

Planning a Memorial Service

Among the many issues at hand when a loved one dies there are two important ones to decide: planning for the timely disposition of the body and commemorating the life that was lived. When you can separate those two activities, you have a great many more options, both in kind and in cost.

A “funeral” service is with the body present and is usually planned within a few days of death, sometimes in great haste. A “memorial” service (without the body) can be delayed as long as you want, to meet the convenience or needs of the family. Perhaps it makes sense to have the service at the summer home of the deceased when all were planning to gather anyway. Scheduling the event in two or three weeks lets out-of-town guests take advantage of the 14-day advance booking discount on airline tickets. Or perhaps you will want to wait for the survivor of a car crash to get out of the hospital. By not feeling pressured to have a service right away, there is time for thoughtful planning. A memorial mass is now accepted by the Catholic church.

Multiple services may be appropriate in some situations—a simple graveside service for the immediate family at the cemetery “back home,” followed by a memorial service in the community where the deceased more recently lived. Or one service for co-workers and another for community and friends.

Many funeral directors will be glad to assist with memorial service planning whether using the funeral home location or not, but there will be a charge for such services. However, many families have found it therapeutic and loving to take charge without the help of a funeral director. Having something

to do takes away the sense of helplessness survivors often feel at a time of death.

The Setting

In planning a memorial service, you will probably want to decide whether a *formal* service reflects the personality of the deceased more than an *informal* one. Warren had church affiliations, so it was logical that his memorial service was held at his church. Richard had not maintained his church affiliations, so his wife chose to use a funeral home for a Masonic rite back in the home state where his ashes will be scattered or buried. Paul’s father spent the last four years of his life in a retirement community. Because it would have been difficult for many of his friends to travel, Paul held a memorial service in the activities room there. Anne’s love of art and music made the local art museum the perfect location for her friends to enjoy a concert in her memory. Mary Jane was a country-living soul. A hillside gathering amidst the wildflowers was a perfect setting in which to sit around in jeans and share memories.

Who Will Come?

You should decide if there will be a public announcement in the newspaper, whether a written mailing to certain friends and associates seems better, or whether phone calls and the local “grapevine” will be sufficient notice.

Who Will Lead the Service?

Obviously, *clergy* are likely to be involved with any service in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque—the program determined by religious practice and protocol. You can certainly ask clergy to participate in a service

held elsewhere, too. But even religious services are being adapted to allow participation from attendees, with people invited to share their memories and thoughts after the initial service, making the occasion more memorable.

As for others who might lead or facilitate a service, the personalities of the people involved may dictate the best choice. A *spouse* who is shy about public speaking would likely defer to an *adult son or daughter* who is at ease leading the local Rotary or Girl Scout Jamboree. Maybe a *best friend* or *sibling* could be asked to preside. If several will participate, it’s a good idea for one of them to be designated with the coordinator’s role, to avoid awkward hesitations as to who should do what next.

It is always nice to find a role for children to play if the deceased was a special person in their lives. Handing out flowers or programs can be managed by even young children or grandchildren. Some may wish to draw pictures for a memory book.

The Service Itself

If there are no religious dictates, you may want to pick a theme of remembrance exemplifying the deceased. Will he be remembered most for his civic activity or his wild ties and the story behind each? Will she be remembered for her gardens and charity work or her practical jokes? Are there favorite readings of the deceased? Bible verses or Zen philosophy? Poetry? (Ernest Morgan’s book *Dealing Creatively with Death* has some excellent examples and suggestions.) Did the deceased leave writings, maybe instructional or inspirational letters a relative has saved? You could ask friends and relatives to write up a favorite memory to read aloud or to be read. (Having those vignettes in writing, too,

will mean a lot to a surviving spouse or offspring after the service.) Some families may decide to print a formal program for the service, listing music to be played and the readings to be given, but it is not necessary.

Music

Beginning the service with music and ending the service with music creates natural “book-ends” for the event. The universal language of music can be calming, healing, or unifying as people gather, whether played by community musicians or made available on CD. In this age of personalization, anything goes—jazz, a Bach organ concerto, a New Age harp. Attendees are even likely to be forgiving of a grandchild’s imperfect flute rendition of “O Danny Boy” when it’s offered with love.

Photographs and Memory Books

Shelby found that the pictures displayed at her sister-in-law’s memorial really broke the ice for tearful family and friends as they reminisced over the hilarious old fashions. You might want to ask friends and relatives to contribute photos, clippings, awards, or other special mementos that can be assembled in a memory book for the surviving spouse or family.

Flowers

Barbara’s family had potted chrysanthemums decorating the church. The pots were offered to special friends and relatives to take with them after the service, to remember Barbara-the-gardener in years to come. This thoughtfulness shows that this family had thought through the question, “What will happen to the flowers after the service?”

Refreshments

Sharing food during a bereavement gathering remains a popular practice. The ladies of the church put on a huge pot-luck supper in the town hall after one resident’s memorial service. But it might be as simple as iced tea and cookies supplied by the family at an “Open House” at home or as fancy as a reception at the local inn. One man has asked for “a cocktail party,” and his wife intends to oblige.

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A Memorial Notice

With a mobile and dispersed society, friends and relatives are likely to be scattered far and wide. They may never see the obituary in a local paper and may not be able to attend the memorial or funeral service. Using her mother’s Christmas card list, Beth sent out a notice of her mother’s death. Written as a tribute to her mother, Beth listed some of her mother’s remarkable traits and accomplishments. It ended with suggestions for memorial donations, to causes that her mother supported—peace, the arts, and education. This sort of card can be easily put together on a home computer or copied at a local copy shop, including a picture if one is wanted. A wide choice of nice paper in many colors is available.

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Dealing Creatively with Death by Ernest Morgan. 160 pages. Upper Access Books, 2001. Available from the FCA Bookstore: 800-765-0107 or www.funerals.org

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