

Celebrating Life with a Funeral and Memorial Service in the Church

Rev. Kent Horsman of Edson United Church developed this resource for families who have been asked or given the responsibility of planning a funeral or memorial service for a loved one.

Christian faith invites us to believe that every human life is a unique creation of God and therefore a good gift from God. We love the people in our lives, and that's why when they die, we experience such grief and sadness. It doesn't feel good to experience being cut off from a loving relationship at any time in our lives.

And yet, we know that every human life has its ending too. God didn't intend immortality for the human species. Death is real. Sometimes death occurs the way we all wish it would: peacefully, after a full and long life, without much suffering. More often human life ends with illness and not a little suffering. Sometimes, life ends with tragedy: by accident, or worse, by acts of violence at the hands of other human beings.

Yet, in the face of the permanence of death, Christians...hope! We hope and believe that death isn't the end of us. We hope and believe that God will raise all of our lives into a new life and in a new creation at a future time of God's choosing. Christians may not believe in immortality, but we believe that God acts in the world, making things new, and we hope in a future where one day God will raise everyone into new life.

And so not only do we grieve the loss of a loved one, we also trust that God will make good on the promise of eternal life, that death itself, is not the end.

With that in mind, Christians celebrate life even while we grieve and mourn the loss of relationship with our loved one. And the church invites you to consider how you will choose to celebrate life.

And to that end, we have prepared this for your use in wondering about how best to celebrate and give honour to your loved one.

Please consider the following information as you prepare for your service with the funeral director and any clergy person or other presider.

The Funeral and Memorial Service: An Overview

Generally, we begin a service by bringing family members into the place of worship and have them seated. It's entirely appropriate for the family to remain seated throughout the entire service as a sign of respect.

It is entirely appropriate if the family wishes to carry in a token of love and place it on the casket, or on the table with holding pictures of your loved one, or perhaps his or her urn. These mementos can then be gathered for use at the cemetery later. Speak to the funeral director about options and choices.

Next, the service continues with reading brief sentences from the Holy Scriptures, welcoming people to the service and inviting people to pray. The service continues with a hymn or a special selection of contemporary music, and follows with the eulogy.

The eulogy is simply a short reflection, usually by a close friend or family member, about your loved one and his or her life.

You can also ask other people to come forward to share in their memories and the minister usually incorporates this into the service following the eulogy.

Remember: it's far more meaningful to share stories about your loved one, than simply to depend on a minister or a presider to do this for you. Often ministers and presiders will not know your loved one and they would gladly have others come forward to share in memories.

Following the eulogy, the service might include another hymn, or song, or move directly to the reading of selections from the Bible, and a message from the minister and/or presider.

You might wish to include a soloist to sing following the sermon or message. You might wish to include a song for people to listen in memory of your loved one.

Next, the minister/presider will invite everyone to join in a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of your loved one. Here the prayers will focus on thanking God for the gift of your loved one's life. This prayer generally concludes with the Prayer of Jesus, most commonly known as The Lord's Prayer.

At this point, announcements might be given regarding arrangements for the interment of ashes or the casket at the cemetery, and instructions regarding a luncheon following the service. Another hymn might be sung, or song played.

Then the minister/presider will give the "Commendation" where he or she will commend your loved one into God's love and care.

If your loved one was a member of a club, or society, or the Legion, that group might then have a special farewell ritual to honour the deceased.

The service ends with the minister/presider giving a blessing to the mourners and the family will be led out from the place of worship.

At the cemetery

Wherever you decide to inter the remains of a loved one, the minister will wait until everyone is gathered at the location and very briefly offer some words from scripture, offer words committing the remains or ashes to the ground and the loved one into God's keeping. Generally you can expect this ritual to take only a few moments.

The family is often encouraged to place mementos and tokens on the casket or in the plot as a gesture of farewell.

With young children...

As in all things, children are naturally curious. Don't be afraid to explain bits and pieces as questions come up. Don't be embarrassed

by their curiosity: nobody else will think anything less of their questions and comments. Encouraging children to be comfortable with questions will help them to feel better. Showing grief in front of children is also normal and something to encourage so that it help them learn about sharing in grief.

Invite the children to consider how they want to be involved, whether it's drawing pictures to be included in the casket or in the plot at the cemetery, or saying something at the funeral, or making cards for mourners to see and appreciate.

Involving children will help them to feel included and make the service more meaningful.

Eight Good Points in Planning

Here are eight good points to consider as you plan the service. Discussing these will make for a more meaningful service overall.

Point One: The eulogy can be more than just the facts...

Consider including some stories or remembrances of the person from different points in his or her life. Giving simple biographical information with dates is good for the newspaper, but sharing a story or a memory that highlights significant "chapters" of their life's story is much more meaningful. When we celebrate a human life, it's what happens between the dates of birth and death that matter most. You may find it easier to divide the person's life into 5 chapters or paragraphs and have an illustration for each. For instance, the first paragraph begins with the birth and early childhood, second paragraph covers the teenage and young adult years, paragraph three the start of family, marriage and early career. Paragraph four can describe the older adult to mid-life years, and the final paragraph could conclude with the final years of your loved one's life.

Point Two: Invite family/friends to share in memories of your loved one.

If the minister doesn't know your loved one personally, it's unlikely that he or she will be able to personalize a message without sounding

somewhat distant and perhaps awkward. Ask family friends and relatives to be prepared to share a short, fond memory of your loved one. You will find that this isn't as hard as it sounds! And it makes a wonderful difference to any memorial or funeral service.

We gather to celebrate your loved one's life and give thanks to God for that life. Even in the most difficult of deaths, sharing stories helps to heal and begin the grieving process.

Point Three: What music shall be played?

Are there any hymns you would like to have played so that people can sing together? It's suggested that you choose at least two hymns and not more than four.

Are there any contemporary pieces of music that your loved one enjoyed and you would like to play in memory of him or her? You will need to work with the funeral director to ensure that the right format for playing music will be chosen. Work with the minister and/or presider of the service to ask about if the church or religion have any concerns about contemporary music being played.

Point Four: Did your loved one have any particular scripture passages she or he enjoyed?

Are there any passages from the Bible you would like read at the service? What about other inspirational poems or readings?

Point Five: Prayers of Thanksgiving

It is the custom of many ministers to offer prayers of thanksgiving for the life of your loved one. Again, to make these prayers more credible, it would be helpful to have personal information about your loved one.

So, gather with your family and friends and write up a list of answers to the following questions. Explore them together. There will be laughter, tears, and many memories. It all helps in the grieving process.

- a) when you think of your loved one, what are you thankful for about his or her life?
- b) What aspects about your loved one's life will you miss most?
- c) What things did she or he teach you about: life, love, work, relationships, values, beliefs
- d) Is there anything that you found difficult about your loved one? What can you name that you found a challenge about them? Is this something that can be named in a prayer, asking for forgiveness, or understanding, or merely something we can let go now that death has happened?

Put all of these onto a piece of paper and share them with the minister/presider on the day before the funeral/memorial so she or he can incorporate them into the prayers of thanksgiving.

Point Six: Will you want someone to sing a solo at the service? If so, please inform the funeral director and the minister/presider.

Point Seven: No need to panic! People will appreciate your good efforts and find that you've created a beautiful and meaningful service. Trust in your funeral director and minister/presider who have plenty of experiences helping families like yours. Ask questions if you have any.

Point Eight: Trust in God. Say a prayer to God asking for strength and peace over the coming days. And turn to your loved ones and friends for encouragement and support. God will be present there too.

We hope this resource will be helpful to you as you plan to celebrate your loved one's life with the church.

Blessings and peace,

Edson United Church