

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)
FUNERAL GUIDELINES
Approved October 24, 2003

The reality of death. Death is a shock. No matter how much warning you may have had, we find ourselves unprepared for it. This is written to guide members and friends of this congregation at a very difficult time. These are not rules, but guidelines to help you.

Call the pastor. No matter the hour, day or night, when a member of the congregation dies, please notify the pastor immediately. Your loss is of great concern. The pastor wants to share your sorrow and to comfort and strengthen you. Please call.

Expressing grief is healthy. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Weeping and talking about the person who died is good and helpful. It is one of the ways God heals broken hearts. If you are trying to comfort someone in grief, it is usually not helpful to say "I know just how you feel." No one truly knows how another feels. Natural, warm, and understanding comments are best, such as: "I am so sorry; God bless you. We've been thinking about you a lot; Bill was a wonderful friend." Often, sitting silently and listening is the best medicine. In times of sorrow, the gift of your presence is appreciated. Funerals are not just for families. Members of the congregation are encouraged to attend the funeral of fellow members. As Christians, we affirm that God's love does not end with death.

Planning the Service. The pastor will help you do this. The process of planning the service can help put your loved one's death in perspective and begin the healing.

(1) **Purpose.** The funeral service reflects the church's faith and hope in Christ's resurrection. It seeks to make clear that **nothing** "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is an opportunity to give thanks to God for the life and memory of the deceased. We assemble in grief, thanksgiving, and hope.

(2) **Place.** The church is the most fitting place for the final service of one of its members who worshiped God and experienced the love of other members within her walls. A funeral home chapel is also acceptable. Sometimes, a graveside service is preferable. Talk with the pastor before making a final decision.

(3) **Service.** The service typically includes prayers, Scripture readings, hymns, and a homily. Solos are acceptable, but congregational singing of familiar hymns is recommended. In the sanctuary, it is customary to use the funeral pall, which signifies the perfect righteousness of Christ that covers us completely. The pastor will consult with the family about their desires. It is meaningful to include the deceased's favorite Bible passages and hymns. If the pastor did not know the deceased well, it is appropriate to ask a family member to write and/or read a short memorial that will allow the congregation to remember and give thanks for the person's life.

(4) **Graveside Committal.** The family and friends usually accompany the body to the cemetery for a brief committal service. Afterwards, it is customary for family and close friends to gather for fellowship and food.

Decorations, Flowers, and Memorials. Presbyterians eschew ostentation and lavish decorations. Flowers in the Sanctuary are a casket blanket and one spray standing on the floor at each end of the casket. Flowers are best suited for the funeral home and the graveside. Flowers fade, but memorials are perpetual gifts honoring the memory of a loved one. Therefore, we encourage memorials to the church or to charities. It is appropriate and helpful for the family to give their preferences in the funeral notice in the Hattiesburg American, such as: “In lieu of flowers, the family requests that memorials be given to Westminster Presbyterian Church Foundation, 115 North 25 Ave. Hattiesburg, 39401, or to _____.”

Visitation and Viewing the Body. Some people are comforted by seeing the body, but this is a family decision. A visitation in the funeral home the evening before the funeral is often a helpful time for the family and friends. Ordinarily, the pastor will be with the family at the beginning of the visitation, before friends arrive. If the family wishes reviewal in the church, it is recommended that the casket be open during for an hour preceding the service. The casket is closed 15 minutes before the worship service begins.

Outside organizations. The deceased may belong to several civic organizations. They may participate before the service or at the graveside, but not during the worship service.

Cremation. Cremation is an option for Christians and is supported by the Session and the Pastor of this church. It is recommended that ashes be buried in a cemetery with a headstone so the survivors have a place to anchor their grief and their thoughts. In case of cremation, no casket is present, and the family may wish to have a picture of the decedent present.

After the Funeral. Along with grief comes healing. An opportunity for people to visit after the funeral is a good time for healing to begin. A fellowship hour can be provided at the church or in a home. The Presbyterian Women will work with the family to provide food and refreshments for the family and close friends.

Funeral Costs. As Christians, we honor the human body, but we do not worship it. As Presbyterians, we seek to be simple, unadorned, and mindful of good stewardship. The church has a magnificent funeral pall which can be used to cover the casket. The flag can be used as a pall for a military veteran. We best honor the dead by caring for the living. If you would like the Pastor to accompany you to the funeral home, that will be a privilege. No fees are charged to members of the church. You may wish to give an honorarium to the Organist and the Pastor, at your discretion.

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Charles Hogrefe, Clerk of Session