

GUIDANCE IN PREPARING FOR A FUNERAL

Funerals are a great gospel opportunity, yet they need to be approached wisely. Funerals are very different to our Sunday gatherings. People are processing their grief, and most would rather be somewhere else. Remember that most people are at the funeral out of love or respect for the deceased and/or their family members. Most would not normally choose to come into your church's meeting place or come to hear you speak. Most will hold to the popular belief in Australian culture that all you have to do to get to heaven is die, almost regardless of how a person has lived their life, and regardless of their relationship with God. Many will also come with low expectations of your performance, having been to funerals where the pastor/minister has treated the family and attendees as a captive audience.

Here are three proven ideas for funerals:

- **Place the Eulogy early in the service, keeping it separated from the Bible reading and the Bible Talk (e.g. by a song or an item).** In the Eulogy the person speaking on behalf of the family can say whatever the family wants them to say. Therefore it's a good idea to ask if a family member or a friend of the family can deliver the eulogy. This is especially helpful if the deceased was not a follower of Jesus. In this way the family is free to speak for itself, even if what they say conflicts with the gospel, because it's the family speaking, not God speaking. However, it's good if the Bible Talk can link to examples/illustrations from the deceased's life, so there's a sense of the whole service being about them. However, the message of the Bible passage and how it applies the gospel to the people at the funeral should be what shapes the funeral Bible Talk. The funeral of a follower of Jesus usually gives excellent opportunities to link examples/ illustrations from their life into the funeral Bible Talk.
- **Keep the funeral Bible Talk short (no more than 7 minutes).** Most people didn't come to the funeral to hear you preach, but out of love or respect for the deceased and their family. So keep the Bible Talk short, clear, and interesting. Use examples/illustrations that connect with people who don't attend church.
- **Resonate with your audience's doubts about the gospel, dismantle their ideas that support their rejection of the gospel, and apply the gospel to your audience.** This useful framework (resonate, dismantle, gospel) comes from Sam Chan's book, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable*.

FUNERAL INFORMATION

You will need to arrange a time to meet with the family to arrange the funeral. They will have a meeting with the funeral directors separate from your meeting with them (compare notes with the funeral director to make sure you understand what each other is doing at the funeral). Take with you a sheet of paper or an electronic document on which you can record the details listed below. Apply the C.U.R.E. steps in the way you listen to and speak with the family (i.e. connect and understand before responding). After a time of connecting with and understanding the family and their memories of the deceased, then ask if it's okay if you go through the following details for the funeral service.

Loved one's full name:

Usually known as: (E.g. William is often known as "Bill")

Date & place of birth:

Date & place of death:

Names of family members: (E.g. spouse, children, parents, brothers/sisters, grandchildren)

Eulogy by whom? (Usually a family member or friend. Only read it for them if there's no other realistic option.)

Your memories of the loved one? (This can help you in choosing the Bible passage and the focus of the funeral Bible Talk)

Bible reading(s): (Most families will expect you to choose the reading.)

Hymns/Songs: (This could be anything from no songs to 3 or 4 songs.)

Musician(s):

Prayers (Lord's Prayer?):

Service sheet, hymns/songs or data/PowerPoint needed?

Place of the funeral service? Time? (E.g. the church building, the chapel at the cemetery/crematorium, the graveside.)

Grave side burial or cremation? Time?

Refreshments afterwards? (Your church may have people who provide this in church hall for a fee per person.)

Flowers for the church?

Car spaces reserved in church car park for immediate family?

Phone calls for the Minister to make (or emails/texts to send):

1. Musician(s) with hymns/songs etc.
2. Church admin with time, person, car park arrangements, flower details etc.
3. Refreshments providers.
4. Church florist (if required).

DRESS CODE

Most ministers/pastors purchase a black suit and tie with a white shirt, which they can use for formal occasions such as funerals and weddings. A properly fitting black suit and tie with a pressed white shirt and polished black shoes ensures the minister/pastor is dressed in a way that does not draw unhelpful attention to his attire (either positively or negatively). This may seem a small detail, but it's a cultural detail that is a part of our desire in gospel ministry to "do all for the sake of the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:23). There will, of course, be cultural contexts within Australia where a more informal dress code is appropriate for the minister/pastor. But the above standard seems to fit a large percentage of formal Australian occasions such as funerals and weddings.

PERSONALISING THE FUNERAL

In following a standard funeral service format it is wise to seek to personalise the service to the family. This can be done by ensuring you include the names of the family members (see FUNERAL INFORMATION above). As you prepare the service think of other ways you can appropriately personalise the service to the family.

ADDITIONAL ADVICE

What about requests from family members beyond a standard funeral service? Family will sometimes ask for the deceased's favourite song to be played during the service (Elvis, the Beatles etc.). They might ask for a family member to read a popular poem that has little connection to the gospel. It's unwise to say an outright "no" to these kinds of requests. Remember, a funeral is an opportunity to make the most of the opportunity to speak the gospel as winsomely as possible. The wisest way to proceed is to decide which parts of the service are recognisably your parts (the Bible readings, the Bible Talk, the prayers, the committal etc.) and which parts are recognisably the family's parts (the eulogy, the exit from the building, thanks to people for coming etc.). Make it clear to the family that in asking you as a Christian pastor to take the service that you will be speaking about Jesus and how he is the way home to God, but other than that you'll be as flexible as you can be to make the service one that works well for their family. A good way to proceed is to place family requests that you cannot 'own' as yours in those parts of the service that are recognisably the family's parts (the eulogy, the exit from the building, thanks to people for coming etc.). The people gathered will easily recognise that some parts are the family speaking and some are you speaking as a Christian pastor. Most will appreciate you being flexible enough to make the service work well for the family. Hopefully that helps them listen to what you have to say in the service about the gospel.

What about connection with the family after the funeral? For church members ensure that there is ongoing pastoral follow up (e.g. through their growth group leaders). For non-church people consider who should visit them and when to ensure someone is having gospel conversations with them and is able to invite them to church when are wanting to know more about the gospel and connect with Christian community. Place in your calendar a reminder of the first anniversary etc. of the person's death so this can be factored into pastoral interactions at that time.