

Funerals in church

The House of Bishops has advised that from 15 June funerals may be carried out in church buildings. We recognise how difficult this time is for anyone who has lost a loved one. You may wish to discuss with the vicar the possibility of a memorial service at a date in the future where more people can be present.

Pastoral Introduction

Funerals present one of the most urgent, difficult and often cruellest tensions that exist between the realities of human need and the demands that must be met if the current COVID-19 outbreak is to be brought under control. When a loved one dies, our natural human desire is to be surrounded by others in order to experience their comfort and support through presence, touch, prayer and a common acknowledge of grief and loss. It is also known that during the current outbreak of COVID-19, the very gatherings and contact desired by those who grieve are precisely what must be avoided, or at the very least restricted, if transmission of the virus is to be brought under control.

This tension may not be readily acknowledged by those suffering from the bewilderment, pain and agony of grief. The challenge for those leading funerals is with gentleness and compassion to enable those who mourn to find ways through the realities of the current situation that acknowledges both their needs as people who grieve and the needs of the whole community to bring COVID-19 under control. This poses a phenomenal challenge for those charged with taking funerals. Where possible, the expectations and needs of those who mourn should be satisfied, while at the same time holding in place the good practice needed to enable the safety of the whole community at this time.

Each church building is different and there can be no one size fits all solution. This advice follows government guidance which is constantly evolving. Therefore, please be aware on reading what is set out below that it may be updated.

Things to think about before the service

How many people can attend?

Each church is different. Therefore, subject to government advice and direction the number of people attending funerals in a church will depend on two factors:

- the space available so a safe distance of at least 2 metres (6ft or 3 steps) can be maintained between households at all times during the service, including entering and leaving the building.
- the number of people that a minister feels they can effectively 'manage' during a service.

Churches may need to set caps on numbers in order to ensure this. Alongside the member of clergy, Funeral Director and staff, the government has stated that only the following should attend:

- members of the person's household
- close family members
- or if the above are unable to attend, close friends

The size and circumstance of the church will determine the maximum number that can be accommodated whilst also facilitating physical distancing, but numbers should be minimised as far as possible.

What if no family or friends can attend?

Where family relatives or friends are unable to attend a funeral service, clergy can still take a funeral even if those present are limited to clergy and funeral directors.

Can we have the organist and/or verger attending?

In light of the government advice above, additional people are not encouraged to attend the service, such as an organist, verger, sound system operator etc.

What about those who may be personally self-isolating or have symptoms?

Sadly, anyone who is showing symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) (a new continuous cough, a high temperature or loss of taste and smell) should not attend the funeral due to the risk that they pose to others; remote participation should be considered, for example live streaming. Failing this, a recording could be made which can be sent to anyone unable to attend after the service. Where no audio link can be achieved, officiants may be able to provide an order of service, either by email or post.

How can the vicar communicate with the bereaved to discuss the service etc?

Any interaction with the bereaved should be done safely; this may mean by telephone or video link. It is important not to share documents, books, photos etc.

What about hygiene precautions?

The St Matthew's team will ensure that hand sanitizers, signposting and protocols etc will be in place in accordance with current Government advice.

What about mourners who are self-isolating due to a possible case of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their household?

Key mourners of the deceased person may include those who are self-isolating due to another member of the household being unwell with symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). Where the funeral is scheduled before the period of household isolation has been completed (14 days from the first person in that household showing symptoms) mourners who are self-isolating should be facilitated to attend.

Mourners who are from a household that is self-isolating should:

- not attend if they have any symptoms of any kind, even if these are very mild
- maintain a distance of at least 2 metres between themselves and others
- advise the other mourners that they are otherwise self-isolating at home, and communicate that their presence means that others who are extremely clinically vulnerable should not attend
- Mourners who are from a household that is self-isolating are advised to use their own transport where possible.

What about mourners who are extremely clinically vulnerable?

Mourners who are in an extremely clinically vulnerable group should be facilitated to attend, should they decide to do so.

People who are clinically extremely vulnerable should have received a letter telling them they are in this group or been told by their GP. Mourners who are in an extremely clinically vulnerable group have been advised that they should minimise their contact with others for their personal protection. However, they may decide to attend a funeral despite the additional risk this poses to them and should be facilitated to do so.

They are not advised to attend a funeral if there are others attending who are self-isolating due to another member of the household being unwell with symptoms of coronavirus, as they could be incubating disease. Mourners who are extremely clinically vulnerable should follow the general social distancing advice for the clinically vulnerable mourners and should maintain a distance of 2 metres away from others as a minimum.

Actions to reduce their risk of infection could include:

- advising other attendees that there is an extremely clinically vulnerable person attending and reiterating the need to stay at home if they are unwell, and to be respectful of the vulnerable person's need to avoid close contact at any point
- advising the mourner to travel to the venue via the safest route possible, preferably in a car by themselves, or with someone from their household
- considering the additional risk involved if attending the funeral requires travelling by public transport
- ensuring that mourners who are in a clinically vulnerable group do not attend the same ceremony as mourners who are in household isolation

During the Service

Can we have singing?

Hymns and singing are not advised as this may encourage droplet and aerosol spread. Recorded music is encouraged as the next best option.

Orders of service can be placed on chairs before the service and then taken away by mourners or safely disposed of.

Can we shake hands; can I touch the bereaved as a gesture of comfort?

While it is contrary to human instinct and normal pastoral practice, mourners are advised that there should be no physical contact including shaking hands, hugging or kissing outside their own households.

Can we still bury ashes?

Yes, but it may still be best to delay this until Government restrictions are lifted and families are able to gather and also to reduce demand on clergy, grave diggers and other workers. If a service does go forward, similar advice will apply with regard to social distancing and hygiene; and managing the numbers of mourners.