

Preparing and Leading a Funeral Service

in the United Reformed Church



Produced by the Mission & Discipleship Committee
of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church

Text by Rosalind Selby and Mike Walsh

Design: Mike Walsh 2018

a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches

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the Way
Living the life of Jesus today

Preparing and leading a Funeral Service

in the United Reformed Church

Contact with the Funeral Director

Getting the information you need 3

Contact with the bereaved family

Making contact 4

Preparing for the visit 4

Visiting the bereaved family to prepare the service

Suggested structure of your visit 5

Gathering the necessary details 6 - 8

Additional notes 9 - 10

Example Orders of Service

Cremation only 11

Church followed by Committal 12 - 13

Committal followed by Church 14 - 15

Further Options 16 - 18

Suggested Hymns 19

Suggested Bible Readings 20

Resources 20

Contact with the Funeral Director

Unless it is a family known to you, your first point of contact will usually be with a funeral director. This will often be a quick phone conversation to check yours, and if required, the church's availability. The conversation should also cover brief details of the deceased, names and contact details of the family members responsible for the funeral arrangements, and a discussion about costs and relevant fees for you and the church.

By the end of the conversation you should be comfortable that you have

- ▶ Details of the deceased, including Name, Age, Next of Kin
- ▶ Family details and contact information to arrange to visit them, including Name, Phone Number, Address
- ▶ Time(s) and venue(s) for the service(s), including how long is your 'slot' at the crematorium
- ▶ Arranged all appropriate fees for yourself and others involved if the service is to be held in church, eg Organist, Stewards, etc
- ▶ Any sensitive information it would be good to know before making contact with the family, eg tragic circumstances regarding the death, or difficult relationship with the deceased

Crematoria and Cemeteries

It will usually be the Funeral Directors who will make all the arrangements with the crematorium or cemetery. However, always check with the funeral director about any practical details you are unsure of.

Contact with the bereaved family

Initial contact with the bereaved family is usually by telephone and is a brief conversation to arrange to visit in person to make all the necessary arrangements for the service.

By the end of the conversation you should be comfortable that you have

- ▶ Arranged a venue to meet, usually the deceased home or the family members home.
- ▶ Discussed who might be present for the visit, eg spouse, children
- ▶ Suggested what they might like to think about before you visit,
- ▶ eg. Music, who will speak, poems, some significant life events memories about the deceased

Preparing for the Visit

What to take;

- ▶ Funeral Details Form
- ▶ Draft Order of Service
- ▶ URC Service Book
- ▶ Bible and suggestions of suitable readings
- ▶ Hymn Book and suggestions of suitable hymns

Also remember;

- ▶ Be punctual
- ▶ Dress appropriately
- ▶ Remember your visit is pastoral, not just functional
- ▶ Listen and ask questions
- ▶ Offer to pray before you leave

Visiting the bereaved family

This section is a guide to collecting all the information you need to be able to put together a meaningful and personal funeral service. It does not contain detailed advice on the pastoral nature of visiting a bereaved family.

Every funeral visit is different. Sometimes you will find people are very distressed and in shock, who will be looking towards you to guide them confidently through the planning of the service. Others may be trying to cope with their grief by being busy, and will have already planned out a complete service before you arrive. It's also common to encounter a family who have been left detailed instruction by the deceased themselves. It's also possible that the person you meet was not close to the deceased and their approach may seem cold and functional.

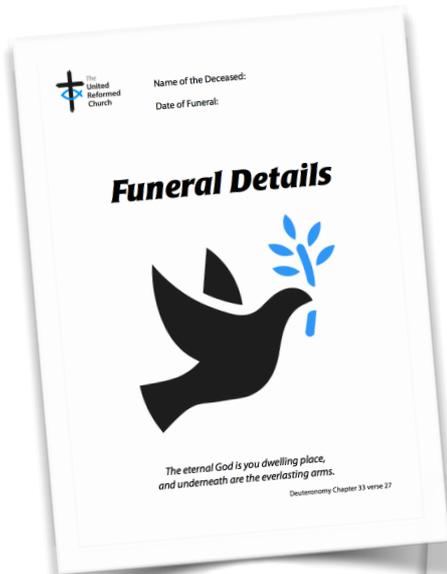
Whatever the circumstances, your job is to the best of your abilities appear confident and caring and to gently steer the conversations to ensure that before you leave both you and the family are content you have shared all the information you each require to prepare effectively.

A suggested structure to your visit;*

- ▶ Introduce yourself and express appropriate condolences
- ▶ Explain the purpose and structure of your visit
 - ▶ Details of the deceased, (Funeral Details form p1)
 - ▶ Practical arrangements for the service(s), (Funeral Details form p2)
 - ▶ Getting to know the deceased, sharing life events and important memories, (Funeral Details form p3)
- ▶ Confirm all arrangements are agreed and understood
- ▶ Prayer

*This structure begins by ensuring you have all the factual information you need to plan the service before spending appropriate time on personal stories and memories. If done in reverse, family members can be too distressed to concentrate on necessary practical details you require from them.

Gathering the necessary details



About the deceased;

Page one of the Funeral Details form asks for basic details of the deceased and their family.

Be sure to check spellings, pronunciation of names, and ask what the family wish the deceased to be known as during the service.

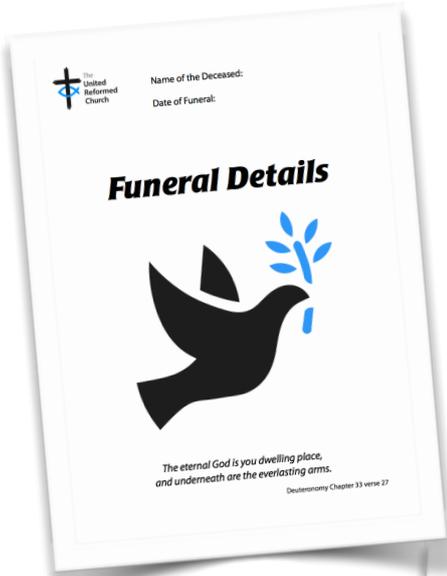
Funeral Details

Funeral Date: _____ Church: _____
 Time: _____

Cremation/Burial _____ Location: _____
 Time: _____

Funeral Directors: _____ Contact Person: _____
 Phone No.: _____

	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Next of Kin</i>
Name:
Known as:	Relation
Age:	Address:
Date of Birth:	/ /
Place of Birth:
Date of Death:	/ /
Place of Death:	Phone:
Occupation:	
Marital Status:	married/single/divorced/widowed	
Spouse Name:	
Children:	Phone:
	Phone:
	Phone:
	Phone:
Church Background / Faith:	



About the service;

Page two of the Funeral Details form asks for basic details of the service, like hymns, readings, family members who will speak, etc.

Be sure to check things like hymn tunes, which version of recorded music, who is providing the music, if younger children will be present.

Service Information

Musician: Phone:

Music:	<i>Reason</i>
Intro:
Exit:
Hymn: 1.
Hymn: 2.

Family member(s) or close friends to speak (optional):

Name	Relationship
.....
.....

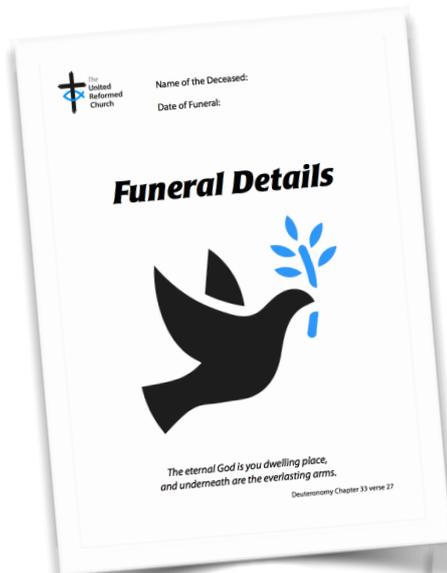
Family member or friend to do a Bible reading/poem (optional):

Name	Relationship
.....

Reading:

Further information:

Expected Numbers:	Adults: Children:
Service Sheet Details:	Funeral Directors print <input type="checkbox"/> Church print <input type="checkbox"/>
	Cover Photo <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet not requested <input type="checkbox"/>
Flowers:	Church Flowers <input type="checkbox"/> Florist's Display <input type="checkbox"/>
Gifts from Guests:	Flowers <input type="checkbox"/> Charity Donation <input type="checkbox"/>
Committal:	Curtains: Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/>
	Family <input type="checkbox"/> Friends <input type="checkbox"/> at
Refreshments:	Family <input type="checkbox"/> Friends <input type="checkbox"/> at



Memories of the deceased;

Page three of the Funeral Details form is a list of prompts for you to help you gather all the personal stories and family memories you need to build a picture of the deceased.

The prompts towards the end of the sheet often produce the most rewarding results.

Personal Stories

to form the basis of the eulogy or tribute

- ▶ Early life & childhood
- ▶ Friends/education
- ▶ Family
- ▶ Church/spirituality
- ▶ Work/home work
- ▶ Hardships
- ▶ Travel
- ▶ Hobbies & interests
- ▶ Social life
- ▶ Later life
- ▶ Illnesses/loss
- ▶ Nicknames/funny phrases
- ▶ Any sensitive information
- ▶ What word(s) would you use to describe them?
- ▶ What did they like to spend time doing?
- ▶ What was important to them?
- ▶ What would you like them to be known for?
- ▶ What would you like them to know?

Additional Planning Notes:

Making it personal

Almost always, in a time of grief, people are grateful to you if you can gently guide them through the planning of the service. When choosing hymns and bible readings, people will often say things like, 'whatever you think's best', 'what was that one we used to sing at school', or, 'we don't want anything sad'. Listen carefully to what people are saying regarding the general mood of the service and be ready to make some suitable suggestions.

Alternatively, some people have very firm ideas about what they (or their loved one) want and don't want, and you may find yourself facing a request you personally are not comfortable with. It is increasingly common for people to request a service which isn't 'religious', and to request secular music and readings. You need to think carefully and pastorally about how comfortable you are accommodating such requests. You can always request that someone in the family reads something you are not comfortable with personally.

It is also quite common to have to gently discourage people from putting too much into the service, particularly at a crematorium. Unless a double 'slot' has been booked and paid for, you will usually only have around 25 minutes once taking into account the time it takes for people to enter and exit the chapel.

If a family member or friend is leading the tribute it is always wise to suggest that it should be around 7 minutes long, (knowing that most people will then take 10!). You should gently suggest that what they want to say is written out in full for a number of reasons; it is easy to forget something important you wish to say during the emotion of the occasion if you do not have notes, it is much easier to keep to timings with notes, and you can step in if they are too upset to continue.

Helping people grieve

Even if you are not leading the tribute you should always spend time during your visit with the family talking about the deceased. Usually people find it helpful to talk about the person who has died, even if the relationship was not good. Listen carefully for what is said and not said. Ask interested questions and respond with summary statements like, 'It sounds like they were a very person'. The family's confidence in you will increase if they feel you are listening well and building an understanding of their relationship and memories of the deceased.

Sometimes what is being said to you about the person who has died isn't very nice, families are very complex things! Even if the relationship was good, people will often display a range of seemingly contradictory emotions, love and anger, regret and relief, guilt and release. Reassure everyone this is all normal and healthy during the grieving process.

As you lead more funeral services you will come across all sorts of different situations and some of them are particularly harrowing, so make sure you have someone who supports you too.

Curtains and Coffins

Most families will expect the curtains to close at some point during a crematorium service, and likewise, the tradition of throwing a handful of soil onto the coffin at a burial is usually expected too. However, it is always good to check precisely what is expected. Some prefer the curtains to close during the words of committal, others at the very end of the service, and occasionally you will be asked not to close the curtains at all. Likewise, for some the throwing of soil is not something they are comfortable with, so never assume.

And remember, whatever plans you have made with the family, you need to communicate to the funeral directors and crematorium staff or they may do something different to what you have arranged.

Order of Service

Crematorium only

The congregation are invited to stand before the coffin enters

Music to enter by

Welcome

Call to Worship & Introduction

Hymn or Song

Prayers of Approach

Reading(s) – Scripture 1 or 2 – or Scripture 1 and, eg, poem

Memories of the Deceased/Eulogy

Prayers of Thanksgiving for the life of [xxx] and for those who mourn

Allow a time of silence during these prayers for people's own thoughts and memories and, depending upon the situation, for letting go regrets.

Before the closing hymn is often a good point for any notices: The family thanks you for coming, if anyone wants to make a donation in memory of [xxx] all monies will go to [xxx], you are all invited to [xxx] for refreshments afterwards.

Hymn or Song

Commendation and Committal (curtains close)

People are invited, if able, to remain standing as a mark of respect.

Blessing (for the congregation)

Music

Invite people to sit and pause for a moment as the exit music plays,

Additional Notes:

At many Crematorium you will be invited to leave the chapel by a different door to the one you entered by. The Funeral Directors will usually have collected flowers and cards and set them out somewhere outside, and family and friends will be invited to gather here. There is then time for people to greet the immediate family. The Funeral Directors will usually advise when it is time to depart.

Order of Service

Church Service, with Committal at the crematorium or graveside

Church

The congregation are invited to stand before the coffin enters

Music

Welcome

Call to Worship & Introduction

Hymn or Song

Prayers of Approach

Reading(s) – Scripture 1 or 2 – or Scripture 1 and, eg, poem

Memories of the Deceased/Eulogy

Address or Sermon (a few words on the Christian hope from you)

Prayers of Thanksgiving for the life of [xxx] and for those who mourn

Allow a time of silence during these prayers for people's own thoughts and memories and, depending upon the situation, for letting go regrets.

Before the closing hymn is often a good point for any notices: The family thanks you for coming, if anyone wants to make a donation in memory of [xxx] all monies will go to [xxx]. Also make clear whether everyone is welcome to join the family for the committal, or not. Similarly announce arrangements for any refreshments afterwards.

Hymn or Song

Commendation

People are invited, if able, to remain standing as a mark of respect.

Blessing

Music

Immediate family will usually follow the coffin out of the church.

Crematorium or Graveside

The congregation are invited to stand as the coffin enters during the opening music

(Music)

Opening Words (after which people are seated)

Reading

Prayers (including a time of quiet for personal thoughts)

Lord's Prayer

The congregation is invited to stand

Commendation (if not at the church service)

Committal

(curtains close if requested, or soil may be thrown onto the coffin)

Prayer

Blessing

(Music)

Additional Notes:

When there is to be a church service (either preceding or following the committal) the time at the crematorium or graveside is quite short. There are usually no hymns or long tributes as these are part of the church service. The committal is the time for private prayer and the point at which to say a final goodbye.

Order of Service

Committal at the crematorium or graveside, followed by a thanksgiving service at church

Crematorium or Graveside

The congregation are invited to stand as the coffin enters during the opening music

Music (if at crematorium)

Opening Words (after which people are seated if at crematorium)

Prayers (including a time of quiet for personal thoughts)

Lord's Prayer

Reading

Tribute (a very short tribute to the deceased is given)

Hymn or Song (a hymn may be sung if at the crematorium)

Invitation to the church service

The congregation is invited to stand

Commendation (if not at the church service)

Committal

(curtains close if requested, or soil may be thrown onto the coffin)

Prayer

Blessing

Music (if at crematorium)

Additional Notes:

When there is to be a church service (either preceding or following the committal) the time at the crematorium or graveside is quite short. There are usually no hymns or long tributes as these are part of the church service. The committal is the time for private prayer and the point at which to say a final goodbye.

Church

A service of thanksgiving

Music

Call to Worship & Introduction

(making sure people who haven't been at Crem understand that this is a service of thanksgiving, the family and closest friends having already said their 'goodbyes' and commended Fred into God's safekeeping)

Hymn

Prayers of approach

Reading(s) – Scripture 1 or 2 – or Scripture 1 and, eg, poem

Memories of the Deceased/Eulogy

Address or Sermon (a few words on the Christian hope from you)

Hymn or Song (optional)

Prayers of Thanksgiving for the life of [xxx] and for those who mourn

Allow a time of silence during these prayers for people's own thoughts and memories and, depending upon the situation, for letting go regrets.

Before the closing hymn is often a good point for any notices: The family thanks you for coming, if anyone wants to make a donation in memory of [xxx] all monies will go to [xxx]. Also make clear whether everyone is welcome or any refreshments after the service.

Prayer

Blessing

Music

Additional Notes:

???

Further options

Less usual arrangements and alternative requests and traditions

Church service only

This is not common, but is a possibility. This is where the whole service is completed at church, including the commendation and committal. No-one then follows the coffin to the crematorium or graveside where the disposal will happen with no further rites.

Burials

Many cemeteries will have a chapel, in which case, everything for a crematorium services can be used here.

However, you could just be doing something very short at the graveside and not use a burial chapel at all. This can also be before or after a church service.

At a burial, remember to change the traditional wording of the committal to “earth to earth, dust to dust” [instead of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”].

Beware if a burial takes places in very bad weather. Be ready, to leave out a reading or shorten the prayers. Wear appropriate footwear and take a large umbrella to keep you and your service notes dry.

Remember there will be no microphone system for what is said at the graveside. Therefore don't do too much and speak slowly and clearly using shorter prayers and readings than a service indoors.

There will usually be soil or sand available if family and friends want to drop a handful of earth onto the coffin. You can also ask if anyone wants to place anything else into the grave – a flower from the arrangement, a letter, etc.

Cultural and religious differences

If you have a family that it includes/is of different ethnic or cultural origin, make enquiries with the daily about any relevant traditions or customs you may not be familiar with.

For example, a Caribbean style funeral can last a whole day! There will be church and burial, various family traditions, singing at the graveside, and a long meal and celebration afterwards.

There are even variations in Irish, Scottish and Welsh traditions, so always check with the family if you have idea that something 'a bit different' is going to be requested.

If there is a mix of cultures within the family – think about how you are going to honour all the different traditions appropriately.

Green funerals

There are now many beautiful woodland burial sites around the country. Be aware, that due to their secluded locations it will likely involve a long journey time. If you are doing both a green burial and a service at the church, you may need to allow a whole day.

The "green" is:

- ▶ Unvarnished and easily degradable material for coffin and no metal handles or other trimmings
- ▶ No stone memorial at the grave – only a small, unvarnished wooden marker which will eventually degrade would be allowed, if anything
- ▶ Under a tree where the damage to the roots is being managed

You can inter ashes in this way too.

Interment / sprinkling of ashes

This can happen within a few days of the main service(s), or quite a long time afterwards – and you may or may not have taken the funeral beforehand.

An interment of ashes is usually short, a bit like a committal at the crematorium or graveside after a church service, just without the commendation and committal words.

A reading, a prayer, and closing with words something like – “We now let these mortal remains return to the earth/join with the elements [depending whether interring or scattering].” There is material in the URC worship manual (available at <https://www.urc.org.uk/worship-resources.html>)

REMEMBER! You **cannot** just inter or scatter anywhere. You must check if permission is needed for the location the family has requested. Funeral Directors or the local authority should be able to assist you with this.

Supporting family members/mourners who cannot attend funeral

Sometimes, for different reasons, family members cannot go to a funeral. (an elderly spouse too ill to attend is common). Assuming you are not the one leading the funeral, you may be asked, or could offer, to say prayers with the person who cannot attend, as close to the time of the funeral service as possible?

Suggested Hymns

Numbers are from *Rejoice and Sing*

No.'s

Abide with me	336
Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)	92
Dear Lord and Father of mankind	492
Great is thy faithfulness, O God my father	96
Guide me, O thou great Jehovah	345
How sweet the name of Jesus sounds	277
I heard the voice of Jesus say	349
Immortal, invisible, God only wise	67
In heavenly love abiding	590
Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us	543
Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy	531
Love divine, all loves excelling (which tune?)	663
Make me a channel of your peace	629
Now thank we all our God	72
O God our help in ages past	705
O Jesus, I have promised	509
O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder (How great Thou art)	117
Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven	104
The day, thou gavest, Lord is ended	584
The King of Love my shepherd is	552
The Lord's my shepherd	679
There is a green hill far away	223
Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son	247
To God be the glory, great things he has done!	289
When I survey the wondrous cross	217

Suggested Bible Readings

Psalm 23 (unless you have the hymn version)

Psalm 27:1, 4-9a, 13-14

Psalm 121

Isaiah 40:28-31

Isaiah 65:17-19, 24-25

Lamentations 3:21-26, 56-58

John 6.37-40, 47

John 11.17-27

John 14.1-6, 25-27

Romans 8.31ff

1 Corinthians 15.20-end (or selected verses, or 15:50-57)

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

Revelation 21:1-4, 22-25; 22:5; or Revelation 21.1-7

Resources

Start to build your own collection of funeral service resources, and begin with the options in the URC worship book, *Worship from The United Reformed Church*

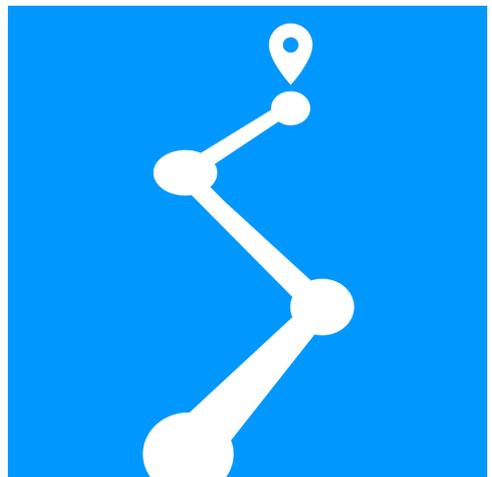
Keep the liturgies you prepare for yourself, many of the prayer you write will be appropriate at other funerals you conduct.

If a family shares something good ask for a copy!

There are many, many books about planning funerals of all kinds, both traditional and contemporary, christian and secular, unusual and unorthodox! Take a look online with a simple search for 'funerals' in a search engine or online bookstore and buy a small selection to aid you in this ministry. Your local church may be willing to help you with the cost of these purchases.



Discipleship



a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in **Walking the Way**
Living the life of Jesus today