

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.*

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Sensing the Spirit in Planning Memorial Services

(Editor's note: Following is an updated article originally published in the Pastoral Care Newsletter, September 1998.)

by Sue Heath

Over the years, I have taken part in many Friends memorial services, and the hand of God can be seen in these meaningful times. They are often true miracles, as people come even when not expected and share wonderful celebrations of the person's life. There is that of God in each of us and memorial services bring out the very best, in both the living and the dead.

Pastoral Care Committee's Role

The death of a member is a time for the pastoral care committee to minister to the family and friends of the deceased and to the meeting membership as a whole. When meeting members assist with some of the routine details, family and friends can concentrate on their feelings, on other mourners and on the way the deceased wanted to be remembered and memorialized.

The caregiving committee will find it very helpful to be prepared in advance with information about local funeral homes, burial grounds, cremation, funds available to assist families with funeral expenses and so on. They should know state laws and local regulations regarding embalming, burial, scattering of ashes, etc., as well as local funeral directors'

understanding of Quaker simplicity. In most states, a mortuary needs to be involved no matter how simple the desired arrangement.

In some meetings the pastoral care committee encourages Friends to plan in advance what they would want for themselves or loved ones regarding the disposition of the body, what to include in a memorial service and facts to be included in an obituary. We need to help Friends record facts about family members, schooling, progress of a career, volunteer work and outside interests, which will document their lives. It is also helpful to have Friends compile in advance a list of friends and relatives who should be informed in case of death. Some meetings keep this information on file for their members. (See "Sample Form for Members' Wishes for Their Memorial," p. 6.)

Learning of a Death

The meeting is usually informed by a family member soon after a death. It is helpful for meetings to designate someone as the contact person in times of death or other emergencies. If there is not a Funeral Committee, the person often is the clerk of the meeting, clerk of pastoral care, or the clerk of worship and ministry. This person can make the necessary contacts to put into motion the meeting's process for support and for preparing for the memorial service. He or she should also be



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alert to the emotional condition of the caller, to offer counseling or a sympathetic ear.

One of the first things to do is to listen closely to what the family wants and needs, and then to explain what the meeting is prepared to do for them. This is usually a time of grief and shock for those close to the dead person, and the Friend dealing with them needs to be sensitive to feelings of sadness and tremendous new responsibility. The Friend working with the family will want to avoid overwhelming the survivors with too much information and to listen for what is actually being asked.

In one situation, a member had died suddenly far away from home. The spouse could not even begin to deal with what kind of memorial service there should be. She was totally engrossed by the mountain of details in getting the body brought across the country. The pastoral caregiver could only join in that concern and begin taking steps to help.

When it is time to discuss a memorial service, the pastoral caregiver may find that the caller has very little idea what a Friends memorial service actually is. Your yearly meeting's Faith and Practice may be useful in explaining Friends process. A Friends memorial service is typically unprogrammed worship, in the manner of Friends, but can also include an introduction, readings, meditations, music and other prepared material, prepared by the family and friends, with help from the pastoral caregiver. Many meetings provide attenders with a small card explaining Friends memorial meetings for worship.

Once the family decides a memorial service is appropriate, the date and time need to be settled. Sometimes the family wishes to have the memorial service within a few days. In other cases they prefer to hold the service weeks, or even a month or two later, at a time convenient for family and friends who live at a distance. Pastoral care or memorial committee members will be able to advise the family about convenient times to use the meetinghouse. In

some cases, meetinghouses are located near Friends schools or in busy parts of a city or town. Traffic or parking considerations are important. If light or heat are insufficient in the meetinghouse, a daylight service may be advisable, or the caregiver may need to recommend alternate sites for the service. In some cases meeting members may find it appropriate to offer to help with telephone calls to friends and acquaintances. Some meetings send postcards out to inform members and others about the death and to announce plans for the service. The family provides additional names of persons to receive the notice.

Pastoral caregivers will consult the family about their wishes and refer to any wishes expressed in advance by the deceased person.

Many meetings suggest that families recommend memorial gifts instead of flowers. The contact person may be helpful to the family in identifying causes that were important to the person being memorialized. An announcement of where to direct memorial gifts is usually included in the death notice or obituary. If the meeting sends out a postcard announcement, it can also include information about memorial gifts, flowers, etc.

Sometimes people ask about the obituary or notices in the newspapers. Local newspapers have different policies about accepting death notices from private parties, and the meeting will need to know the requirements of area newspapers. Gathering information for obituaries in advance is helpful.

Planning the Memorial Service

In planning for the memorial service, pastoral caregivers will consult the family about their wishes and refer to any wishes expressed in advance by the deceased person. In most Friends services, the casket is not present and the service does not coincide with the burial or cremation, but these are matters of individual preference.

In some services, especially if many of those attending may not be Friends, a Friend is asked to explain the memorial service to the guests. The family may want to be consulted about who this Friend should be and what will be said. Usually

the same person breaks the meeting. He or she may also explain that the family will leave and the meeting continue for a short time after which the family will be available to speak to their friends. (See "Introductory Words for a Memorial Service," p. 5.)

In a traditional meetinghouse, close friends of the person who has died are often asked to sit on the facing bench. Pastoral caregivers can help contact those people. If the family has no preferences for the facing benches, the members of pastoral care or worship and ministry can be asked. In a meetinghouse "in the round," there may be other seating traditions. Often there is a section designated for family, kept open until the family comes in, where they can all sit together. The family usually waits until almost the time scheduled to begin before they enter together, and often they also leave before the very end of the meeting for worship. Find out if the family wishes to do this, and designate a place in the meetinghouse where they can wait before the memorial service. A meeting member should be with them to guide them to their place and to be aware of the time.

If the family wants music before or during the memorial service, the memorial committee can inform them of what is available in terms of piano or electronic equipment including amplifiers and microphones. If the meeting does not have the necessary equipment, someone from the pastoral care committee may be helpful in identifying local sources. Some meetings have equipment to record memorial services. This can be especially meaningful to a family with distant members who cannot attend.

Will the family want a printed program or short sketch of the person's life? A committee member can help locate printers and give guidance about programs, remembering that time may be limited and there may be a lot of information to compile. If programs are provided, be sure to determine how they will be distributed.

Practical Arrangements

Often the family will be very unrealistic about how many people will attend the service. Experience often shows that more people come than were expected. It is better to plan for more rather than fewer. The committee will want to have ushers to seat people, especially late-comers. If needed, plans should be made for designating parking areas and having someone in front of the meetinghouse to direct people to the parking area, and the entrance to the meetinghouse.

Find out if the family wishes to designate a special place for family to sit. Be sure to have an idea of how many family members are expected, so enough seats are saved. Simple weighted white ribbons can be laid across the benches to be saved for family, so that the ushers will not have to ask people to move from those special seats.

It is very helpful to designate a family member or someone who knows the family to be at the doors with the ushers, to guide other relatives to their gathering place before the service or to seat them in the family section. If many of the guests are likely to be hard of hearing, ushers can direct them to the sections of the meetinghouse where it is easiest to hear or to listening devices if they are available. The memorial committee should determine if child care is likely to be needed during the service or the reception. They can suggest names of teens or other people in the meeting who do child care and help arrange a place for small children—perhaps a First Day School room or a near-by playground.

Are there enough places to put coats, or do you expect people to keep coats with them? For a memorial service, where a meeting may expect many more people than usually come on a First Day, all the seats may be needed. A rented coat rack will make things easier.

You may expect flowers to arrive at the meetinghouse. Plan how you will place arrangements and how you will handle overflow. Be sure the family takes the flowers with them when they go, or

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provides for their disposal. If no flowers are to be sent, the memorial committee may decide flowers are needed and arrange to have them contributed or ordered.

Many families like to have a guest book which helps them to remember the friends who were present. Sometimes the funeral home will provide books and pens. If there will be a guest book, plan where to place it. If it is at the entrance, people will line up to sign it and cause some delay in getting seated. Guests may be asked to sign the book at the rise of meeting or directed to sign at the reception if there is to be one. A member of the pastoral care committee should be placed in charge of the book to encourage people to sign it and to be sure the family receives it.

The Reception

Many meetings provide a reception following a memorial service, and it is important to establish at the beginning whether the family wants a reception and whether they have any preference about food, beverage, arrangement of the room, etc.

Memorial committees often provide hot or cold drinks and either light refreshment like cookies, or more substantial food including sandwiches, finger food or a hot buffet. The meeting should be clear beforehand who may be responsible for these costs. Sometimes the family will prefer to hire a caterer and will look to the committee for advice about local caterers.

Often the memorial committee takes full responsibility for setting up and cleaning up a reception. If a meeting does not have a ready crew of volunteers available during the day, they may

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need to contact members who will be coming to the service and ask if they will be willing to help.

Some families will want a table of pictures and other remembrances, and the committee can help set that up before hand, supplying tables or other place for a display. Someone should be assigned to keep track at the end to make sure that these precious items are returned to the family. During the reception the family often has an informal receiving line. Committee members should think of the family at this time, by bringing a drink or possibly a plate of food for them and being sure that they can sit down if they wish.

Day of the Memorial Service

A memorial service attracts people who have never been to a meetinghouse before, so they are unsure how to proceed and what to expect. We want to do all we can to make them comfortable. This includes attending to basic physical details such as:

- Has the building been cleaned and is the room set up for the reception?

- If the family plans a display of pictures or other mementos, are they in place?
- What lights will be used?
- Will the heat or air conditioning be needed?
- Are the rest rooms open and fully supplied with paper, soap, cups, etc.?
- Are the doors open so guests can enter the building? Are there enough seats, both in the room where the service will be held and in the room for the reception afterward? Keep in mind the needs of persons who are infirm and may not be able to stand for extended periods.
- Have arrangements been made for where coats should be put?
- Ushers, people helping with parking, and those setting up the reception should arrive at least one hour before the appointed time of the memorial service.

Friends are notoriously early, and even more so for memorial services. I have had more than one experience of all the seats being filled 15 minutes before the service was set to begin.

Ushers should be asked to seat early arrivals toward front of the meetinghouse, leaving seats in the back for those who arrive late so that they won't disrupt the meeting by walking to the front of the room.

People who come from far away may need some

refreshment before the service begins, so ushers should be ready to help them find rest rooms and a place to get a drink of water if needed. In a large meetinghouse, signs to the rest rooms are helpful. Ushers should inform those with children about the child care arrangements.

At one time, a person in our meeting who died was very old, with few friends and almost no family remaining. He had also been rather difficult in the years that I had known him. I remember worrying that nothing would be said, or, worse, that people's messages would be too candid and perhaps hurtful. The miracle occurred! Meaningful messages were shared from people who remembered what their parents had said about the deceased, people who remembered him from their school days, and Friends who could see beyond his testy exterior to the warm and loving spirit within. There has never been a Friends memorial service that failed to inspire me and make me a true believer.

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Sue Heath, a member of Moorestown, NJ Meeting, has reached an age when there seem to be a lot of memorial services to attend. She worked in association management and as a paid secretary in meeting offices where she worked with families as they planned memorial services. She serves as clerk of the editorial committee for the Pastoral Care Newsletter.

Suggested Introduction to a Friends Memorial Service

The sample remarks below are compiled from the experience of two Friends. Feel free to expand and modify them to suit the needs of your meeting and of the family.

When the family has entered the room and is seated, the person who has care of the memorial service rises and speaks as follows:

“This is a called meeting of *[name of meeting]* Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends to celebrate the life of our member *[name]*. *[You may insert some comments about the life of the member and his or her contributions to the meeting.]* For those of you who are not familiar with the Quaker memorial

service, we sit in silence, opening ourselves to the movements of the Divine within us. Anyone who feels so led may rise in place and speak to the meeting. Share with us some facet of *[name's]* life which has touched your life or give some words of comfort to those of us who are left behind.”

At the appropriate time, the person who has care of the service rises up and says:

“This would seem a suitable time for the family to withdraw. After the family withdraws, the meeting will continue until broken by the shaking of hands. After the meeting has broken: The family will be in *[name of room]* to receive Friends. Please visit with

them and join us for refreshments. In [room] there is a guest book which the family would like each of you to sign before leaving.”

Advance Wishes Sample Form

The meeting asks each of our members to complete this information and update it from time to time. Since we know not when death might visit, having this information will help the meeting to provide support to your loved one.

1. If the meeting is the first to learn of your death, whom should we notify? Who should be contacted to learn of your wishes or to make arrangements? Please give the full name, address and telephone number, as well as the relationship to you.
2. Do you have a will or other document that speaks to the matters of funeral, burial or memorial meeting? If so, where is this document kept?
3. Do you have death benefits (veteran, insurance, etc.) meant to pay funeral expenses? If so, where is this document kept? Do we know sources of funds to help with funeral expenses if needed?
4. Do you wish to have a memorial meeting under the care of the monthly meeting?
5. What special requests do you have of, or instructions for, the monthly meeting? Do you want flowers, special music or readings?
6. If persons desire to make memorial gifts, to whom or what group should such gifts be made?

Resources

Faith & Practice, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Quaker Books of FGC, www.quakerbooks.org

A Friends Memorial Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1999*, Quaker Books of FGC, www.quakerbooks.org

Funerals and Memorial Meetings, Committee on Eldership and Oversight of Britain Yearly Meeting, Britain Yearly Meeting 2004; Quaker Books of FGC, www.quakerbooks.org

Preparing for Death, an article by Northern Yearly Meeting, online: <http://www.northernyearlymeeting.org/article/preparing-for-death/>

7. Please provide basic information that can be used in preparing an obituary: date and place of birth, when you became a Friend, when you joined this meeting, education, profession, volunteer and professional accomplishments, names of parents and closest relatives.

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