



Older
People's
Ministries

JOURNEYING
HOME

Leading Funerals

Pastoral and Practical Issues for Officers

This booklet has been compiled by recommendations from a group of both newly-appointed and long-serving Salvation Army officers. Journeying with people at the end of life is a privilege but can also be stressful, so we hope that these gentle suggestions will help you when your time comes to help those who are 'journeying home' and their loved ones.¹

Preparing for end of life before death means that much of the arrangements may have already been made. Aim to do this with your own people. Keep prepared funeral plans somewhere safe.

If you have not led a funeral before, ask another Salvation Army officer if you can attend a visit to a bereaved family with them and watch how they conduct a funeral. This may help you with some of the practicalities. Refer to your *Ceremonies Book* which will help you. Seek out some funeral plans and sermons from other experienced officers.

These words from the Bible in John 14:1-2 remind us of the words of Jesus:



Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?



¹ For more see: salvationist.org.uk/journeying-home

Funeral Directors

- Visit the funeral director and make friends. Pass on your mobile phone number to them so that they can contact you directly. If the funeral director is unable to contact you, they may make a date with the family before confirming you are free!
- Allow the funeral director to do what they are paid to do (including printing the Order of Service) and allow them to gently guide you if you are unsure of anything.
- Speak to the funeral director in person if at all possible. Whilst a good funeral director will gently guide, do ensure that the family's wishes are adhered to. They will err on the side of caution and timing which sometimes influences what they feel can be delivered in the service.

Crematorium

- Visit the crematorium before you do a funeral. Look at the layout, familiarise yourself with the entrance and exit. Check what music they have available, since some crematoriums do not have a vast repertoire.
- If the music for the hymns has sung words on the recording, check the verses are the same as those you are expecting in the Order of Service. This will save embarrassment for yourself and the mourners.
- Ensure you understand how the buttons work on the lectern. You will possibly have buttons to press for each part of the committal service.
- Drive swiftly and safely from the corps/church to the crematorium. You have a choice: you can go in your own car which will give you some thinking time and space before greeting people, or you can travel with the funeral director – but then you need to be aware that people will probably arrive before you.

Burials / Internments / Spreading of Ashes

- Ladies - Have flat shoes available for burials or your heels could get stuck in the grass!
- Stand at the head of the grave to lead the ceremony.
- For an internment, a short Scripture reading, prayer and thought is all that is necessary. Do not recreate another funeral service.
- When spreading ashes, be aware of weather conditions, ie which way the wind is blowing, or you could end up in an embarrassing situation.

(See Salvation Army Ceremonies book page 26)

The Funeral Service / Thanksgiving Service

- Visit the bereaved family in their home if possible; this will allow you to see photos of the person which may be helpful if you do not know them.
- Gain a history of the person; make it personal. Ask by what name you need to call the deceased – for example, if they prefer a shorter name to their birth name.
- Ask to see the order of service (generally provided by the funeral director to check the words from the SA song book match the words on the Order of Service and the number of verses is correct.
- The officers' Ceremonies Book contains suitable Bible readings for funerals. If a family is not connected to corps/church they may look to you for suggested hymns. Traditional hymns may be more helpful: 'Abide with me' / 'The Lord is my Shepherd' / 'How Great Thou Art' / 'Amazing Grace'.
- Plan ahead! Be prepared for the funeral well in advance.
- Give eye contact to the family throughout the service. This will help to put them at ease.
- Give yourself time on the day. Arrive at least one hour in advance if the service is to be held in the Army hall and approximately 20 minutes before if the funeral service is to be held at the crematorium. Mourners come early!
- If it is a military funeral there may be a British Legion flag or regimental involvement. Remember you are the person in charge of the funeral proceedings, not the British Legion Sergeant Major!
- If you have a visiting Salvation Army officer or minister leading the funeral service, take your own Ceremonies Book with you just in case they get stuck in traffic, become ill or are unable to get there for whatever reason.

(See Officers Check List for Funerals to help you in your preparation)

Flags, Ribbons and Practicalities

- When setting the hall, ensure that there are door stops available to keep the doors open as the coffin is brought in. The aisle needs to be wide enough for the coffin and the bearers. There needs to be sufficient room at the front of the hall for the coffin without the mourners being too close.
- For soldiers or adherent members of the corps, a white ribbon is traditionally attached to the top of the flag.
- For a soldier or adherent member, the SA flag will be taken to the crematorium. There you will need a flag stand! Ask the funeral director if the flag can be transported in the hearse if this makes things easier. Ensure the flag stand is at the crematorium in advance.
- Walk slowly! When you walk in front of the coffin and the bearers, do not rush. They will be going at a slower pace than normal.
- If the deceased has been an officer, they may have requested their sessional flag to be placed on the coffin. Ensure that this will be placed on top of the coffin and not inside unless this is the family's request. Ask the family if they wish for the flag to be returned to them before the burial or cremation takes place.
- Some corps have a special flag that is placed on top of the coffin for a soldier or adherent member. If this is the case, don't presume the family will want this - ask them. Also ask a trusted corps member for any specific corps traditions. These may surprise you! You make the judgement whether they are appropriate or not.
- Enter PTG (Promoted to Glory) next to their name if they are on your Soldiers/Adherents roll.
- Find out who is the real next of kin legally and be prepared for family animosity and feuds. Remember this is not the time or place for such things.

The lead up to death

There are possibly many conflicting emotions that families, loved ones or even the individual themselves would be facing when they realise that they are soon to die. For some people, nearing death could bring a sense of fear - fear that they would die in pain, their own sense of loss and even a fear that they aren't good enough to experience the joy of Heaven. For others there might be a gracious relief after a long period of suffering. Some might be accepting, some disinterested even, and for some there is anticipation. Families and friends might face overwhelming sadness, fear, a sense of deep loss or even anger directed at themselves, the dying individual or others including very often God.

It is among this mix of emotions that we consider mission in the lead up to death. Even in the midst of death we are reminded that God is all loving and all compassionate during this stage. As the psalmist rightly proclaims, 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love' (Psalm 103:8). Often people find Scripture helpful and comforting when they or someone they love is dying. This is so important, but alongside this goes the pastoral care, practical help and support that is so often needed at such a time. Our mission in this context needs to be one of care and kindness, sitting at the bedside of the dying and being with their family and friends who are grieving. We need to be the ones who show support and compassion to the dying and their families. Very simply, we need to 'be Jesus' to them. Missional opportunities at this stage of life are not about theological discussions; it is simply standing alongside people in their darkest moments.

When someone dies, the family and friends of that person can often feel very alone. Don't be afraid to continue to visit and support for a time after the funeral. This may be as simple as sharing a coffee with someone, inviting them along to a service; and if they don't want to attend regular worship on a Sunday, perhaps invite them to a Christmas or Easter service.

If you have conducted the funeral of a loved one, you are part of their story, and they are part of yours.

Unusual Circumstances

Funeral at Sea

If you have to do a burial at sea, think about whether you want to be on the same boat as the mourners when they come back to land, or use another boat to give them some privacy. Also if you suffer from motion sickness you may need to be very honest about this and ask another officer/minister to lead the service.

Grave hole not dug big enough

If you arrive to do a burial and the grave is not large enough for the coffin, suggest that you and the mourners take a 45-minute break for tea/coffee at a suitable venue while the funeral director organises for the hole to be made larger.

Body donated to medical science

If this is the case, you will not have a body when doing the funeral service. Be aware that the family may ask for another short service approximately a year later when the body is returned to them.

Prisoners attending the service

If a close relative of the deceased is in prison, they may be able to obtain a pass to attend the service, accompanied by guards. Do not be shocked as they may come in handcuffs and shackled.



Be prepared for something to go wrong - then you won't be surprised! No matter what happens, take a calm dignified approach, speaking with authority to calm everyone in what may be a more difficult situation than it needed to be.

Difficult and Sensitive Circumstances

At all times sensitivity is the key to providing the best care for the person who has died and their loved ones.

Dementia

Remember who they truly were, recognising that the person was made in the image of God and their identity was not defined by dementia.

Social Services

There may be just you present at the funeral, along with the funeral director and the body. If so, acknowledge the person as a person of worth. Remember the conversation you have at that service is between you and God. Acknowledge that the person has no one to say goodbye to. Possibly use a poem, Scripture and prayer, being careful not to rush this person from the earth too quickly.

Homelessness

When someone living without a home dies, the process can be rushed through by the local authority and will always be a cremation unless something is in place to say otherwise. Make sure the local authority know who you are and that if anyone homeless dies you wish to be advised as you may have had contact with them and built a relationship.

Death by Suicide

Please do not use the term 'committed suicide'. The Suicide Act 1961 decriminalised the act of suicide in England and Wales so that those who attempted to take their own life and failed were no longer prosecuted. Therefore we now use the term 'death by suicide'.

(See Page 25 of SA Ceremonies Book for working and guidance)

Death of a Child

When speaking of a child you may want to be honest and talk about the 'loss of potential but the joy that they brought'. If the funeral is of a baby, the undertaker will carry the coffin in his hands. Prepare yourself before the funeral by imagining the size of the coffin so that it doesn't shock you when you actually see it.

Neonatal loss and still-born babies

Neonatal loss of any kind requires sensitive pastoral care and the pastor's own self-care. At a time of intense emotion which has impact on the immediate family, wider family and the worshipping congregation, the pastor could feel overwhelmed.

The task of pastoring through neonatal loss is best achieved by staying in close communication with the hospital's bereavement midwife. They will understand not only the unique psychology of the situation but also the regional and local provision concerning memory boxes, charity support groups and funeral arrangements.

An officer's first role is to be present for the family (as in any loss), but in this situation we have often an additional role to protect the family's privacy. Neonatal loss brings with it complex grief processes, and many families need additional time before they are ready to share their loss with their congregation and community. Protecting the family from sincere but overwhelming attention could be key here. In pastoral terms referral is never a failure. Connecting families with groups like SANDS and other local neonatal loss groups would be a valuable gift. (There are specialist groups for those who have lost one twin, those who have experienced a medical termination etc.)

Finally, there is no way we can 'understand', no way we can say we have 'had the same thing happen to us'; all neonatal loss is different, unique and never to be trivialised no matter the gestational age. How we enable families to mark their loss through memorial, books, planting of trees, jewellery etc could be a powerful way for the family to begin moving on. Remember when we are at a loss for words use Psalm 139.

Opportunities for mission within the context of end of life and funerals

The experience of those who have travelled with people at the end of life points to two specific missional opportunities. The first is with the person who is facing their own end of life on earth, and the second is with that person's extended family and friendship group.

Missio Dei

The mission of God is about sending and being sent. You are called by God, sent to those who are facing the end of their life, and to their loved ones. You are in one of the most difficult and yet privileged positions anyone can be in.

Being Appropriate

The death of a loved one can be a very difficult time. There are some powerful emotions at work. Grief and loss can affect us in different ways, and during this time people are vulnerable. We need to be appropriate when we mention our faith - of course we are called to share the gospel at all times – but as the apostle Paul writes to Timothy, 'Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction' (2 Timothy 4:2). There is always a time and a place to speak about Jesus, but there is always the need to be appropriate and sensitive.

Continued Care

One of the primary ways that we can show the character of a loving God is through our conversations at pre-funeral visits, post-funeral follow-up, or with someone and their family as they approach the end of their life at the bedside. Showing compassion in these conversations and visits can be very helpful for allowing people to see a gracious God at work, even in a time of sadness and loss. Follow-up visits to family, weeks and perhaps even months after bereavement, can be very meaningful.

For any officer / corps leader there is great benefit in having a bereavement / pastoral support / prayer team. These 'prayers' will be covering not only the family in prayer but also you, as the one who is ministering to those in need.

Officers Serving in Scotland

- Recognise that the culture of dealing with end of life issues is different from that in England and Wales.
- The speed of the funeral is different. Things generally happen very quickly in Scotland.
- You may be expected to do a house funeral where there may be an open coffin.

Officers Serving in Ireland

- Funerals are normally held within 3-4 days after death.
- Funerals may be held on a Saturday morning. Funerals in the country areas may even be on a Sunday.
- From the time a person dies it is expected that family and friends will visit the house. They would bring gifts of food, tray-bakes, cakes, bread, tea, coffee, sugar etc.
- Most of the time the 'body' would be at home in another room and it would be expected for you to view the person. It is not unusual to have ten or more people in the house at any one time.
- More often than not a short service for family and friends would be held in the home with an open coffin, prior to the funeral service.
- If the body remains with the funeral director it is usually because they are going to hold the service in the designated chapel in the funeral home.
- Most funerals are burials – at the time of writing there was only one crematorium in Northern Ireland, in Roselawn, Belfast (a second at Ballyearl was due for completion in 2023).
- When a person dies it would be expected that the officer visits within the first few hours and speaks with the family.

Guidance for Pastoral Visitation

- Learn how much time to spend with the family. Acknowledge when you have to withdraw from that level of pastoral care. Don't feel guilty for this.
- Be aware that prayers may not have been answered in the way the family has desired. This can shatter faith.
- Be aware of culture. Not every culture grieves in the same way. African families, for example, can grieve very loudly. Do not be shocked. It is not for you to decide what is appropriate and what is not.
- Be aware of strange superstitions and know how to deal with this as a church minister.
- If something is not of God – anti-Christ, masonic, spiritualist church etc – and you are being asked to take a part in this, remember this is not the place for a Salvation Army officer or representative. Know your integrity and stick to your Christian values no matter what.
- Be aware of difficult family situations. If the family are asking you not to tell one sibling for instance, pass this on to the funeral director and let them deal with this.

End of Life Pastoral Support

- When visiting someone who is dying, speak directly to the person. Do not feel foolish even though the person will be unable to respond to you.
- If someone is in a coma, remember to speak to the doctors and nurses around also. You won't feel so alone then.
- Never speak about the person as though they are not there or they have already died. Give the person the dignity and respect they deserve. They may still be able to hear you.
- Use Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer which are familiar to many, even those who haven't attended church regularly.
- When the hospital staff know that someone is dying and in the final stages, they often leave the family alone. If you are with them at this point, the family may well look to you about whether they have died or not. It is not for you to say that they have died, so calmly go seek out a nurse or doctor to help you and speak to the family.

Personal Emotions

- If you have known the person well, there is nothing wrong with showing some emotion, at the same time remembering that you are the family's representative and it is your responsibility to lead the funeral through.
- Have a tissue handy, keep breathing – and if you find your emotions taking over, stop talking, breathe and pray.
- Ask the family beforehand to share with you some stories about the person and ask permission to relay your own stories if it is appropriate and you have known them well.

Remember your role and your limitations

- Clear your diary and give yourself time on the day of the funeral. Don't be rushing, and make sure you give yourself some space after the funeral service too.
- Have your answer ready if you do not wish to attend the wake.
- Never look shocked!
- Do your homework; then you will always be prepared (so far as is possible).
- Do not rely on your own memory for anything. Write down everything, even prayers.
- Make it personal, and remember the immense privilege of leading a funeral.

You are not a taxi.

You are not a caterer.

You are not a printer.

But you are God's messenger
and his hands and feet to
those who mourn.

The Salvation Army Older People's Ministries team has been established to support corps and the communities they serve in understanding, reaching and meeting the needs of older people. This recognises the changing demographic of the UK and that people are now living longer than ever before.

Contact the Team to talk to us
about other resources and services

Email: olderpeoplesministries@salvationarmy.org.uk



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salvationist.org.uk/older-peoples-ministries