaningful funeral? What made it meaningful?

The Introduction to the Uniting Church Funeral Service

We are here today to give thanks to God for the life of [name],

(or, to acknowledge the passing of [name],)

and to affirm the Christian conviction that while death is the end of mortal life,

it marks a new beginning in our relationship with God.

We are also here to share the sorrow of those who mourn,

and to offer them our love and support.

Further Reading

Thomas G. Long's *Accompany Them With Singing—The Christian Funeral*, Westminster / John Knox Press (2009)



Sharing the sorrow of those who mourn

A fundamental purpose of a Christian funeral is to comfort those who are mourning. Grieving does not begin or end with the funeral, but a funeral is an important part of the grieving process. At a funeral, mourners remember the person they loved in ways that are important to them. Favourite pieces of music can be played; particular poems or pieces of literature read; displays of the person's life put up at the church. When planning a funeral it is important for the celebrant to talk with the family about what will help them to say good-bye.

The 'Words of Remembrance' are a significant element of the service. Their purpose is to give mourners an honest sense of the person they loved. The 'Words of Remembrance' do not need to be comprehensive, and in fact a long list of everything the person has ever done is unhelpful. There simply need to be enough memories shared to enable the people gathered to remember a unique, God-given, life.



Reverently disposing of the body

The difference between a funeral and a memorial service is the presence or absence of the body. There can be good reasons for having a memorial service rather than a funeral, for example, if the person died overseas. The modern discomfort with the reality of death is not a good reason for having a memorial service.

Christianity is a deeply embodied religion. In the Incarnation God became flesh, and so Christians treat bodies with reverence. This is true even when our perishable physical bodies are no longer needed. The presence of the body is an important part of the funeral service. The body was an intrinsic element of the life of the person we loved; it needs to be treated with dignity and respect.

Accompanying the body to its final resting place is the last thing we can do for the person we loved. In the case of cremation that final resting place is when the ashes are interred or scattered. For various reasons this is often delayed for long periods. Whenever it occurs, however, the church can accompany the mourners at that moment.



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