



**"JOY IN THE MOURNING"**

**A HANDBOOK FOR TAKING  
FUNERALS**

**FIRST EDITION**

**MALCOLM COX, FEBRUARY 2020**

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# THE PRIVILEGE

I took my first funeral 30 years ago. It remains the most difficult. I was not yet 30 years old and had no personal experience of intense grief. A couple in my ministry had a baby which was stillborn. They asked me to take the funeral and I did my best. The memories of that day have stayed with me for three decades and, I am sure, will stay with me the rest of my life.

I am glad I was there to serve them the best I could. But how I wish I had more training and knowledgeable people to support me as I attempted to support them. This booklet is designed to be a basic guide and resource pack for any member of our congregations, whether staff or not, called upon to participate in a funeral.

The information in this guide is not complete, but it will provide a good starting point. Elsewhere in this booklet you will find resources to take you further and deeper if needed.

I am very grateful for all the people over the years who entrusted to me the privilege of leading them through a funeral. The variety has been extraordinary. From that first stillborn child to more children, young people, the elderly, believers and nonbelievers, family members and church members. Not only that, but the cultural variety has been educational, inspiring and, sometimes, bewildering! Each funeral presents its own particular challenge and is its own privilege.

Let's not forget that Jesus himself was one who empathised with the grieving:

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”” (John 11:33–36 NIV11)

I am far from a funeral expert, but I have conducted more than most in our fellowships. My hope and prayer is that you will find this booklet to be practically helpful, but also a spiritual inspiration. We have three goals here:

1. To honour the life of the deceased
2. To support the grieving
3. To bring glory to God

God bless, Malcolm (February 2020)

# BASIC PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICALS

These principles and practicals are not definitive. Much will depend on the context.

However, these issues should be carefully considered once it is clear that you are going to be involved in a funeral. The perspective I shall take here is one where you are operating as the 'minister'.

1. Get involved as soon as possible. Arrange a meeting with the key people as early as you can. More on what to do in that and subsequent meetings below.
2. Find out who the funeral directors are and make contact. Most firms are highly professional and will be your best resource for information and advice.
3. Play your part. Whether you are close to the deceased and their family or not, you have a role to play. Although you will want to be human and connected to the events, you will also need to stand a little apart. You are God's representative, present to offer God's wisdom and comfort through your very own and real humanity.
4. Respect the culture. Different cultures have different rites of passage. If the culture of the funeral is different from your own find someone who can give you some insight. Preferably someone not intimately involved with the funeral. I will never forget my first Caribbean "nine-night". I was very grateful for those who prepared and guided me.
5. Self-awareness. Involvement with bereaved people can lead to a reminder of experiences of loss in your own past. Find someone to talk to when you are triggered.
6. Remain calm. People and families process grief in very different ways. Some express their pain with a great deal of volume, energy and, sometimes, behaviour which is shocking. It is important that you are a rock in a sea of trouble. Prayer is your best resource.
7. Positive but not patronising. There are many things to be positive about even in the midst of grief. Grief is evidence of love. However, we must avoid being trite. Never say things like, "You'll get over it soon", "Pull yourself together", "She wouldn't want you to cry like that". And similar.
8. Clothing. Overdress rather than underdress. Risk being too formal rather than too casual. Both for meeting the family and for the funeral itself

# THE FIRST MEETING

The details will vary from person to person, but you may find this checklist useful when conducting your first meeting with the family and whoever might be planning the funeral.

If appropriate begin and end the meeting with prayer.

## Details

- Date of service:
- Type of funeral:
- Time at church:
- Time at Crematorium/Cemetery:
- Funeral Directors Tel :
- Contact in family Tel :

## Life of the deceased

- Age:
- Birthplace:
- Family + relatives:
- Normal name used:
- Character:
- Employment:
- Interests/Enjoyments:
- Any significant moments in their life:

## Details of service

- Favourite/requested hymns:
- Favourite/requested readings:
- Any other music (arranged with Funeral Director):
- Any other readings – poems etc.:
- Does anyone wish to give a personal tribute (asks to see a copy of any eulogies in advance):
- Flowers/donations:
- Reception – announcement?
- Entry into church/crematorium - seated/close family follow coffin/all follow coffin
- Curtains at crematorium - close net curtain/close curtain/no close

## Extra Notes

- Most funeral services are 20 to 25 minutes long. If you go over you will be pushed out by those running the facility. This happened to me once. Never again.
- When I meet with families I ask what kind of booking they have at the crematorium. In most cases I try to persuade them to make a double booking which means they will have 40 to 45 minutes. Less pressure. It costs more, but it is worth it.
- Make a plan to visit the crematorium before the day of the funeral. Although they are all quite similar, there are variations in terms of processing into the room, the position of buttons that might need to be pressed, lecterns from which to speak and suchlike.
- Find out if any members of the family are disabled. This may be significant for seating, but also you may wish to request that disabled members of the family arrive in good time. It is not always easy to park near to entrances.

# THE LESSON

It might be the most nerve-wracking but also the most privileged part of the service. Whether you are taking the funeral of a believer or not, the chance to share something about God is a privilege. Consider these guidelines regarding what to say and how to say it.

1. Be honest. Do not say, “He is now with God in heaven” when you are not sure that’s the case according to scriptural teaching. There are many other forms of words you can use.
2. Be kind. In other words do not say anything like, “It’s such a shame he didn’t take his chance of salvation while he had it. Now he is suffering the consequences.” You are not the judge.
3. Use one scripture and make one point. Maybe reference another scripture, but base your lesson on *one*. In most situations you will have somewhere between five and 10 minutes to speak. You want people to go away remembering one point from one scripture. If the deceased had a favourite scripture I try my best to make that the focus of the lesson.
4. Real about the relationship. If you knew the person well then refer to that relationship in your lesson. However if you barely knew them or did not know them, say so.
5. Use the correct name. I went to a funeral where the Minister called the deceased by a name that none of the family used. It was very embarrassing and added to the pain of grief.
6. Offer hope. The gospel is a gospel of hope. You are addressing the people present, not the one departed. Make the most of this opportunity to remind Christians that their hope is certain, and offer any non-believers hope that extends beyond the grave.
7. Be positive. My father took a funeral of a man who died in his 90s. By all accounts he was a horrible person. No one came to the funeral except his carer and a council official. However, my father discovered that he had been in submarines in the Second World War. This enabled him to salute the man’s courage in serving his country and protecting his fellow countrymen. There is *always* something positive you can say.
8. Anticipate the service overrunning and decide what you can most easily cut out of your lesson if necessary.

# THE SERVICE

There are many variables for a funeral service. No one size fits all. Consider the following point of guidance when planning the service.

1. Prioritise the desires of the family. You may have your own ideas, and these should be considered, but they come secondary to what the family want.
2. Songs. Ask the family what hymn/s they would like. It is not uncommon for people not to know. Therefore, ask if the deceased had a favourite hymn, and have a few of your own ready to suggest. A good guideline is to pick hymns that most people in attendance would know.
3. Prayers. Our tradition is one of primarily extempore praying. Nothing wrong with this at a funeral, but it's not uncommon for people to get tongue-tied. Using set prayers is not a second-class way of praying.
4. Instruct speakers. Those reading, praying or sharing may not have much speaking experience. Even seasoned speakers will not have significant experience of speaking at a funeral. Give them some basic advice: speak slowly; write down what you want to say; be yourself.
5. Backup plan. On occasion a speaker finds they cannot go through with what they had intended. Be ready to step in yourself.
6. Eulogies. Ask to see a copy of the eulogy in advance. Even if it is not every word, at least the bullet points. This will prevent you from duplicating information in your lesson as well as giving you a better feeling for how the family perceived the deceased.
7. Order of service. Put all set prayers, words of hymns and scripture readings on the order of service. Everyone can then work from the one booklet.

The next page contains a typical cremation service with all the details. These would be altered depending on circumstances. The pages following contain outlines for a variety of services.

# TYPICAL CREMATION SERVICE IN DETAIL

## Welcome and Opening Words

Welcome to this service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving for the life of FULL NAME (, known as FIRST NAME).

We are here today because, in some way, knowing FIRST NAME has enriched our lives. We have come to say our farewells and to seek God's comfort and strength at this time of separation. Meeting together in the context of Christian worship to remember all that FIRST NAME has meant to us, we seek to celebrate HER/HIS life and to commit HER/HIM into God's hands.

As we gather we read some ancient words of scripture and seek to draw strength and comfort from them:

“Jesus said ‘I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’” (John 11.25-26)

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:2)

“Because of the LORD'S great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22–23)

We have gathered here today because FIRST NAME's death, like his life, has touched our own. Today our thoughts and prayers are especially turned to FIRST NAME's family....

As we seek hope and comfort, we sing our first hymn, chosen by HER/HIS family...

## Hymn

## Prayer

Loving God, we come to you in our need. You have given us life and now we face the mystery of death. Please help us to find you in the whole of life, its beginning, its middle and its ending. At this moment, please help us to discover you in our pain as well as our joy, in our doubts as well as our faith, so that we might find comfort in your words and new hope in Christ. Be with us now, as we celebrate the life of FIRST NAME, that though our

tears we may know your comfort and in our remembering we may be assured of your never-ending love. We make our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Personal Tribute/Poem if desired**

### **Bible reading**

### **Address**

### **Prayers**

Father God, we thank you for the life of FIRST NAME, now gone from among us all; for all your goodness to him and for all that he has been to those who loved him. We thank you for the ways in which FIRST NAME's life has shown us your goodness, mercy and love. We thank you for what has been unique and special about HER/HIM...

Now we bless you that HER/HIS sins are forgiven, HER/HIS recent pain and suffering ended and all past hurts and regrets forgotten. Help us to be content to release HER/HIM to you in the faith and hope we have in Christ our Lord.

Loving God, we thank you for the friendship and peace SHE/HE has brought, for all that SHE/HE has given to us. We pray that nothing of HER/HIS life will be lost but will be of benefit to the world and that all that was important to HER/HIM will be respected by all who follow.

We pray for FIRST NAME's family. We name before you.... May they each know your love and ours in the weeks ahead as they begin to adjust to this new phase in their lives. Let their memories of FIRST NAME comfort them as they recall and celebrate what SHE/HE means to them.

We pray for HER/HIS wider family, for HER/HIS many friends and neighbours, and for all whose lives have been enriched by knowing FIRST NAME, that they may continue to grow in faith and love to the glory of your Name.

We make these prayers in the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

### **Hymn**

### **Commendation & Committal**

Gracious God, you have given us life, and in your love you are giving us new life in Jesus Christ.

We entrust FIRST NAME into your safe keeping in the faith of Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord, who died and rose again to save us, and to bring us all to a joyful resurrection and glory of your eternal kingdom. Amen.

And now, the moment comes when we must say farewell to FIRST NAME, HER/HIS earthly life has ended and we commit HER/HIS body to be cremated, trusting in God's mercy and compassion

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. Amen

### **Blessing**

And now, may the love of God surround us and strengthen us, may the hope of Christ fill our hearts and indwelling of the Holy Spirit lead us into ever deeper love one for another, today and always. Amen

# TYPICAL FUNERAL SERVICE AT CHURCH FOLLOWED BY BURIAL<sup>1</sup>

Entry of Coffin and Mourners While Music Plays

Opening Sentences and Welcome

Hymn

Gathering Prayer (followed by Lord's Prayer if desired)

Reading(s) – a family member may wish to read either the Bible passage or a poem

Address (may follow the tributes)

Tribute(s) - a family member may wish to offer a short tribute

Prayers of thanks for the life of the deceased and for the family in their mourning

Hymn

Words of Commendation

Blessing

Coffin leaves the church, followed by mourners.

(Travel to cemetery)

Gathering around the graveside

Short gathering sentences and prayer

Act of committal

Final prayer and blessing

Mourners disperse when ready

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my friend the Rev Alice McDermott of St James Rd, Baptist Church in Watford for these funeral service outlines

# TYPICAL FUNERAL SERVICE AT CHURCH FOLLOWED BY CREMATION

Coffin already received or brought in ahead of mourners

Entry of Mourners While Music Plays

Opening Sentences and Welcome

Hymn

Gathering Prayer (followed by Lord's Prayer if desired)

Reading(s) – a family member may wish to read either the Bible passage or a poem

Address (may follow the tributes)

Tribute(s) - a family member may wish to offer a short tribute

Optional hymn

Prayers of thanks for the life of the deceased and for the family in their mourning

Hymn

Words of Commendation

Blessing

Coffin leaves the church, followed by mourners.

(Travel to crematorium)

Coffin and mourners enter the crematorium chapel while music plays

Short gathering sentences and prayer

Hymn, if desired

Act of committal

Final prayer and blessing

Family leave as directed, usually with music playing

# TYPICAL FUNERAL SERVICE AT CREMATORIUM

Entry of Coffin and Mourners While Music Plays

Opening Sentences and Welcome

Hymn, if desired

Gathering Prayer (followed by Lord's Prayer if desired)

Reading(s) – a family member may wish to read either the Bible passage or a poem

Address (may follow the tributes)

Tribute(s) - a family member may wish to offer a short tribute

Prayers of thanks for the life of the deceased and for the family in their mourning

Hymn, if desired

Words of Commendation and Committal (during these words the curtains will usually be closed)

Blessing

Family leave as directed, usually with music playing

# ON THE DAY

The following might be a useful checklist for the day itself.

- Print out your lesson on paper. Whether you will be using the paper copy, or something like an iPad, take a printed copy. All kinds of nasty things can happen to electronic devices.
- Take a real Bible. Have it open as you walk in with the coffin (if that's what's happening) and speak from it when you teach the lesson. Please don't use a phone or iPad. They doesn't have the same sense of authority nor of comfort. Oh, and while we're on it, don't take a small Bible with tiny print.
- Where feasible I blue-tack my lesson notes to the page in my Bible opposite the text from which I will be speaking. That way, there is no danger of losing my place nor of pages falling off the lectern or out of my hands.
- When appropriate, I do the same with the prayers and the order of service at the graveside, if that's the form of the service. That way I only need to hold a Bible rather than additional pamphlets, sheets of paper or other books.
- Do you need reading glasses? If so, bring them. Sometimes the lighting is not as bright as you might like.
- Arrive early. It gives you a chance to make sure everything is running smoothly at the crematorium. You also have the opportunity to have a chat with early arrivals and, as the Minister and the speaker, it is always good to connect with the congregation.
- Check that the PA is working, and the music is queued up.
- Check the orders of service have arrived. Pick out a copy for yourself.
- Have a pen handy with which to make last minute adjustments on the order of service.
- Will you be outdoors for any length of time? Bring just-in-case clothing for wet/cold weather. I take a long smart coat and a change of footwear in the car.

# AFTERWARDS

You have played a once-in-a-lifetime role for the family. You may wish to do some and/or all of the following after the event.

1. Write a note or card to the family in the week following the funeral offering your condolences and gratitude for the privilege of taking the service.
2. If appropriate, offer to visit a week or two after the funeral just to see how people are getting along.
3. If appropriate, ask if they would like you to pray for anything specific.
4. Mark the one-year anniversary of the death in your diary and send them a card or some kind of message on that date. Some families might like you to lead a short service of thanks and remembrance in their home or similar.
5. Where you have been supporting people with little or no faith, ask if they would like to know more about the hope you spoke of in your lesson.
6. Don't be afraid to invite non-church people to attend church. It is not simply that you hope they might become a Christian, it is also a place where they can find genuine loving support.
7. Keep the family in your prayers.

# RESOURCES

## Books:

“A Funeral Manual” by Perry H. Biddle Jr. Contains - advice for arranging the funeral service; typical funeral services from a number of different denominations; a suggested service for the burial of a child; advice on music; some model sermons for different situations including a suicide; and selected useful passages of Scripture. I have consulted this guide for every single funeral I have conducted.

Common Worship: Funeral Booklet (Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England) - the church of England funeral booklet. Contains - a typical funeral order of service with variations; sample scriptural texts; prayers; form of words to be used for a burial of a body; form of words to be used for the burial of ashes.

“Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul”, by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen. Stories, poems, anecdotes about grieving and death. Must be used with caution. Can be a bit syrupy. However, I have used material from this book effectively in the right context.

Letting Go: Caring for the Dying and Bereaved (New Library of Pastoral Care) by Speck, Peter, Ainsworth-Smith. Not so much about the funeral per se, but about how to understand what it means to support others in grief, the effect it has on you yourself as well as several appendices of practicalities, useful addresses and cultural issues.

“What To Do When Someone Dies”, Anne Wade. A practical “Which?” guide to what to do from funeral planning to probate.

## Online:

Bereavement Care: a charity with many useful resources. I did a “bereavement visiting” course with them in 2003/4. It opened my eyes to the complexities of being with grieving people and the opportunities to be a support.

Cruse bereavement care: resources and training to help others going through bereavement.

Baptist resources: useful resources and advice for people taking funerals.

# USEFUL SCRIPTURES

- Commonly Used (and some less so!) Bible Passages for Funerals
- Revelation 21: 1 - 7
- Ecclesiastes 3:1 – 13
- Proverbs 31:10
- John 12:24-26, 44-47
- Psalms 23; 46; 90; 103: 8-17; 130; 139; 139:13- 16a (For a child/baby/stillbirth)
- John 14:1 - 17, 27
- John 6: 37-40
- Romans 8: 28-39
- 1 Corinthians 13
- Isaiah 40: 28 - 31
- John 3:16
- John 5: 24-25
- John 14:1-2
- John 14:27
- 1 Peter 1:3-12a
- 1 Corinthians 15
- Isaiah 66:12 – 14a
- Luke 10:25 – 37
- Proverbs 2:1 - 10
- Philippians 4: 4 – 8

# **BEREAVEMENT VISITING COURSE**

As mentioned above, I attended a 'bereavement visiting' course with Bereavement Care. At the same time I reached out to a friend of mine who told me about a course produced by the Church of England (diocese of Canterbury). That course was called, "Joy in the mourning".

It is styled as, "A course for those who support and visit the bereaved". Although not strictly about funerals (the focus of this booklet), many of the principles found in the booklets are helpful when considering how to interact with those planning the funeral.

The five booklets focus on the following topics:

1. Grief and mourning
2. Sudden death
3. Pregnancy loss and the death of the child
4. Dying and letting go
5. Visiting the bereaved

Unfortunately that booklet is now no longer published. I have scanned copies which can be distributed if needed. I also put together a basic bereavement training course for members of the North West region of the London church. Those materials are also available on request.

# IN CONCLUSION

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”  
(Romans 12:15 NIV11)

Jesus was compassionate. He empathised with the mourning. He entered our world of dirt, death and despair. He did not shrink back from identifying with fallen, broken and weak humanity.

Commenting on the coming of the Messiah, Matthew quotes from Isaiah chapter 9:

“the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16 NIV11)

You now come into the lives of the grieving bringing the spirit of the Messiah. The darkness of bereavement is pierced by the presence of the light of the world. Those grieving in the shadow of death find that God’s comfort has arrived:

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:3–5 NIV11)

The comfort you bring is not superficial nor fantastical. It is rooted in the heart of God, expressed on the cross, and victorious over death.

Helping a grieving family is demanding emotionally and spiritually. Yet it is glorious. My hope and prayer is that this booklet will equip you not only to conduct the services well, but also to be the heart of Christ present to those in pain.

I’m not sure there’s a higher calling or a greater privilege.

God bless, Malcolm

P.S. : There’s much more that could be added to this booklet. If you have suggestions or questions please contact me: [malcolm@malcolmcox.org](mailto:malcolm@malcolmcox.org); (07973) 491021.