

Burial Services during Pandemic

The requirements of physical isolation and distancing to protect against the spread of the Coronavirus and COVID-19 have created many challenges.

As difficult as it is to be separated and isolated from extended family and friends and the traditional activities of our communities that mark the important and holy occasions in life, it is all the more difficult when a loved one, or an elder, or any community member dies. The death of a member of the family and community is a time traditionally marked by gathering: coming together; coming home to be present with family and friends; visiting to support each other in mutual grief and sorrow; and together celebrating with thanksgiving the life of the one who has died.

A death in the community is a time when traditional practices and patterns of burial are honored so that everything is done in a good way--in the right way. The entire community knows what needs to be done and how roles and tasks are to be assigned.

During this pandemic, however, so many of these traditions and important patterns for responding to a death and preparing for a burial have been suspended.

Nevertheless, there are ways a community can adapt to the present situation and provide burial services that are prayerful, holy, and dignified. The goal of this letter is to offer some suggestions and some possible resources for families and communities to use for burial during this time of pandemic. In all things, the family, the traditions of the community, and the wisdom of the elders should guide decisions about the use or adaptation of what is suggested here.

Burials:

In the Episcopal tradition the Burial Service in the prayer book can be considered to take two parts: The first part is typically the service that happens inside the church building. It includes prayers, readings, and, if a priest is available, Holy Communion. However, in the absence of a priest or deacon, a lay person (non-ordained leader in the church) may preside at the Burial Service (a lay person would not be able to celebrate Holy Communion).

The restrictions imposed in response to the Coronavirus/COVID-19 make having this first part of the Burial Service in the church building impossible.

The Committal Service:

The second part of the Burial Service happens at the graveside. It is called "The Committal." This service can be led by a lay person.

Provided the service is conducted while respecting and maintaining the standards of physical distancing required for preventing the spread of the coronavirus, and with approval of the community leadership, The Committal may be used at the cemetery for a burial during this period of pandemic.

The Committal Service begins on page 501 of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. However, a complete and adapted form of the Committal Service is included with this letter. Again, it can be led by non-ordained Lay Leaders.

Once the restrictions of the pandemic are lifted and gathering in large groups and travel between communities is allowed, Memorial Services should be celebrated for individuals who were buried during the pandemic. These Memorial Services may take the form of the first part of the Burial Service that is conducted in the church. If a priest or deacon is not available, Memorial Services may be led by non-ordained church leaders (Lay Leaders). A bulletin for a Memorial Service led by a Lay Leader will be provided.

A Word on Cremation:

In the Episcopal tradition, cremation is an acceptable option for preparing a body for burial. As God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, so too can God call us forth from the dust of cremation and into the fullness of being in the Body of Christ on the last day. In the words of the Committal: “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our [beloved]...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” These words remind us of the message we hear on Ash Wednesday: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Though our body is destroyed in death, yet, our hope is in EASTER--the promise of new and everlasting life in the joy and fullness of Christ Jesus. Nothing can separate us from His love. No matter what the final disposition of our mortal remains, we are NEVER beyond the reach of his resurrection glory.

It is possible in the years ahead that more people may make the decision to have their body cremated. While it is an acceptable and faithful choice, it is also not a choice for everyone. It is important that we honor and respect these difficult and spiritual decisions.

When a person has chosen to be cremated, it is still possible to adapt Traditional Burial practices to accommodate the lack of a body. The container with the ashes may be buried as is or it could be placed in a small box made by the members of the community or family who would have otherwise made the casket for the body. This “burial box” could be designed to be much smaller than a casket, but large enough to hold the container with the ashes, but also any other items that would be typically buried with a body: for instance: a folded blanket, moccasins, gloves, crosses, a prayer book, or other items of significance to the individual or family. The burial box could be lined in the same way a casket is lined.

The grave for a cremated body does not need to be six feet deep but should be dug deep enough to adequately protect the grave from disruption—three feet would be a minimum.

As cremation removes the necessity to bury a body immediately, the container with the ashes or the burial box may remain in the home or other appropriate safe location until communities can gather again and a full burial service is possible.

A Word about Contagiousness after Death:

The CDC (Center for Disease Control) provides information and some guidance about the risk of spreading the coronavirus after a person has died:

“The virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to mainly spread from close contact (i.e., within about 6 feet) with a person who is currently sick with COVID-19. The virus likely spreads primarily through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory infections spread. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. This type of spread is not a concern after death.

It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.”

Given this information, the risk of catching the virus from someone who has died seems to be rather low. However, there is a “possible” risk from touching an infected surface or body and then touching your face. For this reason, the CDC recommends that anyone who might handle the body after death to prepare it for transportation or burial should at minimum wear disposable gloves and wash their hands thoroughly after removing the gloves.

More information can be found at the CDC website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#COVID-19-and-Funerals>

Facebook Post, as written by Bishop Mark on 4/14/2020:
Happy Easter to all of you wonderful ministers of Our Risen Lord!

I give thanks for your leadership. I have been encouraged to hear of the wonderful ways you participated in celebrating Easter Day. Thank you.

I am attaching a file with a few words about Burials during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it clear that funeral services are not possible in our churches because of physical distancing requirements, it is still necessary to bury the dead and suspend large celebrations in our churches (Memorial Services) until gathering is no longer a threat to the Public Health.

Included with in this file is a simple Lay Leader Order of Service for the Committal, which is the graveside part of our Burial Service. These graveside services are possible in the villages if the restrictions of physical distancing are maintained. However, this is not permission to have large gatherings at the graveside. We still must do our part to keep the graveside service small and restricted to immediate family and those who are covering the grave.

These are definitely difficult times. I am grateful for your spirit of hopefulness. We will get through this together.

An Order for Burial For use by Lay Leaders during the Pandemic

Reception of the Body

The following form may be used at whatever time the body is brought to where it will be prepared for burial and placed in the casket

The Lay Leader meets the body at the door and says

With faith in Jesus Christ, we receive the body of our brother (sister) *N.* for burial. Let us pray with confidence to God, the Giver of life, that he will raise *him* to perfection in the company of the saints.

Silence may be kept; after which the Lay Leader says

Deliver your servant, *N.*, O Sovereign Lord Christ, from all evil, and set *him* free from every bond; that *he* may rest with all your saints in the eternal habitations; where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Let us also pray for all who mourn, that they may cast their care on God, and know the consolation of his love.

Silence may be kept; after which the Lay Leader says

Almighty God, look with pity upon the sorrows of your people for whom we pray. Remember them, Lord, in your mercy; nourish them with patience; comfort them with a sense of your goodness; lift up your countenance upon them; and give them peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

After the casket has been brought to the cemetery and is ready to be buried, the Lay Leader continues with the Service of Committal

The Committal

The Lay Leader says the following

Everyone the Father gives to me will come to me;
I will never turn away anyone who believes in me.

He who raised Jesus Christ from the dead
will also give new life to our mortal bodies
through his indwelling Spirit.

My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope.

You will show me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy,
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Next, the Lay Leader gets a handful of dirt to toss on the coffin or into the grave. Then, while earth is cast upon the coffin or into the grave, the Lay Leader says these words

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our *brother or sister N.*, and we commit *his or her* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious to him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him and give him peace. Amen.

The Lay Leader says

The Lord be with you

People And also with you.

Lay Leader Let us pray.

All join in saying the Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lay Leader continues with the following prayer

Father of all, we pray to you for those we love, but see no longer: Grant them your peace; let light perpetual shine upon them; and, in your loving wisdom and almighty power, work in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Then the Lay Leader says the following, the People responding with the words in italics

Rest eternal grant to *him*, O Lord;
And let light perpetual shine upon him.

May *his* soul, and the souls of all the departed,
through the mercy of God, rest in peace. *Amen.*

The grave is now filled.

**Reminder that a full Memorial Service and Celebration of Life for the deceased may be scheduled to take place at the church after the pandemic is over.*