

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MAINE

GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN FUNERALS DURING COVID19

Introduction

For Christians, gathering to mourn the dead, celebrate their life, and proclaim the hope of Resurrection are essential practices of our faith. During the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID19 outbreak, our usual mourning rituals have been and will be interrupted. We think of the women on that first Easter, who went to follow their familiar mourning ritual to anoint Jesus's body, to find it disrupted. We remember their initial shock and confusion and feel this, too. We're waiting to feel the hope of Resurrection. In times of trial like the death of a loved one, we turn to the familiar practices from our faith and ancestors. And so, we know that this disruption for a grieving community is doubly hard. We grieve this disruption with you.

We also know that a faith that is "loving, liberating, and life-giving" has to privilege life over death. If we have to change our practices and modify our traditions for a season in order to protect life and safeguard the vulnerable, that is a sacrifice we must make.

The time to make good decisions is before a specific circumstance makes the question urgent. So I ask all congregations in the diocese to think about and adopt a policy describing how they will handle funerals during the pandemic. No two congregations are the same, and I don't expect that every policy will be the same. The only thing I expect and require of all policies is that they expressly state that they are subject to ongoing public health instructions.

This document contains two parts. First is an assembly of thoughts and suggestions that you might find helpful. Please think of this as pastoral support for you and your decision making, and perhaps a bit of "cover" if you find you need it.

Second is a very concise model policy, which you are welcome to adapt and adopt. It is meant as a resource, and you are most welcome to prepare your own policy in the way that meets your local needs best.

Pastoral Suggestions Concerning Death in a time of Pandemic

1. Begin funeral planning remotely. While our best and most familiar pastoral work often happens in person, this pandemic calls for us to physically distance to flatten the curve. This feels counter to everything we know as Christians, as Jesus draws close to those who suffer. Name explicitly these extraordinary circumstances, and how you would wish to be physically present, but out of care for their lives, you will be doing the funeral planning remotely. This is unbearably hard. Keep your pastoral care and planning to phone, email, and video.

2. Acknowledge the pain. the family and friends of the deceased may likely be upset by this death and as the awareness sets in, they may be doubly upset by the prospect of a funeral that is not as they imagined it. Acknowledge their pain, expectations and disappointment. When appropriate, share your church's guidelines.

3. I urge you to consider the merits of delaying some rituals. According to folklore, the New England "service berry" tree won't bloom until the ground had thawed enough that you could dig a grave and have a service. We have always had to conform our observances to our context, and so it is now. Consider suggesting a simple graveside service for a small group who can be physically present (and appropriately socially-distant), with a full service at which family and friends can gather when the crisis is past.

3. Appeal to external authorities. All of us are changing our lives and practices to comply with public health orders and advice. The goal is to do the best we can while protecting life; so feel free to invoke public health guidance, and the guidance in this document, if someone in their grief decides you are being the problem.

4. Presume we're all doing the best that we can. Be gracious with yourself and others. Extend extra grace. Folks are taxed emotionally and financially. As best you can, let as much as you can go. This is not business as usual, and so we're all going to have to be flexible. Invite the family into this flexibility, even in their grief.

5. Find ways to remain connected to one another and to God. Are there members of your congregations who can be drafted into service in card writing? Can there be a calendar of people who can call the family on designated days? A video conference call "wake" for a time of remembrances and storytelling? Can you print extra copies of a worship leaflet to send to family members who cannot gather in person?

7. Over-communicate: My mantra is, "until somebody says 'you're saying too much' I'll keep sending emails, calling, and sharing." Parishioners and friends want to hear from you!

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Sample Funeral Policy for _____ Church during COVID-19

For Christians, gathering to mourn the dead, celebrate their life and proclaim the hope of Resurrection are essential practices of our faith. During the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID19 outbreak, our usual mourning rituals have been interrupted. We think of those women on that first Easter, who went to follow their familiar mourning ritual to anoint Jesus's body, to find it disrupted. We remember their initial shock and confusion and feel it too. We're waiting to feel the hope of resurrection. In times of trial like the death of a loved one, we turn to the familiar practices and rituals of our faith and ancestors. And so we know that this disruption for a grieving community is doubly hard. We grieve this disruption with you.

The Centers for Disease Control has recommended no gatherings larger than 10 people. In Maine, we are limited in our funeral practices in the following ways:

Viewing/Wake

We cannot have wakes at this time.

Funeral

- We are able to host a funeral service at the church but only allow in ten people in the church.
- We can live stream the service.
- We are not able to host a funeral service at the church at this time.

Graveside

- We are able to host a graveside service outdoors and require that all people practice physical distancing of 6 feet between one another. We are able to accommodate having 10 people present.
- We are not able to host a graveside service outdoors at this time.

Repast/Collation

We are not able to host a meal following the funeral at this time. We would welcome the opportunity to host a memorial service for your loved one at a later date when we can all safely gather and celebrate their life.