

# 1 ~ CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF YOUR LOVED ONE

## Planning the Funeral or Memorial Service

As you plan a funeral or memorial service for your loved one, here are some differences between the two.

A funeral is usually held soon after the person's death, and the body or cremated remains—usually referred to as “cremains”—will be present during the service. Usually a graveside service will immediately follow if the person's body is present.

A memorial service can be held at any time following the death, and the body is usually not present. I've heard of memorial or tribute services being held in advance of the death while the person is still alive and can attend, but that isn't customary.

Of the services I've attended, by far the most moving ones were the services that had a personal touch. Photographs, slides, collages, anything that helps tell the story of the loved one's life are appropriate and can be very touching.

I've always said that when my time comes, I hope the wake is more like a party. Nothing sad or mournful for me, thank you. I want the music, the room set-up, and even the lighting to set a festive mood. I like to think that there'll be plenty of great food, some wonderful music, and lots of photographs please. I'm looking forward to going to heaven, so I don't want a roomful of people crying for me.

When my father-in-law died, our goal was to make his serv-

ice a celebration of his life. We wanted to highlight the high points of his life and share with folks who might not have known him as well as we did what a great guy he was.

I heard author Angie Hunt say recently that whether we admit it or not, we all want to have a great memorial service. Not flashy or expensive maybe, but we all long to leave a legacy, and we want our loved ones to express that our life mattered and that we'll be missed. She said that's why people carve their initials in trees and press their hands into concrete. It's because we want our lives to have counted for something.

A memorial service or funeral is the way we honor the memory of a person who has gone home. A well-planned service is, for many of those left behind, the beginning of the grieving process.

As you begin to plan the service for your loved one, include memories of him or her that will strike a chord with those who attend. A great deal of comfort can be gained from remembering the familiar and loved characteristics of the person. Also, funny stories seem to take the edge off the pain. When everyone is feeling sad and tearful, a good laugh brought about by a favorite memory or photograph helps.

At the service for our friend Linda, an open microphone was available for people to share their memories of her. At first, everyone who spoke talked about what a great encourager she was and espoused her great ability to see into someone's soul and find the good in that person. The tributes went on and on; they were very touching, and we were all bawling like babies. Then her husband got up and told a funny story about Linda, so other loved ones chimed in. They had everyone laughing and crying at the same time. It was a wonderful time of sharing and tribute.

I want to share with you ideas that others and I have used to

plan a meaningful service. You may want to use them, or they may spur ideas of your own that you want to use. Ask others for their ideas; it's comforting to people to feel that they're part of the process. Delegate jobs to others so they can feel involved and included. Their involvement can be a powerful help in their healing process. Be careful to ask them to take part and not tell them what you expect them to do. If some prefer to not be involved, respect that.

If you would like to involve children in planning the service or even taking part in the service, it's certainly appropriate. Here are some ideas for ways to involve them.

### Allowing Children to Participate in the Service

- Have children or grandchildren of the deceased carry to the front an item that represents something important to the one who has passed away.

*At a funeral my friend attended, one child carried a bag of potatoes, because his dad was famous for his potato recipe. Another carried a pair of snow skis, because his dad was an avid skier. Another brought forward a soccer ball, because his dad loved watching his son's soccer team play. As the items were brought to the front, the pastor told what it was and why it was important to this young father. The children felt very included without having to speak in front of those gathered for the service, and each child was allowed to choose what to carry forward.*

- Don't rule out allowing youngsters to speak during the service.

*My son, then 14, wrote a eulogy for his Papa and delivered it with complete composure, and it was his idea to do it. We were surprised. I've since been to several funerals in*

*which children got up and spoke. The key is to let them choose what's right for them. Don't apply pressure, give hidden messages, or goad them, regardless of how great you think it would be for them to take part in the service. Allow them to back out, even at the last minute, if they have a change of heart.*

- If they play an instrument, let them.
- Ask them to hand out the order of service and obituary.
- Let them help with the set-up at the front of the sanctuary, deciding where flowers should be set or where pictures of the deceased or things he or she loved should be displayed.
- Let them help choose photos for the slide show or memory board.
- Let the children or grandchildren sing a song together if they would like to, but don't force them to take part.
- Ask them to hand out small bottles of bubbles to blow at the grave site or balloons to release after the service.
- Give them the opportunity to read scripture during the service.
- Invite them to do a reading, write a poem of their own to read, or print it and hand it out before the service.
- Take part in the "memory tree."

*For their 10-year-old daughter's funeral, one family had a "memory tree." Ribbons were handed out at the church door. People were invited to write memories on the ribbons and tie them to the branches. Later the family planted the tree at a park they had enjoyed visiting when their daughter was alive. Let the children pass out the ribbons and pens or tie the ribbons onto the tree.*

- Take part in a "chocolate factory."

*To celebrate her husband's passion for all things choco-*

*late, Elaine and her children threw a chocolate dessert party after the funeral in the parking lot of a chocolate factory. There are many possible variations on this one that a family could do to tailor it to their loved one's passion.*

- Ask children for their ideas about the music.
- Ask them if they have their own ideas about something special they could do.
- Let them help choose the gravestone, the casket, the urn, the flowers, or the vault if their age allows. Narrow their choices to items that are within your price range so they won't be disappointed by choosing something that can't be considered.

It may not seem like it now, but you'll get through this time. One thing that helped me so much was the assurance that we would survive, coming from people I love. Even though I wasn't convinced they were right at the time, it still was a comfort to me.

When I was 18 weeks along in my pregnancy, I suffered a miscarriage. I believed I caused it by taking a certain medicine. Although I had called the doctor's office and asked before taking the medication, I later learned that it could have caused the miscarriage. I was destroyed. It seemed too early in the pregnancy to have a memorial service, and some people told me that because it was so early it wasn't a real loss. But we longed to do something to show that this little life mattered and was very real to us. In the words of Dr. Seuss, "A person's a person no matter how small." A memorial service is an important step on the road of healing.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*  
—Rom. 15:13



The word “funeral” sounds like such a dirge. Some people we know referred to their loved one’s service as his “commissioning service.” Other friends held a “graduation ceremony” to celebrate their loved one’s graduation into heaven.

When Mrs. Drake, my son Martin’s teacher, died, her family held a “life celebration.” It was beautiful. Flowers and balloons were everywhere, and a big-screen photo show was conducted, accompanied by uplifting music and people sharing how her life had touched theirs. I remember thinking that I hoped they had taped the service so the family could watch it in the months to come and be encouraged.

At a funeral I recently attended there was a basket filled with small packages of tissues for whoever wanted one. It was a nice touch. I didn’t think I would need any and didn’t take a package. Later I was sorry I hadn’t, so I think it would be a good idea to leave the baskets scattered throughout the pews.

## **A Sample Order of Service**

Following is a sample for you to use as you plan the order of the service. Use what works for you, and discard the rest, or feel free to add your own touches. This outline is a good place to start without having to reinvent the wheel.

**Order of Service**

**Prelude (Music)**

**Presentation of Colors**

**Greetings and Opening Remarks**

**Congregational Singing**

**Prayer**

**Song**

**Eulogy**

**Song**

**Open Microphone**  
**Congregational Singing**  
**Homily (Message)**  
**Song or Congregational Singing**  
**Prayer (Perhaps the Lord's Prayer)**  
**Presentation of Flag and/or Taps**  
**Retrieval of Colors**  
**Postlude (Music)**

## **The Music**

Music is a powerful healer, and most services start with and end with music. Well written and well performed music can bring us to tears and can also lift us up. For the service, include a few of the songs your person loved, and include a few that will inspire and encourage. Music can also make a powerful faith statement, so be sure to include spiritual songs.

For my father-in-law's service we chose songs he and my mother-in-law loved. We set his slide show to those songs. The opening childhood and college pictures were set to Glenn Miller's "String of Pearls." For the family photographs we played Steve Green's "Find Us Faithful." The last photo was a recent close-up of Mel that we left up while "I Can Only Imagine" by MercyMe was played. Many people record the services now so that those who are too young to remember or unable to attend will feel included.

Our youngest son, Micah, who was nine years old, played "Amazing Grace" on the recorder. To close the service, Martin and Matthew, our two oldest sons, played "Taps" on their trumpets from the balcony. It was very touching and powerful.

Using carefully chosen songs adds a lot to the service. Be careful when asking someone to sing or play; live music can be a great

addition or, when not done well, can derail an otherwise well-planned service. We played instrumental versions of favorite old hymns on a CD player as folks came in. Music has a way of ministering to broken hearts in ways words can't penetrate.

If you know an accomplished pianist, it's a wonderful touch to include live music. Live harp music or bagpipes also add beautifully to the service. Finding someone to play is a job that's good to delegate to someone you trust who wants to help. Remember—including others in the planning and execution of the service is a great way to make them feel a part of their loved one's last "party" and also helps that person start his or her healing as well.

The following is a list of songs my friend Lisa Cole of Promise Band and many other friends recommended. I've also given the names of the artists who recorded the songs. I hope this list helps you find something just right for the service you're planning.

"Abide with Me," Judy Collins or Tennessee Ernie Ford

"Amazing Grace," Charlotte Church or an instrumental version

"Angels Among Us," Alabama

"Ave Maria," Michael Bolton

"Baby, Take Your Bow," Chris Rice

"Back in His Arms Again," Mark Schultz

"Be Not Afraid," David Phillips

"Because He Lives," Bill and Gloria Gaither

"Because You Loved Me," Celine Dion

"Beyond Belief," Petra

"Blessed Assurance," Brian Free and the Assurance

"Breakfast Table," Chris Rice

"Bridge over Troubled Waters," Simon & Garfunkel

"Come, Now Is the Time to Worship," Phillips, Craig, and Dean



- “Cry Out to Jesus,” Third Day  
“Draw Me Close,” Lyndsey Wallace  
“The Dance,” Garth Brooks  
“El Shaddai,” Michael Card or John Thompson or Amy Grant  
“Find Us Faithful,” Steve Green  
“Forever Is a Long, Long Time,” Orquestra Was  
“Friends,” Michael W. Smith  
“Give Me Jesus,” Fernando Ortega  
“Go Rest High on the Mountain,” Charlotte Ritchie  
“Going Home,” Wayne Watson or Sara Groves  
“Good-bye, My Friend,” Linda Ronstadt  
“He’s Listening,” Flo Price  
“Home,” Sara Groves  
“Home Free,” Wayne Watson  
“How Great Thou Art,” Daywind Performance Track  
“How to Say Good-bye,” Michael W. Smith or Amy Grant  
“I Cannot Hide from God,” Ralph Carmichael  
“I Can Only Imagine,” MercyMe  
“I Miss My Friend,” Daryl Worley  
“I Surrender All,” Amy Grant  
“I Will Lift My Eyes,” Bebo Norman Worship Tracks  
“I Will Remember You,” Amy Grant  
“I Will Rest in You,” Jaci Velasquez  
“I Will Trust You, Lord,” Sheryl Farris  
“I’ve Just Seen Jesus,” Larnelle Harris & Sandi Patty  
“In Christ Alone,” Margaret Becker  
“In This Very Room,” Sandi Patty  
“It Is Well with My Soul,” Greater Vision  
“Jesus Will Still Be There,” Point of Grace  
“Lay It Down,” Jaci Velasquez  
“Legacy,” Nicole Nordeman

- “Lift My Eyes,” Jill Paquette  
“Lord’s Prayer,” Charlotte Church  
“Mansion over the Hilltop,” Daywind Performance Track  
“May It Be,” Enya  
“My Tribute,” André Crouch  
“Near the Cross,” Joel Rosenberger on piano  
“On Eagle’s Wings,” Michael Crawford  
“Psalm 23,” Charlotte Church  
“Praise You in This Storm,” Casting Crowns  
“Roses Will Bloom Again,” Jeff and Sheri Easter  
“Shout to the Lord,” Integrity or LordSong  
“The Lord’s Prayer,” Charlotte Church  
“The Savior is Waiting,” Ralph Carmichael  
“The Old Rugged Cross,” Vince Gill or Anne Murray  
“‘Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus,” Amy Grant  
“Trust His Heart,” Wayne Watson or Babbie Mason  
“What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” Alan Jackson  
“When the Savior Wipes the Tears from Our Eyes,” The Hoskins  
Family  
“Word of God, Speak,” MercyMe

### **Collections of Songs:**

- 50 Hymns on Guitar*, Samuel David Erwin  
*Big Band Hymns*, The Chris McDonald Orchestra  
*Celtic Hymns*, Don Hart, instrumental  
*Hymns of Hope*, David Davidson on violin  
*Lord of the Hymn*, Celtic Worship  
*Praise Him Piano*, CN Productions  
*Top 25 Praise Songs*, 2005 Edition  
*When We All Get to Heaven, Echoes in the Valley*, banjo and  
chimes

Consider any songs your loved one enjoyed that you feel would be appropriate. If there are favorites the congregation could sing along with, remember that singing is very healing. Be sure to project the lyrics onto a screen at the front or print them in the order of service.

At my friend Linda's service, her grandchildren sang "Jesus Loves Me" together. There is safety in numbers, and it was a way for all the grandchildren to participate. Remember: participation is up to the children, not a requirement.

Many of the songs listed here can be found on YouTube if you want to hear them. Some of the artists have clips on their Web sites, or you can listen to them at Christian bookstores where there are usually booths for listening to demo CDs.

## **The Order of Service or Memorial Folder**

The order of service or memorial folder is usually handed out at the door as people come to the service. It usually includes the order of the service and information about the deceased. Often a photo is included. Sometimes a eulogy or the obituary that appeared in the newspaper along with poetry or a favorite Bible verse are included.

My father-in-law's sister writes poetry, and she wrote a wonderful personalized poem when Mel died. We had it copied onto beautiful paper and put one in each of the folders that were handed out. Many of the services I've attended included some poetry.

## **Sharing Time**

Setting aside a portion of the service to allow friends and family members of the deceased to share memories of the person or talk about his or her character traits is often done. If you

decide to include this in the service, make it optional. Ask those attending to share a favorite memory or something about the person they loved and will miss. It might be good to ask someone to share that you feel will be comfortable doing so to get things started. Be sure the pastor or the one conducting the service doesn't allow sharing to go on for too long.

If you don't feel comfortable with a time of sharing, another idea to give people an opportunity to reflect on the one who has died is to pass a binder with lined paper and a pen throughout the gathering. In one service I attended, pretty stationery sheets were passed around, and at another a journal-type book was passed around. Let folks tell their favorite stories or something that was meaningful to them about your loved one. Another idea is to put a sheet of paper and a self-addressed envelope in the folder so that folks can think about it and mail it later. These thoughts and remembrances make a great keepsake and source of comfort for the family.

### Using Original Art in the Service

If your loved one was an artist or had a favorite artist, using one of his or her favorite pieces in the order of service, on a stand at the front or back of the room, or in the entry next to the guest book is very appropriate. I attended a service in which a color copy of a painting by the deceased was on the front of the order of service. Remember: anything your person created could be displayed on the table. Think outside the box. Quilts, sculptures, pictures of Christmas decorations, carved pieces, paintings, or knitting—anything he or she loved to make—would be a great tribute to the loved one's legacy.

## Something He or She Loved

When my friend's mother-in-law passed away, the family asked everyone to come to the funeral in Bronco or Rockies attire because she was such a fan, and she hated to dress up. A fitting tribute!

At our friend Paul's funeral, there was a fly-by at the end of the service by Air Life. It was awesome. It gave folks the feeling that Paul was waving at everyone from heaven. A definite way to end on an up-note!

## A Keepsake

At Robin Ann's memorial service there was a basket at the back of the church with little cards stapled to packets of flower seeds. The cards were about the size of a business card and read, "In loving memory of Robin Ann, August 14, 1958—May 7, 2007. Robin loved life and lived it to the fullest. In her honor, please carry on by planting these seeds." A nice touch.

## Picture Displays

**Foam core display board of a life well lived.** I made one of these for Mel's service. We displayed it on an easel in the front of the room where the service was held. Mel was cremated, so we didn't have a coffin at the front. We filled the room with photos and other things he loved.

I went to the hobby store and purchased items I could use to make a board with his name, photograph, and favorite verse on it. I purchased big 3-D letters. I bought a foam core display board so it could stand on its own. They come in many colors, but can also be covered with beautiful fine art paper that comes in big sheets available at art supply or hobby stores. Because of the explosion of the scrap-booking industry, there are many

great sticker choices. A few well-placed ones can add a lot. Beautiful paper to mount the picture and print a verse and text on comes for a few cents per sheet. I used a glue gun to attach the plastic letters and a scrap-booking glue stick with super holding power. I attached little metal shapes I found that depicted things Mel loved, such as traveling and the American flag. For the photographs, use repositionable tape to make them easier to remove later.

**Photo albums.** I've been to several services where the families brought in photo albums that were already completed. They were open on a table so that folks could take a few minutes to look through them and remember the good times. After the service, they were moved to the reception room so folks could linger over the pictures.

**A time line.** Another idea is to take several of the foam core poster boards and put photos in chronological order to make a timeline of the person's life. Or you can also group photos together in different activities the person enjoyed such as sports, gardening, cooking, and so on. These collages can be placed at the front of the room and then moved later to the reception room.

This works if you have many photos or if you have only a few. Be sure to attach the photos in a temporary way so they may be easily removed later. Again, stickers are available now for almost any occasion and will add a lot to the display.

**A memory line.** An easier idea for a photo display is to first collect as many photos as you would like to display. Print the photos and mount them on pretty paper. After putting them into chronological order, attach string to the wall by placing tacks on both ends and in the middle. Add a bow over each of the tacks. Next attach the photos to the string with clips or clothes pins. It

makes a lovely memory line, and the photos can be easily removed to put in a photo album. A memory line is a great conversation-starter and gets everyone talking about the fun memories. My friend told me about a service she attended where memory lines were strung all around the room with many copies of each of the photos. After the service, every guest was encouraged to choose a picture he or she liked and take it home. People were very pleased to have a keepsake.

**Centerpieces.** Another way to honor the memory of the deceased is to put photos of him or her doing something he or she loved and grouping them for centerpieces for the tables. Photos of the person gardening, gathered around a pot of flowers, or photos of the person mountain biking, gathered around his or her helmet, make great centerpieces. Again, think outside the box.

Snapping plenty of pictures has taken on new meaning to me lately. I want to have photos of the folks I love so that I can represent them well if they go to heaven before me. Besides, I cherish looking at them and reliving all those precious memories.

**A picture show.** We wanted to honor Mel's great life, so we filled the room with reminders of him. I collected as many pictures as I could of my own and from other family members. Mel and Muff had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary seven years before his death, and we made a book to commemorate the occasion; there were lots of photos close at hand. I took the entire pile to the copy shop and scanned them onto disks. You can do this at home if you have a scanner, but if not, you can scan them at a copy shop or a self-serve photo shop. Appropriate stickers add a lot, and there are many to choose from at your local hobby shop. I found some amazingly appropriate ones and scanned them and added music to make a wonderful PowerPoint presentation.

If you're good with a computer, this is a snap. If you're computer-challenged, you can still do it. Ask for help—someone will be delighted to pitch in. Ask a kid—kids tend to know more about computers than adults. Remember: any way you can involve others in the process is good for them and reduces your stress.

**A looping slide show.** My friend Jean put together a slide show that was played in the entrance and then the reception room with accompanying background music. It was lovely, and since I hadn't known Jean's mother except in her later years, it was meaningful to see shots of her when she was young. Jean said a benefit to putting it together was that it was good therapy for the whole family to reflect on their loved one's life as they chose the photos together and relived precious memories.

There are also digital picture frames available now that play 2,000 digital photos like a slide show, and you can even add music. This is a great idea for funerals, but also a wonderful gift idea for aging parents. Wouldn't it be meaningful if the person who passed away was able to enjoy the slide show while he or she was alive?

**Honoring the dead and respecting the living.** As we prepared for Mel's service, I asked other family members what songs, photographs, or other items they thought characterized his life. I added every one of their suggestions if at all possible. Remember: a memorial service or funeral is really for those left behind, so cater to their needs and desires, and be respectful of their ideas of grief expressions—even non-expressions. Everyone deals with loss and pain in a personal way, so it's important to not impose our ideas on what's the proper way for someone else to grieve.



We encouraged my mother-in-law to bring her dog—a sheltie named Annie—to the service for support. As we expected, Annie was a great comfort to her, and she behaved perfectly during the service. I realize not all churches or funeral homes allow animals other than service dogs.

Do whatever feels comfortable and right for you and your loved ones. Don't worry about what anyone else thinks. At these times, it's important to seek as much comfort as possible for those who are hurting and not worry about doing anything to impress others.

### **Food for Thought: Refreshments Following the Service**

Sometimes I think our culture has things a bit backwards. At weddings, the bride and groom—who are young and just starting out—have to come up with dinner for every guest who graces them with their presence. At funerals, we seem to expect the family—who is grieving and in agony—to throw a party. The Body of Christ is at its best during these times when there's a special need. We're directed by God's Word to stay in the fellowship of believers, because a burden shared is halved, and a joy shared is doubled.

If your church offers to help, let them. If you're able and want to thank them, make an offering to the group that supplies food for funerals, or write them a thank-you note—you can do that later. Now is the time to let the body work for you.

After the service, we offered coffee and dessert. My Bible study buddies and friends all brought food in, and they even served it and made the coffee. They're saints—every one. We didn't want to have a full-blown dinner; my mother-in-law wasn't up to sitting and making small talk. She was in pain. After other services I've attended, church members had laid a beautiful dinner table

of food. Do whatever works for you. I never feel much like eating at such times, but many folks find it comforting, largely because of the fellowship that comes with a meal. Plus, remember that the out-of-towners have no place to go.

If you find yourself in the crisis of losing someone, as we did, and you're between churches, as we were because of a recent move, then here are some low-, medium-, and a little higher-budget ideas for refreshments after the service.

### Low-Budget

- Don't schedule the service at meal time.
- Fruit—order trays or cut it up yourself.
- Cookies or pie—wholesale clubs have a wide selection at reasonable prices.
- Coffee, tea, water, and lemonade.

### Medium-Budget

To the above add:

- Sandwich trays from the grocery or deli.
- Rolls & condiments.
- A relish tray or two—or pick up some jars of pickles.

*The store or restaurant that prepares the trays will be able to tell you how many each tray will serve. Estimating how many are coming to a funeral is difficult. If possible, err on the side of too much food, but try to purchase items that you can freeze or that will keep for several days. No one is likely to feel like cooking for a while—and may not even feel like eating, but, of course, everyone must eat, and it's good to have the leftover sandwich trays on hand.*

### A Little More Money with a Little Less Effort

If you can afford it, contact a favorite restaurant and have a light meal catered that can be served through a buffet line. Be

careful to not choose very aromatic foods, as some will surely be feeling queasy from the day's events and grief. Maybe pick a restaurant that your person loved. For me, they can get food from The Olive Garden. And don't forget the tiramisu and chocolate!

Again, be sure to choose things that can be used for several days that will make good leftovers or can be frozen. If you can afford it, this is a good option, and restaurant employees will come in and do the set-up and clean-up.

If you don't feel up to planning or serving food, just have coffee and tea and punch, and call it good. Be sure to listen to yourself and your limits. If you're stricken with heartache, couldn't care less about refreshments, and there's no help, don't even do it. No one with a brain will care, and if they do care, they should have been helping make it happen. This isn't about impressing anyone. It's about surviving a hard time.

If you want to serve food following the service, this is the perfect place to delegate! The work is easy, and it will give others something to do besides sit and cry.

*Lord, as we contemplate the tribute to our loved one, please bring to mind the attributes that will encourage those left here and serve to extend our loved one's legacy. Show us what you would have us share, and give us your words. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*