

Funerals, Memorial Services, and Rituals

Rituals, funerals, and memorial services can capture in a powerfully symbolic way our understanding of life and death. They speak through action and symbol, poetry and music, prayer and philosophy, of who we are, what we believe, and how we want to be remembered

Rituals, funerals, and memorial services should not be “done to or for” people

FUNERALS

The term “funeral” is used to describe several events that take place immediately following a person’s death

WHY HAVE A FUNERAL?

AIDS has challenged many young people to think about how they wish to be remembered.

Often the person living with HIV/AIDS will want to design his/her own funeral service, or create rituals for the time of death. This “advance planning” can have powerful healing effects for the individual, partner, and family. It can facilitate anticipatory grieving and ensure the deceased’s wishes are respected and followed. In many ways, planning for death in this way can be seen as the final gift to beloved family and friends.

Most find traditional funerals and church services do not speak of their experience. In designing their own ritual(s), funeral, or memorial service(s), persons living with HIV/AIDS may want the service to reflect honestly who they are. They may want to bear witness to relationships which cause the family discomfort. While painful for some, it is important at the time of death to be honest. When secrets grow, healthy grieving is hampered as families and friends are caught in the web of secrecy and deception.

The service should be the loving creation of friends and family, and those who facilitate or conduct the service must be flexible. If the service is a true creation of the deceased and those who loved him/her, then death’s pain can be eased. Because few terminally ill people have given much thought to funeral arrangements, caregivers must be prepared to offer advice if requested.

These events will often include:

- the wake, when friends and family gather in the presence of the body to offer support to one another
- a funeral service or memorial service (formal or informal) that occurs in a place of worship or elsewhere. Usually, the body is present at a funeral service but not at a memorial service
- burial or cremation (whether attended by relatives and friends, or not)
- often a less solemn reception or gathering will follow these events

A funeral can:

- serve as the conscious beginning of the grieving process. For those in a state of denial, it may be the time when reality of the loss begins to sink in
- provide an opportunity for friends to mourn the loss of a friend and to offer support to the family
- provide time when tribute is paid to the person, his/her uniqueness, and accomplishments
- be a rite of passage providing a formal setting for family and friends to say “good-bye” to the deceased

It is an opportunity for survivors to think about the meaning of life and death, to give thanks for the one who has died. Often this is done within the context of worship.

HOW TO CHOOSE A FUNERAL SERVICE PROVIDER

The funeral business is currently undergoing change. Depending on where you live, there may be choices between funeral homes, memorial societies or transfer services. Before contacting a funeral home, consideration should be given to what services are to be provided and approximately how much money can be spent. While the majority of funeral directors will help make those decisions, it is good to think ahead before calling.

CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN PLANNING A FUNERAL SERVICE:

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- friends and family to be notified
- is the body to be embalmed, and will it be buried or cremated?
- how is the body to be prepared, i.e. clothes, hair style?
- is the casket to be open or closed?
- will there be a time for visiting?
- will there be a service? Will the body be present?
- where will the service be held?
- who will conduct the service? Who else will speak?
- what music will be used?
- will there be a notice in the newspapers? What information will it contain?
- does the family wish to order flowers?
- would remembrances of flowers or memorial donations be preferred, or both?
- will there be a reception following the funeral? If so, where?

CONSIDER THESE POINTS WHEN MAKING A DECISION ABOUT FUNERAL SERVICE PROVIDERS:

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- what is the reputation of the funeral service provider?
Do you believe they respect confidentiality?
- are they convenient to the home or community?
- will they provide the service desired? Do they ask what is desired or do they decide what must be done?
- will they embalm the body of a person who has died of an AIDS-related illness? If so, will there be an additional charge?
(There should not be an additional charge.)
- what are their fees? Some provinces legally require funeral homes to provide a price list. Don't be afraid to ask pointed questions about fees
- is the staff fair and respectful?

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT FUNERALS

What are the legal minimum requirements that must take place after death has been certified?

A body must be either buried or cremated (or in some cases, may be given to medical science for research).

Must you have clergy to conduct a funeral?

No, you do not. Anyone may do it. If the funeral or memorial service occurs in a place of worship, it is normally conducted by clergy. If so, you may be obligated to conform to the order of service of that particular religion, but friends and family may possibly take part in planning. If other than clergy officiates, there may be more flexibility. You may want to consider music, readings, special symbolic acts and tributes to the deceased.

Does a body have to be embalmed?

No, not always. A body should be embalmed for aesthetic reasons if there will be public viewing in a funeral home, or if the funeral must be delayed. By law, some provinces in Canada require embalming if the body must be shipped out of province. In Alberta (at the time of printing) embalming is not permitted for persons whose death certificates list HIV or AIDS as cause of death. Such practice is inconsistent with what we know of HIV transmission and the HIV community is advocating for changes to this practice.

Is cremation the least expensive way to dispose of a human body?

It may be, but not in every situation. A simple immediate cremation with no additional services may be the least expensive method. Final costs will be determined by other services you require from your funeral caregiver.

Do all funeral homes charge the same price?

No, not all funeral homes or funeral service providers are alike. Prices vary from place to place, so check with more than one. You can request a price list from a funeral home, although items may require clarification by the funeral director. Don't be afraid to ask questions about cost.

What if the person who dies has no money?

The family must apply to Social Services before making arrangements in their community for assistance with the burial. Some religious and aboriginal communities provide funds for burial of their members.

Is pre-arranging a funeral a good idea?

Pre-arranging a funeral can help people accept the reality of impending death. However, there are some cultures where pre-arranging the funeral is looked upon with suspicion, so this must be approached sensitively. If finances are a concern, check with Social Services for any guidelines that must be followed before making arrangements.

Is it legal to scatter cremated remains?

Cremated remains, or ashes, can be scattered anywhere, i.e. in a public cemetery, lake, river, farm or at a family cottage.

Is there a board that regulates funeral service providers?

Yes, each province has its own board. In addition, the Funeral Service Association of Canada has an office in Ajax, Ontario. If you encounter difficulties when dealing with a funeral home or memorial service provider, do not hesitate to contact the provincial or national association. (see *Resources*)

PLANNING THE FUNERAL SERVICE

Many people would like to avoid attending funerals, but these are important events that deserve careful planning. It helps, of course, to discuss funeral plans with the person before death occurs. Whether or not this is possible, consider these points when planning the service:

- what religion or philosophy of life did the person embrace while alive?
- the service should be faithful to the values, beliefs and activities of the one who died
- in addition, the service should comfort survivors

Many people think that because a person wasn't religious, a service can't be held. This is not true. Often a service can be planned to include some religious components, although they may not strictly conform to the rites of one particular religion. Here are some components of a funeral service:

Music	include favourite music of the one who has died. You may also want to enlist the services of musicians for the event
Readings	involve scripture, poetry, or a letter from the deceased
Tributes	have a number of family and friends speak about the deceased. Occasionally, the service is opened up to anyone who wishes to speak
Symbolic acts	candles, helium filled balloons, rainbow ribbons, flags, incense, music, flowers, or pictures may all be used effectively to convey ideas about life, death, and letting go
Prayers	prayers may be chosen from more than one religious tradition, and/or include humanistic prayers

FOR MORE INFORMATION

See the Funeral Services sub-section in *Resources*.

SUGGESTED READING

Lamont C. A humanist funeral service. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1977.
 Stuart E. Daring to speak love's name: a gay and lesbian prayer book. London, UK: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.