

Virtual funerals

liturgies and words for our digital world



Virtual funerals – liturgies and words for our digital world

Introduction

This is not intended to be a definitive collection of resources, but will hopefully give you a starting place with words and ideas that could be useful for you, or to pass on to family members. Please tailor to the needs of your situation.

It is split into six parts

- 1 Liturgical resources for worship leaders to use**
 - 1.1 For use by family and friends in their own homes**
 - 1.2 Liturgy to be led by a worship leader online or over the phone**
- 2 Useful advice to be passed on to relatives**
- 3 Prayers and Poems for worship leaders which can also be passed on to relatives and friends to say on their own at home.**
- 4 Other sources of information that may be useful in thinking about the wider implications of the Covid-19 pandemic**
- 5 What people have done, three short services and a reflection following a virtual funeral**
- 6 Useful links**

Disclaimer

What is provided in this booklet is a compilation of resources that ministers and worship leaders may find helpful in a wide range of pastoral situations. Due to the need for an urgent response because of the way coronavirus was affecting pastoral care and funerals, this booklet was compiled from sources inside and outside the United Reformed Church, and therefore some parts of the liturgies may not reflect the church's doctrine as set out in its [Basis of Union](#).

1 Liturgical resources for worship leaders to use

1.1 For use by family and friends in their own homes

A reflection for when you can't attend on the day of a funeral

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39



Before you find a place to sit quietly, you might like to find a photograph of the person who has died, write down some special memories, or choose a special piece of music to play that connects you with the person you are remembering today. [Where it says 'N' in a prayer, just say the name of your person].

You might like to light a candle. Then pray:

We are here today trying to be still as our loved one **N** is laid to rest – separated in body but not in spirit from all whose life **N** touched... we mark this time knowing that we are not alone...

Adapted from Ruth Burgess

Reflect on your memories.

- 1** What stands out in your memory about **N**?
 - 2** What will you always remember about them?
 - 3** What things did you learn through their life and death, including about God?
- you may wish to write these down to use later in a thanksgiving service.

So let us pray

God, you are present with us
in every touch we cannot feel,
in the words we cannot speak,
in the breath we cannot share.
Hold us in your love
and give us strength to continue in trust. Amen.

Jan Berry

We want to take our time to... remember **N** before God and to give thanks for **his/her** life. We need time to express our sorrow, the grief which hurts because we loved **him/her**. We want to recall **N's** qualities, kindness, and fortitude, knowing that our lives were forever changed by their love. We recall, in a moment of silence, what **he/she** has meant to **his/her** loved ones, friends and colleagues.... We are here to listen to words from the Bible and in them to find comfort and hope.

So let us pray

Eternal God, the creator and upholder of all things, your ways are not our ways, nor your thoughts our thoughts; your wisdom is unsearchable; your purposes cannot fail. As we come to you, let not our hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Comfort us in the natural grief of parting, and help us believe that death itself is swallowed up in victory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

For thousands of years Jews and Christians have drawn strength from the ancient poem known to us as Psalm 23. Read Psalm 23 or alternatively you might like to listen to sung version such as In heavenly love abiding.

The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
He shall refresh my soul and guide me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.
Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in every generation. From everlasting to everlasting you are God. You stand beside us in every experience of joy or sorrow, happiness or desolation. As we walk through death's dark valley, help us to trust in your steadfast love until the day dawns, the morning stars sing together, and the whole creation shouts your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now give thanks to God for their life and ask for strength for yourself and those who grieve. Think about those who would want to be at the funeral and pray for them.

Eternal God, before whose face the generations rise and pass away; we praise you for all your servants departed this life in your faith and love, especially for N,...We give thanks for all your goodness towards him/her; all he/she accomplished by your grace; and all that he/she was to those who loved him/her. And now help us to say goodbye: we praise you that for him/her sorrow and sickness are ended, death itself is past, and he/she lives for ever in your love and care; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rest eternal grant to him/her, O Lord,
and let light perpetual shine upon him/her.

Now say the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

(or)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Now pray this prayer, which is used at the end of the funeral service to say goodbye.

O God, who gives us life and in whose arms we die, we entrust **N** to your safe keeping in the faith of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Receive one of your own, one in whom you have been at work, who carries with **him/her** our love. Welcome **him/her** into your presence, into the rest of everlasting peace and into the company of all the saints. Living God, in the mystery of your eternity, we are not separated from... for your love holds us together. While we live **he/she** will not be forgotten among us. In your eternal love, **he/she** will never be lost. May our memories of **him/her** enrich our lives. May the good things of **his/her** life leave a trace on earth. May your keeping of **him/her** glorify heaven.
May the love of God, in whom we live and die, bless and console us
and gently wipe away every tear from our eyes now and always. Amen.

Adapted from Order for Christian Funerals

You may wish to play some music to finish this time.

To finish you might like to light a candle on-line at www.funeralguide.co.uk/obituaries

If you need more help, you can find support on our website, www.urc.org.uk

Contact details for most United Reformed Churches are available at www.urcdirectory.org.uk
allow ability to customise to give local contact details.

1.2 Liturgy to be led by a worship leader online or over the phone

A Shorter Order of Service for funerals during the Pandemic

Introduction

We have come together to worship God; to give thanks and praise for the life of **N**, whose days among us have now drawn to a close. We have come to share our grief, over one loved and respected by those who knew **her/him**, and one whose love and concern have strengthened us. We meet in the faith that death is not the ultimate calamity that it seems; that we can be enabled to face it despite fear, anger, bitterness or guilt.

URC Service Book

We believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death.

Order of Christian Funerals

We each remember **N** in our own ways and, later on in the year, we will have an opportunity to remember and celebrate **her/his** life in a memorial service. Now, however, we remember **N's** qualities, kindness, and fortitude, knowing that our lives were forever changed by their love.

(pause)

Andy Braunston

Confident that God always remembers the good we have done and forgives our sins, let us pray asking God to gather **N** to God's own side.

O God in whom sinners find mercy
and the saints find joy,
we pray to you for our **sister/brother N**,
that **s/he** may be delivered from the bonds of death.
Admit **her/him** to the joyful company of the saints
and raise **her/him** on the last day
to rejoice in your presence forever. Amen.

Order of Christian Funerals

Reading

For thousands of years Jews and Christians have drawn strength from the ancient poem known to us as Psalm 23. The Psalmist wrote:

The Lord is my shepherd ...

Prayers

We have a time now for prayer if you are religious, quiet contemplation if you are not.

Eternal God,
before whose face the generations rise and pass away: we praise you for all your servants
departed this life in your faith and love,
especially for **N**,
whom today we commend into your sure keeping;
each of us recalling in a moment of silence
what **s/he** has meant to us (**long pause**).
And now we praise you that for **her/him**
sorrow and sickness are ended,
death itself is passed and **s/he** lives for ever
in your love and care.

O God, who brought us to birth,
and in whose arms we die,
in our grief and shock,
contain and comfort us,
embrace us with your love,
give us hope in our confusion,
and grace to let go into new life,
through Jesus Christ. Amen

URC Service Book

The Committal

In sure and certain hope
of resurrection to eternal life
through our Lord Jesus Christ
we commend to Almighty God our **sister/brother N**
and we commit **her/his** body
to the ground (**to be cremated**)
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The Lord bless **her/him**,
the Lord make his face shine upon **her/him**,
and be gracious to **her/him**,
the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon **her/him** and give **her/him** peace.

Order of Christian Funerals

S/he is Gone

You can shed tears that **s/he** is gone
Or you can smile because **s/he** has lived
You can close your eyes and pray that **s/he** will come back
Or you can open your eyes and see all that **s/he** has left
Your heart can be empty because you can't see **her/him**
Or you can be full of the love that you shared
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday
You can remember **her/him** and only that **s/he** is gone
Or you can cherish **her/his** memory and let it live on

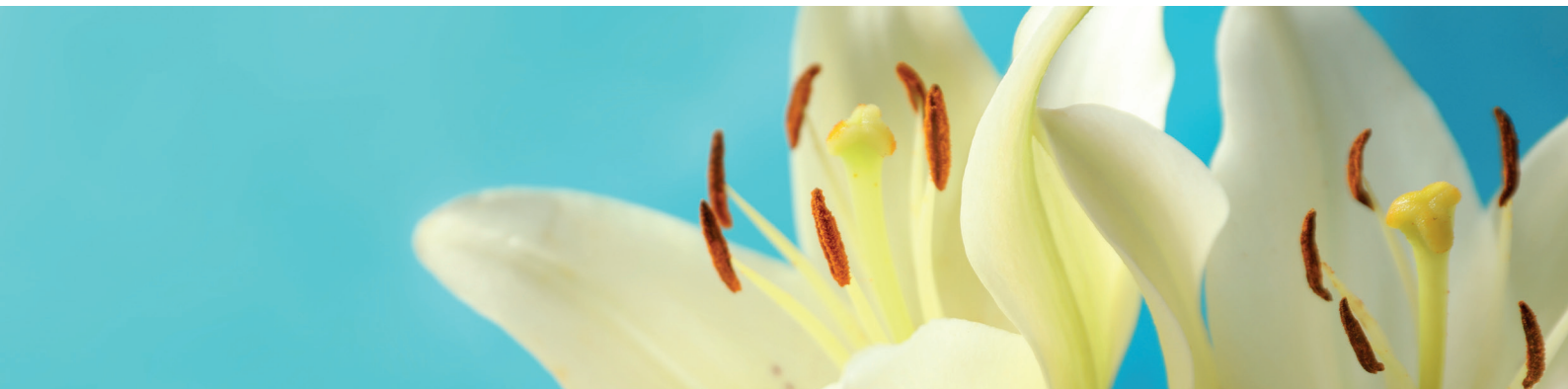
You can cry and close your mind,
be empty and turn your back
Or you can do what **s/he** would want:
smile, open your eyes, love and go on.

David Harkins

Blessing

May the love of God
and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ
bless and console you
and gently wipe away every tear from your eyes.
And may the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you, and all whom you love,
now and always, Amen

Adapted from Order for Christian Funerals



Funeral Service – all faiths/none

The Entrance

Hymn/Music

Gathering

We have come together today to gather with each other and to give thanks and praise for the life of **(name)**. We have come to pray for the comfort and strength promised to us.

Whoever we believe God to be, or in whatever universal Spirit we believe as we gather, we can take comfort from the strength of commitment in this chapel today.

We have all made a statement by being here. We say our farewell in hopes that **(name)** knew joy. We honour **(name's)** life by taking the time out of our lives to be here. And, somehow, we hope to have more sense of life by acknowledging and honouring this death.

And so we pray.

Spirit of all time, we praise you who are our help in every time of trouble. In the presence of death, you comfort all who mourn. We come today to hear that you bear our grief and share our loss.

Give us grace to trust in goodness and mercy. Let each one here, in whatever thoughts we have, know beyond our understanding that we are held in the love and comfort of the universe itself. Our grief will not last forever, our lives will be made new. Amen and Amen.

Reading from Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 , Verses 1 to 8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Thoughts about (name).

I certainly remember **(name)**,

This is a day in which we *all* deliberately remember. We remember **(variety of names known for deceased)** a person whose face shines in our minds as we stop to recall.

You each have your particular memories of **(name)** whether it was **(instances of activities, work, home)** You watched **(pronoun)** have fun, watching **(pronoun)** get hurt, and watched **(pronoun)** care deeply for people.

Treasure that.

For me, this is what eternal life is. Eternal life is not some odd place in a heaven we can't find on a map.

Eternal life is that the one you know and love has left **(pronoun-self)** behind in the memory of all of you. **(pronoun)** lives on. **(pronoun)** is in your hearts and in your minds and there will always be – always has been – **(name)**.

Treasure that as you let **(pronoun)** go today.

Tribute to the person

We hear much about **(pronoun)** now, from **(whomever says this)**.

Hymn/Music

Prayers

O Spirit of all creation, who brought us all to birth and in whose love we will die, in our grief and shock contain and comfort us; embrace us with your love, give us hope in our confusion and grace to let go.

In your unending love and mercy you turn the darkness of death into the dawn of new life. O Love, with whom every generation rises and passes away, we recall so many people departed this life, especially, today, **(name)**, whom today we commend into your sure keeping.

We give thanks for all your goodness to **(pronoun)**, for all **(pronoun)** accomplished by grace and for all that **(name)** is to those who love **(pronoun)**.

We are thankful that for **(name)**, sorrow and sickness are ended, even death is past, and **(pronoun)** lives in new ways in universal love and in our lives.

Let there be compassion on all people in sorrow. We pray for all of **(pronoun)**'s family: **(name as many as needed)**

This day will remind each of us of other funerals, of other losses. Be with each of us as those memories surface, let there be strength to release our memories into a loving universe and to receive back the reality of new and hopeful lives.

Committal

Now we commend **(name)** to new times and **(pronoun)** family and friends to deep care.
[Please Stand]

Having commended **(full legal name)** into universal love, we **commit (pronoun)** body to be cremated/buried, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

We put our whole trust and confidence in the Love of all time, believing beyond Understanding that **(name)** has found deep eternal peace and that each of us will find new and eternal life.

Blessing

May all good light shine in your darkness.
May all good love be the love between you.
May all good life be your life everlasting.

We now move apart from each other, sure in the knowledge that we are richer for our meeting.

Elizabeth Gray-King 2020



From the Church of England resource *Prayer Booklet for those unable to attend a funeral*, Diocese of Worcester (Common Worship).

Some sentences may be read from scripture

'I am the resurrection and the life,' says the Lord.

'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

John 11:25, 26

We brought nothing into the world, and we take nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

1 Timothy 6:7; Job 1:21b

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is his faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22, 23

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16

The Gathering

We meet in the name of Jesus Christ,
who died and was raised to the glory of God the Father.

We join with those in **(place)**

in remembering before God **N**;

to give thanks for **his/her** life;

to commend **him/her** to God our merciful redeemer and judge;

to commit **his/her** body to be **buried/cremated**,

and to comfort one another in our grief.

God of all consolation,

your Son Jesus Christ was moved to tears

at the grave of Lazarus his friend.

Look with compassion on your children in their loss;

give to troubled hearts the light of hope

and strengthen in us the gift of faith,

in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Almighty God,

you judge us with infinite mercy and justice and love everything you have made.

In your mercy turn the darkness of death into the dawn of new life,

and the sorrow of parting into the joy of heaven;

through our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Those present online may be encouraged to share briefly their memories of the one who has died.
Or a prepared tribute is read out**

Reading

An appropriate reading from the selection here is read.

Isaiah 61:1-3 To comfort all who mourn

John 14:1-6 In my Father's house are many rooms

John 20:1-11 The Resurrection of Christ

Romans 8:31-end Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ

Romans 14:7-12 Christ the Lord of the living and the dead

1 Corinthians 13:1-end Description of love

1 Corinthians 15:1-26, 35-38, 42-44a, 53-end The resurrection of the dead

1 Corinthians 15:20-end The resurrection of the dead

1 John 3:1-3 We shall be like him

Revelation 21:1-7 Behold I make all things new

Prayers

God of mercy, Lord of life, you have made us in your image
to reflect your truth and light:

we give you thanks for **N**, for the grace and mercy **he/she**
received from you, for all that was good in **his/her** life,
for the memories we treasure today.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

Your mighty power brings joy out of grief, and life out of death.

Look in mercy on **[... and]** all who mourn.

Give them patient faith in times of darkness.

Strengthen them with the knowledge of your love.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

God our Father,

we thank you that you have made each of us in your own image,
and given us gifts and talents with which to serve you.

We thank you for **N**,

the years we shared with **him/her**,

the good we saw in **him/her**,

the love we received from **him/her**.

Now give us strength and courage

to leave **him/her** in your care,

confident in your promise of eternal life.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer

Support us, O Lord,

all the day long of this troublous life,

until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,

the busy world is hushed,

the fever of life is over

and our work is done.

Then, Lord, in your mercy grant us a safe lodging,

a holy rest, and peace at the last.

The Lord's Prayer

Commendation and Farewell

We commend **N** to the mercy of God, our maker and redeemer.

Silence is kept

God our creator and redeemer,
by your power Christ conquered death and entered into glory.
Confident of his victory and claiming his promises,
with those in **(place)** we entrust **N** to your mercy
in the name of Jesus our Lord, who died and is alive
and reigns with you, now and for ever.
Amen.

Concluding prayer/ Blessing

Taken from (and adapted) **Common Worship: Pastoral Services**, material from which is included here, is copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2000, 2005 and published by Church House Publishing.



2 Useful advice to be passed on to relatives

From the Church of England resource Prayer Booklet for those unable to attend a funeral Diocese of Worcester

Sadness, Grief and Being there (taken from www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/sadness-grief-and-being-there)

If someone you love dies in the next few days, of whatever cause, it may still be possible to have a small funeral held at a graveside or a crematorium led by a minister.

What happens at a funeral

During a funeral there are five things that happen:

- 1) You give thanks for all that the person meant to you
- 2) You find hope for tomorrow, drawing strength from the presence of friends and from God
- 3) The person is commended into God's care
- 4) The body is committed to be buried or cremated.
- 5) You say your last farewell to a person's physical body.

If you are unable to go to a funeral which is still happening with others attending:

- You could watch online if the funeral is live-streamed. The family or undertaker would be able to tell you.
- Take a few moments to think, write, or draw some of your memories of the person.
- Share those memories with others soon after the funeral or if there is a special memorial service after the lockdown is over.

If you were unable to say goodbye

This is particularly hard, and the best thing to do is to talk to someone about your feelings. Many of the things above will also help, and there are prayers that might help.

Again, lighting a candle online (www.churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/light-candle) might help, and if you can go out, then pop into an open church (when they can be open again) to pray and think.

Holding important conversations

This might be a moment when you begin to think about funerals and about death. It could be a time to think about what you would want at a funeral, so do take time to talk about these issues with your own family and friends. And, if appropriate, make a note of your thoughts and ideas – even if there is no funeral service at the moment, you will be able to use these ideas to shape a special service in the future to give thanks for your special person.

Impact on bereavement

Not being present when someone dies, and not being able to be at a funeral can have a big impact on grief and bereavement. Grief is a long and painful journey, and you may need additional support.

Journey through grief

The funeral itself marks a particular moment as life changes after the death of someone you knew and love. As time goes on after the funeral, the experience of grief continues.

Going through grief is sometimes described as a journey. Like a journey, it is a process and so involves changes over time. But, unlike most journeys, it doesn't really have a clear end point. And even its starting point can sometimes be vague. Each grief journey is unique, affected by many things, including: the circumstances of the death, the relationships of the people involved and the personality and past experiences of the person who has been bereaved.

The process of grief takes longer for some people than for others.

The grief journey may be longer if the death:

- occurred without warning
- involved a child
- was particularly horrifying or
- is not certain or has no clear focus e.g. if a person has gone missing.

Starting the journey

A sudden, unexpected death means that the start of the grief journey is clear. But, when death follows a long illness, the grieving process may begin gradually, before the person has died.

At the time of a bereavement, people often say they feel numb. They may 'feel in limbo' during the time between the death and the funeral. Ordinary life is put 'on hold' and they feel as if they are just 'going through the motions' of life.

Once friends and relatives have gone home after the funeral, bereaved people can feel especially lonely. Life seems very empty and they often wonder whether they will ever get to feel any better. Gradually, they start doing ordinary things again, such as returning to work, tackling jobs in the home and dealing with paperwork. But life does not 'return to normal'. 'Normal' has changed forever.

Moving on through the journey

Most bereaved people go through a number of different emotions. But they do not go through them in neat stages. They may move back and forth between a range of feelings. Grief is tiring and can feel like being frightened or involve feelings of shame or guilt or of irritability or downright anger.

Grief is natural and many people go through the grief journey with just the support of family and friends. Others value the support of trained counsellors or listeners.

There are many organisations which can help with grief, these are just a few:

- Cruse
- Care for the Family
- NHS
- Bereavement UK
- Child Bereavement Charity
- Child Death Helpline – there to listen to and support anyone affected by the death of a child.
- Grief Encounter – which supports children who have lost someone they love
- SANDS – Still Birth & Neonatal Death charity
- Winston's Wish – a charity for bereaved children
- Some churches have counsellors who specialise in supporting people after a bereavement. Churches can also point people towards other local bereavement services.

The journey's end

As time goes on, bereaved people find they can speak of the person who died without tears or deep emotion. They notice their interest in hobbies returning and can look outwards to the world and its possibilities.

Eventually, they can laugh and love and find reasons to live again.

3 Prayers and Poems for worship leaders which can also be passed on to relatives and friends to say on their own at home

This...

This is not what we imagined.
We imagined a good send off,
with friends and family gathering together
to listen and share
stories of you and your life and our love;
with time to hold each other
and weep, for what we have lost.
But no,
we have something very different...
In our disconnection
let us know we are still connected through you
In our separate places
let us know that we can hold each other in our hearts,
in the words we can share and the stories we can tell.
By phone, online,
maybe even seeing each other,
even when we cannot touch each other.
And God?
Perhaps God is here –
in the love we share
in the joy we remember
in the tears we shed
in the hope we hold.
For this is not all there will be.
One day,
when this is over,
when it is a memory,
we will gather,
and we will have the send-off we so long to give.
We will hold each other
and weep and laugh as we remember
Your love which connects us, even now.

Anne Sardeson, March 2020

Gathering words

We are gathered here, face-to-face
or connected by technology and love.
We trust in God's presence
within and among us
holding us where physical touch cannot.

Opening prayer

God, you are present with us
in every touch we cannot feel,
in the words we cannot speak,
in the breath we cannot share.
Hold us in your love
and give us strength to continue in trust. Amen.

A prayer

God, who knows all our circumstances,
we offer our thanks for the life of...
for all the love **s/he** found through family and friends,
for the beauty and wonder of your created world,
for all that brought joy to **his/her** heart.
We offer up to you the mystery of dying,
our anger and bewilderment,
our pain and sorrow at loss,
our vulnerability and fear
as we continue our own journey.

In the midst of separation and distance
in our daily living
help us to know that you are near.
Help us to trust your promise
that nothing,
in illness or health,
in living or dying,
can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Jan Berry 2020



The following prayers are adapted from the Church of England resource *Prayer Booklet for those unable to attend a funeral*, Diocese of Worcester. Reproduced with permission.

Loving God, the shadow of death has fallen over me because someone I love has died. Be with me through this time, comfort me with your presence, and let me see the light of hope, for you promise eternal life through Jesus Christ your son, who died and rose again. Amen.

For a grieving friend

Dear Lord, as Jesus' followers asked him to help their friends, so I ask you today to help my friends struggling in the darkness of grief. May they know moments of peace in their pain, moments of joy in their memories, and moments of hope in your love. Amen.

Knowing what to do and say

Dear God, normally I would ask – shall I bake a cake or take a casserole, drop by with a card or flowers? But these are difficult times, and I can't do the normal things. Give me wisdom as we talk on the phone or online, and help me to listen well, to share good memories and offer the right words of hope. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Going to a friend's funeral or remembering them at home

Lord of all love, be with me today in the stillness and comfort me as I remember my friend. Be with me as I look back, remembering all whom I mourn, and be with me as I look forward to the journey that lies ahead. Give me the strength to talk of hope and the courage to show love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

A prayer about the Coronavirus outbreak

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress. Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low; that we may rejoice in your comfort knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

For those in isolation

God of compassion, be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation. In their loneliness, be their consolation; in their anxiety, be their hope; in their darkness, be their light; through him who suffered alone on the cross, but reigns with you in glory, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For those who are worried/social cohesion

Loving Jesus, you are compassionate to those in need and heal the sick in body and mind. Look kindly on those who are fearful at this time. Help us all to put away all thoughts and actions that separate us from you and from one another. Give us grace to live our lives confident in your promise that you are with us always. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us to love our neighbour, and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you. In this time of anxiety, give us strength to comfort the fearful, to care for the sick, and to assure the isolated of our love, and your love, for your name's sake. Amen.

For those who are ill

Merciful God, we entrust to your unfailing and tender care, those who are ill or in pain, knowing that whenever danger threatens your everlasting arms are there to hold us safe. Comfort and heal them, and restore them to health and strength; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For hospital staff and medical researchers

Gracious God, give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who are caring for the sick, and your wisdom to those searching for a cure. Strengthen them with your Spirit, that through their work many will be restored to health; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From one who is ill or isolated

O God, help me to trust you, help me to know that you are with me, help me to believe that nothing can separate me from your love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers for when you can't get to church

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your disciples, 'I am with you always'. Be with me today, as I offer myself to you. Hear my prayers for others and for myself, and keep me in your care. Amen.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
From St Patrick's Breastplate

I am giving you worship with all my life,
I am giving you obedience with all my power,
I am giving you praise with all my strength,
I am giving you honour with all my speech.
I am giving you love with all my heart,
I am giving you affection with all my sense,
I am giving you my being with all my mind,
I am giving you my soul,
O most high and holy God. Praise to the Father,
Praise to the Son, Praise to the Spirit,
The Three in One.

Adapted from Alexander Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica, 1900

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
The 'Jesus Prayer'

After a time of prayer

Be with us, Lord, in all our prayers, and direct our way toward the attainment of salvation, that among the changes and chances of this mortal life, we may always be defended by your gracious help, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A child's prayer for when a friend is ill

Dear God, (name of friend) is ill. They are not allowed to go to school or come over to play. I'm sad because I miss them. They must be feeling miserable and lonely as well. Please be close to them. Please be with the people who are looking after them. Please help them to get better and to know that you love them. Amen.

A prayer for the world

God of love and hope, you made the world and care for all creation. But the world feels strange right now. The news is full of stories about Coronavirus. Many people are anxious because of it. Many people are anxious that they might get ill. Many people are anxious about their family and friends. Be with them in their worries and help them to find some peace. We pray for the doctors and nurses and scientists who are working to discover the right medicines to give hope to those who are ill. Thank you that even in these strange and worrying times, you are with us. Help us to look for the signs of your goodness and love towards us. Amen.

A prayer remembering God is with us

Lord God, you are always with me. You are with me in the day and in the night. You are with me when I'm happy and when I'm sad. You are with me when I'm healthy and when I am ill. You are with me when I am peaceful and when I am anxious. Today I am feeling (name how you are feeling) because (reasons you are feeling this way). Help me to remember that you love me and are with me in everything today. Amen.

Lament

I just want to hold her hand
and to have her hold mine
but our world will not allow it,
dis-ease separates.

If I could be there I could do
and love and speak for her
among strangers who will miss
the little, important things.

And not because they don't care,
hell no, they do, but this is no way
to end your days, our days,
discovered too late, alone.

I hear no talk of God but
in the silence. That God
has abandoned us again,
left us, to be alone, un-held.

By David Buck © 2020, used with permission

Poem – The Gap

I cannot hold you close today.
I cannot take your hand;
I cannot wipe your tears away
Or brace you as you stand.

I cannot whisper in your ear
Or pass a gift to you –
A sweet or silly something dear –
To cheer a world turned blue.

I cannot sit at home with you,
Make tea or share the moans;
Can't spread a blanket over you
When sorrow chills your bones.

Only these words can reach across
The distance we must keep
Reminding you we're still an US
And, waking or asleep,

The bond that ties us close endures
And love can stretch so far –
Can wind its way through walls and doors
To wherever you are.

So I will pray and you will pray
And we will pray together.
The tie that binds us cannot fray:
Love. Always and forever.

A day will come, an end to pain,
And when that day begins
We'll hold each other close again
Because love always wins.

By Caroline Beckett, no copyright and free to share

4 Other sources of information that may be useful in thinking about the wider implications of the Covid 19 pandemic

Some thoughts from a trauma-informed perspective on supporting ministers in funeral ministry during the Covid-19 Crisis

As the Covid-19 crisis deepens, we will, as ministers, be called upon to take funerals for those who have died from the virus, as well as from other causes, in circumstances that may well be very distressing for us as well as for the few family members who are able to attend, and those who can't.

What we are going through globally, locally in our communities and churches, and in our families and within ourselves is a traumatic situation. Trauma can be a shock event like an accident or act of violence, but it can also be a slowly unfolding situation over a period of time as in the current crisis that we are all facing personally and professionally.

First a bit of background to set the context as it's helpful to understand the **main characteristics of trauma** which many of us are experiencing in some form or another in this situation in order to know how best to approach supporting ourselves and others:

- **Overwhelm** – our normal capacities to cope become overwhelmed and we feel that we can't handle all that's coming at us; it's all "too much, too fast, too soon"¹. The sense of overwhelm can also come from having to receive and handle other people's distress and pain, and to have to keep doing it, while trying to hold our own anxiety and distress.
- **Broken connections** – quite literally our physical connections with one another have been broken and we can't console others with a touch or hug as we would normally do. Not only are families distressed by the loss of a family member, but also by not being able to have the funeral they would have liked to celebrate and honour the deceased. Our understanding of who we are and how we connect as ministers is being shaken, and how we understand the world and God is being challenged. When previously safe assumptions about how we live, what we think and what we experience are thrown up in the air it feels a scary place to be, in our bodies and emotions as much as in our minds.
- **Trauma is a whole body experience** – we know we are going through something difficult because our bodies, not our minds, tell us first! All sorts of body experiences and symptoms emerge, such as a tight chest, stomach ache, needing to go to the toilet more often, headaches, tiredness, loss of concentration, depleted energy levels, neck and shoulder tension, skin conditions and so the list goes on depending on where your stress registers in your body. The amygdala, our 'early warning system' in our 'feeling brain' (limbic system) is telling us we are not safe and is triggering the nervous system to send out the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol to get us ready for fight or flight. When these hormones are coursing round our bodies, we quite literally lose connection with our 'thinking brain' (pre-frontal cortex) and we react instead either with fix-it energy, or with collapse. Most importantly, we lose our capacity to be truly present to ourselves or to others.

So, how does this help in terms of being faced with taking several funerals in extremely distressing circumstances, on top of all the overwhelm and disconnection we may already be feeling in our ministries and personal lives?

1 Peter Levine, author of several books on understanding and healing trauma

- **Naming** what's happening: This might sound obvious, but attentive listening to exactly what is going on for us enables us **to name precisely** what we are experiencing in our bodies and our feelings. Our nervous systems start to calm when we can name exactly what it is we are feeling. It releases tension when this is heard and received in ourselves and, whether in person or virtually, by a warm resonant other.

One of our deepest needs is to know that we are understood, so being able to share what we are going through with someone else who can acknowledge with us that what we are facing is overwhelming, difficult, upsetting, confusing etc, is a huge resource. Once we've been able to name what we're feeling, then we can begin to work with what we need to move forwards.

- **Normalising:** Understanding that what we are experiencing is perfectly normal in a traumatic and anxiety provoking situation. Knowing that we can't stop our bodies reacting initially in this way helps us to realise that we are not being weak or inadequate, and to let go of guilt or shame that we are not coping better than we feel we should.
- **Breathing:** When we are agitated, anxious, or distressed we can't think clearly as we have temporarily lost connection with our thinking brain. Calming the triggered nervous system is what helps us to re-regulate ourselves and bring our thinking brains back on-line. One of the most effective ways to do this is to pay attention to the breath and to consciously slow it down, lengthening the inhale and the exhale for a few breaths and bringing our awareness to our bodies being grounded in the present, in physical space and time. A way of doing this is:



- to stop for a few moments and be aware of your body, your feet on the floor, the chair supporting you, and any areas of tension that you notice in your body;
 - to become aware of your breath and then to take a slightly longer inhale (for the count of 3) and to lengthen the exhale (for a count of 4), and to do this about 5 times;
 - to stay with the quiet for a few moments, to be present to the moment and your experience, and then bring it to a close perhaps with a thanksgiving to God for the gift of his presence with us in our breath.
- **Resourcing:** When our feeling brain is calmed then it can connect well with the thinking brain to gain access to our resources! This is the space for working out creative and sensitive ways of handling the service and what will be of most help to the family. Positive and practical ways forward emerge along with drawing on other resources that may be available to us.
 - **Being present:** One of the gifts of this approach is that you can then practice breathing, calming and centring when faced with the actual funeral and, from this place, be more able to communicate a sense of safety and space in which the distress and grief of those attending can be held.

It's not only viruses that are contagious, but feelings are too. Being able to be present to and hold difficult feelings, our own and those of others, is calming for others and enables them to be more present in the midst of very distressing circumstances. Sometimes we're afraid of naming in the service how difficult this is for the family in case we make it worse, but actually the opposite is true. People feel that you understand, that you 'get it'. It speaks to their souls.

- **Self care:** Doing this kind of funeral ministry on top of all the other pressures and different ways of ministering in this crisis, is hugely demanding and tiring, so it is really important that you don't feel guilty about attending to your own needs. We are in this for the long haul. Be kind to yourself!

Hilary Ison, www.tragediesandcongregations.org.uk

And finally – some very practical advice for at the Crematorium as on Twitter [@PeterCo27756774](https://twitter.com/PeterCo27756774)

You're not wimpy
 Keep your distance from folks
 Go vested, to avoid using the small vesting room
 Use your own prayer book/order of service
 Wear disposable gloves until you begin
 Use hand gel after touching anything and avoid touching your face
 Shower afterwards

5 What people have done

Three short services using mainly the *URC Worship Book*

1. A family member had to self-isolate for suspected Covid-19 – the email funeral

The funeral had already been prepared, with several discussions with the family – back in the days when we could meet face to face. However, the funeral was being held on the week things began to change, when people over 70 or with underlying health conditions were told that by weekend they needed to stay indoors. Church was still open but church groups were deciding not to meet.

The day before the funeral (to be held at church), a family member contacted me to say that they felt they should cancel it as one person close to the deceased had to self-isolate. I gave them the option to live stream for that person or to postpone it. They opted to cancel the service and do something later as a family when they scattered the ashes. However they were happy for the church to still meet (as life long church member).

As church groups were not meeting, I emailed a service out to the church members, based on the funeral service that the family had prepared.

This was what I emailed (**personal details removed**):

Subject: Remembering **[person's name]**

Dear friends,

At some time on **[insert day]**, we invite you to pause and remember **[insert name of deceased]**. **[Name]** has been a part of our family for most of **her** life, and although we cannot meet together in person, I offer the following to help guide your thoughts and prayers into your own service of thanksgiving for **[name]**.

You will see there are YouTube links to hymns that were to be a part of the service.

Please use them if you would find music helpful.

Blessings,

Angela

Minister at **[name of church]**

<><

Remembering **[name of deceased]**

Together let us give thanks to God for the life of our friend and loved one **[insert name]**.

[paragraph with details about the person and their life in the church family]

I wonder – how did **[name]** touch your life?

(Pause to reflect on a memory of **[name]**.)

Hymn: Lord of All Hopefulness https://youtu.be/9-D_aT8CXyc [hymn chosen by the family]

Bible Reading: Psalm 23 [reading chosen by family]

A Prayer

God, we thank you for the gentle, kind faith of our friend [name].

We thank you for the way she lived out her faith with a gracious and generous spirit.

God, we know that you have welcomed [name] with open arms, and that she is safe with you – free from pain, free from suffering.

We pray for her family, thinking especially of [.....]. We would ask that you surround them with your love and fill them with your peace.

God, we entrust [name] to your safekeeping.

Receive one of your own who carries with her our love.

Welcome her into your presence.

While we live she will never be forgotten.

In your eternal love, she will never be lost.

We commend [name] to your safekeeping.

Give her peace and rest in your eternal home.

Amen

A Blessing

The peace of God, which passes all understanding

Keep our hearts and minds

In the knowledge and love of God

And of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord;

And the blessing of God,

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Remain with us always. Amen.

Hymn: Amazing Grace <https://youtu.be/KVjftQZ9jHA> [version requested by family]

2. The funeral at the crematorium was cancelled – the telephone funeral

The next funeral was also prepared with the next of kin in the days when we could talk face to face, but two days before it was to be held at the crematorium, the Prime Minister said those with underlying health conditions would be told to stay inside.

As the next of kin was in that category, I asked him to consider cancelling the service at the crematorium. Instead I offered to phone him and pray with him, as the deceased was driven to the crematorium for a direct cremation. I also suggested we hold a service of thanksgiving on the deceased's birthday, at church with refreshments at the back.

When I phoned him, I read prayers from the *Blue Book 'Funeral Services'*.

Welcome and Introduction p3

First Opening Prayer p.4

Reading: Isaiah 11:6-9 [requested by family]

Prayers of Thanksgiving p. 11-12

The First Commendation p.16

The Lord's Prayer

The Blessing p.22

3. The funeral that happened at the crematorium

The third funeral was able to go ahead as planned, except only the immediate next of kin could attend – up to 20 people. We maintained 2 meters distance between me and the family.

I led the procession in, as the funeral services carried the coffin in. Once they left the crematorium, the family could come in. They were all in individual seats, sat 2 metres apart from one another. When a family member read the eulogy or a Bible reading, I stepped down, so as to maintain 2 metres distance.

Again – I used the order of service previously agreed with the family, using prayers from the *URC Worship Book* and the *Blue Book 'Funeral Services'*.

A Reflection by a relative after a virtual funeral contributed by the Revd Nick Stanyon

A reflection on his mum's virtual funeral

Well, as promised, a user's reflection of a virtual funeral service.

Before hand, it sounded so weird and plain wrong to plan a virtual service beamed live from the minister's home. Many of the family felt strongly that Mum deserved more than that. But those thoughts and feelings soon dissipated once the service began. It felt 'realer' than expected, and the sound of tears around the room showed it had hit the mark. These tears were from grandchildren who would not have been able to attend the service if we had attempted it at the crem., so job done.

One strength was the professionalism with which the minister (Nigel Ford of Canford Heath Baptist Church) conducted the live-stream. He'd gone to lengths to set up, using a forest scene back drop and placing a photo of Mum on a well-placed table. He did not hold notes, but read from a script somehow placed beside the camera, so eye contact was maintained throughout. When it came to singing, he had his piano just out of site below camera and so could accompany us without moving.

His wife joined him to sing, and to encourage us all in doing so. He based the service on a slimmed down version of the celebration we had planned, using the scripture and songs we had chosen, doing a tribute based on notes I had sent him, allowing us time for silent reflection and leading us in prayer as we committed Mum to the Lord's keeping. He even ended with Glen Miller's 'In the mood' playing as we had planned. And during the service, but not filmed, Mums body was respectfully dealt with at the crematorium.

The service was broadcast on the churches face-book page. A downside was that some people thought they had clicked the right icon to join the service, but it was only a notice on the face book-page, resulting in frantic phone calls when the service had begun. Nobody missed anything much, but it was an avoidable panic. It is important to make it very clear where to find the live stream on the page, and how to access it.

Doing the service this way, we felt supported and together, even if not as we would have liked. Friends and family from across the country (and even in Spain) joined us at the time, with 55 computers connected to the live stream and many leaving messages of appreciation in the chat line. We felt supported in a way I don't think we could have done if we had just had a small crem service.

Afterwards the family gathered in a zoom meeting, which was less successful, but very worthwhile. Some of us struggled with the technology and one managed to sign in to another meeting all on her own, phoning to ask where we all were! But we were able to laugh, share memories, and support one another almost as well as in a normal 'gathering after the service'.

We even lifted a glass in Mum's memory, with Grandpa proposing the toast. It was good to be together in this way. On the down side, one upset grandchild felt unable to join us in this 'artificial' way. That's understandable. Also, we were not able to break up into side conversations and everyone had to listen to one who was speaking – making some parts stilted and nervous (as large groups listening in conversation can often be).

And then, Zoom very kindly gave us extra time, which really threw us out as no-one knew how and when to stop the meeting! An agreed way to end would have helped.

Over all, while this was very different, I think this method worked very well. We are going to have a big celebration of Mum's life later in the year, but part of me would not mind now if we did not. I think we have done right by her and by ourselves.

Thank you all for your thoughts and prayer through this. We appreciated all your comments on my last post. I repeat that I shared these posts not to look for sympathy (grateful as I am for it) but to stimulate thought and imagination through offering a user's point of view to those of us concerned with delivering. I offer my reflections in the hope of helping colleagues to be able to help and support others in these difficult times.

God bless you all.

6 Useful links

Sources from other denominations

The Methodist Church has published a short at-home service people can use if they can't attend a funeral.

www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/worship-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#home-funeral-service

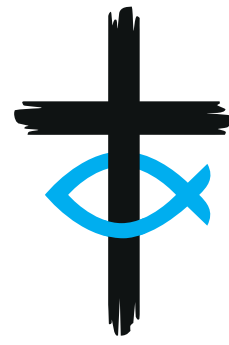
Church of England

Simpler reflection document link is

www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Funerals%20liturgy%20at%20home%20public.pdf

There are also shortened crematoria and graveside services linked from this page

www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/new-reflection-issued-people-who-cannot-attend-funeral



The
**United
Reformed
Church**

www.urc.org.uk

**‘We worship God, ever present in the Holy Spirit;
who brings this Gospel to fruition, assures us of
forgiveness, strengthens us to do God’s will,
and makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus,
sons and daughters of God.’**

The United Reformed Church Basis of Union

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