

# OUR WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION: PLANNING GUIDE FOR A CHRISTIAN FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL

*Suggestions and Tips from the Rev. Dr. J. Jey Deifell, Jr., PhD*

Since my ordination in 1966, pastoral care has been a primary component of my ministry. When death occurs, the whole Gospel becomes powerful, practical and personal to all concerned. My Reformed heritage leads me to these perspectives:

First, along with believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Second, the Resurrection is a central doctrine of the Christian faith and shapes Christians' attitudes and responses to the event of death. Death brings loss, sorrow, and grief to all. In the face of death, Christians affirm with tears and joy the hope of the Gospel. Christians do not bear bereavement in isolation but are sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit and the community of faith. The Church offers a ministry of love and hope to all who grieve.

Because it is difficult under emotional stress to plan wisely, I encourage all believers to discuss and plan in advance the arrangements which will be necessary at the time of death, including decisions about the Christian options of burial, cremation or donation for medical purposes. These plans can provide for arrangements which are simple, which bear witness to our resurrection hope, and in which the Christian faith and community are central. Available at First Church and on our website, is a Planning Form for a Christian Funeral or Memorial Service. Although this is not a legal document, it can be very helpful to loved ones as they try to carry out the wishes of the deceased. It also can be a useful tool for discussions and for other preparations.

Over the years I have found some commonly asked questions. As a pastor I have come up with some possible answers which might help to guide you in your planning. They are as follows:

## **Where should the funeral or memorial be held?**

Unless there are unusual conditions, the service should be in the Meetinghouse or Chapel. These are two of the primary places where faith is born and nurtured, where marriage vows are made, where baptisms occur, where we break the bread and drink the cup. This is the place where week-by-week the congregation gathers for the Word, for praise and prayer and for dedication. Of course we can worship anywhere, in a home or funeral chapel, but the setting and the association of the House of the Lord help to give us an awareness of the presence of God which brings assurance and comfort.

## **What about the practice of "viewing the remains"?**

This is not a part of our worship of God, so the casket should be kept closed during the service in order that the worship of those gathered may more naturally be directed to the Author of life and salvation. If the family desires viewing, this can be done at the funeral home or at the church before the worship service. It is surely appropriate that we treat "the earthly tent" with dignity and with gratitude, but we should remember the marvelous truth that the person we knew and loved is no longer inhabiting this vessel of physical life. They are in the presence of God. If we give primary emphasis to preserving and displaying the physical body, we can miss the purpose of the worship service.

## **What about the costs?**

God is not impressed by outward array. In His sight, a person's worth is not measured by the craftsmanship of their casket nor the size of their tombstone. Extravagant expenditures detract from the purpose of the funeral, which is to worship God. A lavish display of wealth does not display the gracious love of God and the victory of Christ over death, but rather draws our attention to what is earthly and transient. So the simplest of caskets is equally as appropriate as the most elaborate. In fact, our Congregational heritage teaches that simplicity expresses the Christian life better than extravagance does.

Many people feel that gifts to the church, or their favorite charitable cause, form a more fitting memorial to a Christian than do lavish displays of flowers at a funeral. Often a family will indicate to friends their preference for such memorial gifts.

There are no fees for members of First Church for use of the church facilities. There are suggested honorariums for music leaders, custodians and clergy.

## **Should fraternal or civil rites be included in the service?**

Since this is not a part of our worship of God, it is more appropriate for these organizations to pay tribute to their deceased members at another hour and place. Fraternal groups may desire to conduct their ritual at the funeral home, then attend the church worship service in a group.

## **What about having the interment before the service?**

This procedure is being followed by more and more Congregationalists and is in complete accord with our belief. After a brief graveside service of Scripture and prayer is held, the family and friends go to the church for the worship service of praise and thanksgiving. This practice was followed by the early American Protestants. Bringing the body to the church was the practice of the Roman Catholics and was done in order that prayers might be said for the dead soul suffering in purgatory. Having the interment first is a Congregational procedure. It was the required practice of the *Westminster Confession of Faith, Directory of Government Worship and Discipline*, 1644. It seems to have the following advantage: If the casket is present during worship in the most prominent place, backed by towering banks of flowers, it becomes a kind of worship center. Our thoughts are naturally directed toward the physical remains, "the earthly tent," rather than the "building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." If the committal of the body occurs before the funeral, we are then free to turn our thoughts to God, our Refuge and Strength, and to "...what God has prepared for those who love Him" (I Corinthians 2:9).

## **What about cremation?**

This is a matter of personal preference. It is not inconsistent with the Christian faith. In Genesis 3:19 God spells out the nature of our bodies after death: "...You are dust and to dust you shall return." Whether this process takes place slowly or rapidly is of no Christian importance. Some people desire cremation because it is relatively inexpensive; others prefer the more traditional method of interment.

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## **Cremation** (Continued from previous page)

First Church of Christ has established a **Memorial Garden**, located beside the patio outside of the glass connector between the Wells Area and the Meetinghouse. A Memorial Book with the names of those interred is permanently kept in the Chapel. Call the senior minister's administrative assistant for details about the interment of cremated remains in this area of our church yard.

## **What about donation of the body?**

It is in keeping with the Christian spirit of concern for others to remember that valuable service can be rendered by granting permission for postmortem examination and the use of certain parts of the body, such as the cornea, kidneys, heart, etc., for gifts to the living. The entire body may also be given to a medical school for teaching purposes. Carrying organ donor cards or affixing authorization to one's driver's license expedites these gracious acts.

## **What about children?**

Well-meaning friends and relatives often try to shield children from the fact of death. When that happens, their questions may go unexpressed and fears are delayed and often become contorted in later life. Some adults speak of death in euphemisms which may cause children to mistake death for sleep, a long vacation or other inadequate equivocations. We encourage children to participate fully in the process. Ask one of the staff to assist you in sharing with children and to advise you about helping children work through their grief. You may also want to discuss their presence at the viewing, the service of worship or other family time together. Most small children are more disturbed that their loved ones will leave them. Assuring hugs go a long way in helping them. They don't understand theological explanations.

## **What about the contents of the worship service?**

While the minister is ultimately responsible for the contents of the service, the family will be integrally involved in the planning. If the **Planning Form For A Christian Funeral or Memorial** is filled out by the deceased, it will be consulted. Others may be invited to participate as leaders in the service at the discretion of the minister.

As in any other service of worship of God, the Triune God is to be glorified. All music, vocal or instrumental, should be in keeping with the Christian faith. Whether triumphant or comforting, hymns should focus upon our Gracious God and be appropriate expressions of faith for the worshipers. Prayers of Thanksgiving, Petition and Intercession along with the Lord's Prayer, the reading of Scriptures and a meditation are always appropriate. Thanksgiving to God for the deceased (vs. eulogies) emphasizes the goodness and graciousness of God. Calling upon the Comforter and lifting up the Hope of the Resurrection recognize the sorrow at the death of the loved one, rather than abandoning the worshipers to self-pity and hopeless gloom. The service, although honoring the deceased, affirms that in life and in death we belong to God. This is as true for us who remain as it is for the departed. We can now go on living and loving by the power of God.

Paul wrote: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:54-58, NRSV).

## **What other Scriptures might be helpful?**

- Job 19:25-27
- Luke 23, 24
- Isaiah 25:6-9, 40, 43, 44, 45
- John 14
- Ephesians 1, 2, 3:14-21
- Romans 8
- Lamentations 3:22-33
- 1 Peter 1
- 1 Corinthians 15
- Revelation 7, 21, 22
- 2 Corinthians 4 and 5
- Psalms: 23, 30, 42, 43, 46, 90, 91, 103, 116, 121, 130, 139, 145 and 146

## **What about the post-worship service?**

If the family wishes, First Church will arrange a reception at the church following the service, when friends may meet the family. Please notify the senior minister's administrative assistant.

Every year, First Church celebrates the "**Communion of the Saints**" at our Annual Meeting of the congregation, held at the end of April. At that time, names of all members who have died since our last meeting are read and a prayer of thanksgiving is offered to God. The names are listed in the Annual Report as well.

## **What about a "Living Will"?**

Many have expressed a desire not to have their lives prolonged by extraordinary medical procedures when they are terminally ill. Such a decision is often upsetting if left to relatives. Patients have long been granted the right to accept or reject medical or surgical treatment. Connecticut has created a process by which a competent adult may legally record such a request before becoming unconscious or otherwise incapable of doing so. This process is known as a Living Will, and must be properly witnessed. A Living Will can indicate one's desire to be fully informed as death approaches and to be consulted about various medical procedures. In addition, if it is no longer possible to participate in those decisions and there is no reasonable expectation of recovery, a Living Will can state that no artificial or extraordinary means be used to prolong life.

Other important documents are a *Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care* and *Appointment of Health Care Agent*. These documents help identify who would be empowered to make appropriate health care decisions if the patient is unable to make his or her wishes known. Information and forms are available from your doctor, hospital or your attorney.

*Hopefully this Planning Guide, along with the Planning Form, will help you to think about the meaning of your own death and resurrection in the context of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. With prayer, let us make arrangements in harmony with our faith, and therefore find greater comfort, courage and peace. This certainly will bring a blessing to our families and community of faith when it comes time for them to honor God by celebrating our lives.*

*Joyfully serving the Lord with you,*



*Dr. J. Jey Deifell Jr.*

