

A Clergy Discussion on Funeral Planning during COVID-19

In the last few weeks, pastors Rev. Dr. J. Lawrence Turner (senior pastor, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church), Rev. Dr. Jathaniel Cavitt (senior pastor, Colonial Park United Methodist Church) and Bishop Linwood Dillard (Citadel of Deliverance Church of God in Christ) have all walked alongside grieving church members who have been denied the traditional rites of saying farewell to a loved one and reimagined planning services and the intentionality of a ministry of sustained connection at an intimate time when physical presence is not possible.

Pastoral Presence

Providing pastoral care at the time of a coming or recent death is an intimate experience. With stay-at-home orders and social distancing necessary to keep people safe from COVID-19, pastors face challenges they never imagined for how to provide a ministry of presence when they cannot be near enough to touch those who are about to leave their earthly lives or their loved ones. Tender conversations that normally happen face to face, or even hand to hand, right now must happen over the phone or at best with a technology that allows the pastors to see the expressions that pair with the words they are hearing.

Funeral Rites and Rituals

Under the best of circumstances, families feel immense pressure to plan the perfect service. Right now, even funeral homes are navigating uncharted territory, and realistically only a small graveside service (only 10 people) may be possible. Pastors may need to give families permission to come out from under pressure and know that their loved ones would understand the circumstances and see what the Spirit is stirring among them. In a Christian death, we still proclaim the gospel in the face of death even if the rites and rituals look different because of the circumstances. Some ideas include:

- Stream a service officiated by a pastor without anyone attending in person.
- Gather brief video or musical contributions from friends and family who might have contributed to an in-person service into a video that can be streamed for people to watch from anywhere.
- Hold the graveside service now and make plans for a robust celebration of life service in the future when the danger of gathering as many as who wish to come is past.

Intentional Aftercare

Beginning with the meal many congregations share after a funeral—and now can't—be intentional about follow-up. Create a continuum of care that involves both pastor and lay leaders. Arrange to deliver meals to the family in a way that observes social distancing guidelines. Remember that many families who lose a loved one right now have no “normal” to return to. Their jobs are on pause. They are supposed to stay home. They can't go to church. They don't even have the benefit of a familiar routine to give them structure. Frame a plan of care for calls, cards, and prayers so they know that the connection of care is never broken.

Church Health hosted a webinar called “A Clergy Discussion on Funeral Planning during COVID-19.” It is available for viewing on our website, <https://churchhealth.org/fce/>.