



Death, Grief and Funerals in a Time of Social Distancing

“For I am convinced that 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

These are challenging days for the practice of congregational ministry. Public health directives have meant churches are suspending Sunday services and all other meetings indefinitely. Some congregations are adapting by developing forms of online worship and gathering; others are still trying to figure out how to keep members of their worshipping community connected. Clergy are struggling with how to offer pastoral care in times of crisis. Some creative solutions are emerging. Pastoral counselling and listening can be done by telephone or video conferencing. Congregational networks such as elder districts or prayer chains can be mobilized to regularly check in on seniors and people who are shut-in by telephone. Baptisms and weddings can be rescheduled.

But there is one core pastoral issue which presents a special challenge for clergy and church leaders. How do we minister to grieving families in their time of loss at the death of a loved one when natural human gestures of comfort like hand holding and hugs are strongly discouraged? How do we handle requests for funerals when those who desperately need the opportunity to gather together, remember and celebrate the lives their loved ones, and to hear God’s word of resurrection hope and healing cannot do so without potentially exposing one another to harm?

Our first pastoral instinct may be to continue offering the ministry of physical presence and traditional group liturgies. But these are exceptional times. In the face of a global pandemic our primary pastoral responsibility is to consider the health and safety of those we serve. No one has special immunity or protection from viruses and all people are to follow public health precautions and directives for physical distancing. Should a funeral request come, gently but firmly encourage postponement of the funeral or memorial service until restrictions for in-person gatherings have been lifted. This may not be an easy conversation to have with grieving people, but under the circumstances it may be one of the most pastoral responses we can offer. It might be wise to bring this matter to the attention of the Session and communicate to the congregation that all funerals will be postponed until the end of public health restrictions so all will know in advance what to expect.

In the meantime, clergy and church leaders are invited to consider using existing technology to help people grieve and connect for mutual support. Some ministers are experimenting with “virtual visitations” where people can gather through video conferencing to offer condolences

to grieving family members, share memories and stories and pictures, and have a brief online time of scripture reading and prayer. Where the family is comfortable with the suggestion, ministers may even offer informal funeral services adapted to online video conferencing. Ongoing pastoral conversations by telephone and online face-to-face meetings can help maintain personal contact with those journeying through grief.

None of this can ever be a substitute for physical presence, appropriate touch and community worship, which is so much a part of traditional pastoral care in times of grief and loss. We miss these important aspects of how we do ministry and yearn for a return to normal. Until then, in God's grace and love, we adjust. We are an Easter people. Even in the shadow of death we believe that in Christ there is resurrection and new life. The difficult days we find ourselves in will pass. In the meantime, we seek God's comfort and presence in the community of faith as we find new ways to serve broken and hurting people.

Below are links to other resources and suggestions for further reading and reflection:

Funerals pose challenges in time of social distancing (Baylor University):

baptiststandard.com/news/faith-culture/funerals-pose-challenges-in-time-of-social-distancing/

Guide for Christian Funerals During COVID-19 (Massachusetts Council of Churches):

masscouncilofchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020.03.24-Christian-Funerals-during-COVID19-Version-3.0.pdf

Moderator Asks That Funerals Be Delayed (United Church of Canada):

united-church.ca/news/moderator-asks-funerals-be-delayed

Digital Pastoral Care for Grief: Individual & Collective (United Church of Christ):

docs.google.com/document/d/1sdalu3udRXIadIo9A_E0J2URF0EqzXHAFIQUhXI_esY/edit