

Guide for clergy/officiants conducting funerals according to the Coronavirus guidance

Please note: This guidance is intended for use by Church of England Clergy and parish leadership teams and should not be shared more widely. Information for the general public and the bereaved on how funerals are affected by the Coronavirus outbreak can be found at www.churchofengland.org/coronavirus

It is clear from other countries' experience that we can anticipate a significant increase in deaths over the next weeks and months as a result of Coronavirus. The Government's guidance on social distancing and self-isolation including for those over 70 or with underlying health conditions, and avoiding unnecessary travel will all have implications for the way we conduct funerals going forward.

The following points are aimed at helping clergy think through how best they may undertake funerals and meet the needs of the bereaved, whilst adhering to the Government's Guidance. They are not an exhaustive list, and the situation is likely to change, but they give some suggestions as to how we can continue to offer this important service in a respectful, loving and gracious way, offering people the hope and comfort of God's love and care at a very difficult time.

Please also see further information available publicly on the Church of England COVID-19 webpage (<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>)

1. Before the funeral

Any interaction with the bereaved must be done safely – this may mean by telephone, skype etc. If meetings are held face to face, make sure you adhere to social distancing guidance, limit the number of people you are meeting to an absolute minimum, remind anyone self-isolating and/or with symptoms that they should not attend either the meeting or funeral in person, and choose the venue carefully – not in the house of someone who is self-isolating for example. Be careful about sharing documents, books, photos etc. Wash your hands thoroughly before the meeting and after

- You will need to explain that the funeral will be different to what they may expect from previous experience.
- Numbers of those attending the funeral must be kept to an absolute minimum – immediate family only. Those over the age of 70 and those with an underlying health condition should be strongly discouraged from attending.
- It may simply not be possible for family relatives or friends of the deceased to be able to attend the funeral. However, clergy can still take a funeral at the graveside or crematorium, even if those present are limited to clergy and funeral directors.
- Consider, particularly if close relatives are unable to attend, whether to suggest that a memorial service could be held at some point in the future after this immediate crisis. Be aware though of your capacity to undertake potentially large numbers of these.
- If the situation arises when the number of funerals requires a change and reduction in length of the actual funeral service, this must be explained, so that expectations are managed.
- Hymns and singing are not advised as this may encourage droplet spread.

- Liaise with the funeral director about any particular issues or concerns they may have and how they wish to handle the coffin in advance of the funeral.

2. The funeral

- It may be necessary in the future, if the number of deaths increases or the capacity to offer funerals becomes challenged, that the current funeral service will need to be changed and shortened. Please see separate liturgical guidance on this.
- If the immediate family are self-isolating, consider ways in which they may be able to join the service – either through an audio link, skype etc. If this is not possible, consider arranging for those people to have an order of service provided so they are able to use it within the safety of their home to mourn their loved one. A leaflet to help those unable to attend can be downloaded.
- Make sure everyone adheres to the Government guidance on social distancing. This may have implications for how the coffin is brought into a crematorium or to the graveside. Be advised by the funeral director concerned.
- For those who are unable to attend the service, consider things such as recording the service if that is felt appropriate and is practical. This will be a challenging time for the bereaved and so you may need to think about other ways to both support them at this time.
- Other suggestions include inviting those who cannot attend to write their memories or a message that can be put in the coffin, if the funeral director is willing to do this.
- Be mindful of your own personal hygiene – wash your hands before and after, and avoid using communal Bibles
- Discourage shaking hands or kissing etc – this may be hard to manage, but try to remind people of the need for social distancing
- There should not be a “wake” or gathering after the funeral

3. After the funeral

Think about whether you are able to provide any bereavement support for those concerned. If the partner or family member of the deceased is now alone and self-isolating, consider what support can be provided practically.

4. Burial of ashes

Delay this for as long as possible, and preferably until after the immediate crisis is over, to reduce demand on yourself, grave diggers etc and avoid unnecessary travel and contact by relatives.

5. Capacity and resilience

Think now about ways to ensure capacity and resilience in terms of lay and ordained minister availability. What capacity do you have in your own ministry team, and how might you support each other across a deanery?

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