

The Pragmatics of Funerals (Especially for the Unchurched)

Dr Neil Percival

Funerals are an incredible gospel opportunity. There are few other occasions where large groups of non-Christians will come to you and invite you to minister God's truth to them. This makes these unique situations where some of the normal rules of Church may need to be suspended.

1. A general principle – put people first

My approach has always been to prioritise the needs of people over Church practice. That doesn't mean ceasing to be Anglican. It means understanding our audience, recognising that coming into Church is an uncomfortable experience at the best of times for unchurched people, and doing what we can to minimise their discomfort, remove obstacles to their engaging with God, and show that they matter to us.

This process starts from the very first time we meet with the family. If their experience with the minister is positive, they will most likely appreciate the service as well.

2. Meeting the family

Grieving people are in a state of emotional and spiritual crisis. The keys to coping with crisis are connection, control, and meaning.

- Connection - To minister effectively, the family needs to experience a sense of connection with you, and through you, with God. Put them at ease, build rapport, be a place of calm in the midst of their grief, get to know them, and let them get to know you.
- Control - Much of what is happening is outside of this family's control. Don't let the funeral service be another part of that. Give them back control wherever possible but without asking them to make difficult decisions that they are not equipped to make. For example, I always let the family decide what they want me to wear - robes, clerical collar and suit, or suit and tie. It doesn't matter to me what I wear, but letting a grieving family decide what they are most comfortable with speaks loudly that we are putting them first. In the same way, I ask the family to choose a bible reading but always give them a range to select from. I always ask about their ideas for the service

before I give any of mine. Usually, I can take their thoughts and make suggestions about how they can best fit together so that we end up with an Anglican funeral service structure, but the family feels that this was their decision and, most importantly, that they were in control.

- Encourage the family to talk freely about the deceased and the contribution that this person made to their lives. This is where meaning is found. Take notes. Referencing some of these things in the service will make it personal and show that you were listening.
- Other practical things I want to get from a meeting with the family to help me in my preparation are:
 - The full name, DOB, DOD, and age of the deceased as well as how they were commonly known, nicknames...
 - For my benefit, I like to draw a quick family tree of all the immediate family to understand who I might meet at the service and how everyone is connected.
 - I also like to get the names of everyone who will be participating in the service – the eulogy, bible readers, any other speakers...

3. Funeral Directors

We have to work together so try to cultivate a good relationship. Do your best to fit in with their needs and timetable for getting things printed and try to make things easy for them. In return, they can be a great resource. I pass on lots of jobs to the Funeral Directors. I get them to set up, tidy the Church after a service, and play the music if it's pre-recorded. I've even got them to pay for upgrades and improvements to the Church.

Occasionally, you will encounter a Funeral Director who will try to tell you how to run the service. On the one hand, they do have a lot of experience so it's worth listening in case they're making a valid point, but in the end, you are in charge of what happens in your Church so do what you want.

I asked one Funeral Director about the top three things he would like clergy to do better. After stating that he couldn't fault my services in any way, he went on to say that he wished clergy would be more aware of a person's "level of religion" and adapt the service to better reflect that. "One size fits all" services turn people away from having Church funerals. Second, he was concerned that some clergy didn't seem to spend much time with the family or know much about them. Third, he wished that some clergy could be more accepting of the family's choices of music.

4. Structuring the Service

- It's important for families to say what they need to say, watch slideshows, read poems, play significant music, and so on. While these matter to the family and give them opportunities to participate, they are often just sentimentalism and do not proclaim any Christian truth. I try to ensure that these come early in the service so that, in the reading of the bible, the preaching, and the prayers, God has the last word.
- I try to prepare a different sermon for each funeral. The key ideas will probably be the same, but in a country town, the same people turn up over and over. Some are more regularly in church for funerals than my supposedly regular church members are on a Sunday. I don't want people to switch off when I start my "funeral sermon," so I try to give them something different each time.
- If there is to be a slideshow, I want it in my hands at least the day before the service so that I can make sure it will play correctly, and I can fix things if necessary.
- At non-Christian funerals, I discourage the singing of hymns. Some families believe that there have to be hymns in the service, but the reality is that I end up singing a solo and that doesn't encourage anyone. With Church families, I do the opposite.
- When leading a congregational prayer, like the Lord's Prayer, I make it clear in my introduction that people only need to join in if they feel comfortable doing so. We are not imposing our faith on them.
- For unchurched, I usually pare the service down to its most basic components and try to keep the service to between 30 and 45 minutes. I also explain the process at the start so that everyone knows what to expect.
- Never compromise biblical truth. Be honest. Don't say or imply that someone has gone to heaven when we don't know that they have. Instead, give thanks for all the good in their life and the positive impact they had on others and then talk in more general terms about what Christians believe. Always point to the hope of eternal life that we have in Jesus. If we don't do that, why are we there. However, a funeral is not the time for hard sell evangelism.

5. Follow-up

Most non-Church families are amenable to a follow-up visit a few days later but I don't usually visit more than once unless they specifically request it. We make

it a practice to invite each family back for a memorial service on All Soul's Day and a significant number come. At that service, distanced from the raw emotions of the funeral, I have the chance to preach the gospel more directly.

6. Funerals for those who have committed suicide

- Suicide is a big problem in rural communities and families will sometimes avoid a Church funeral because they feel we will pass judgement on them. The best way to overcome this is to build a reputation in the wider community for being non-judgmental and accepting and to win the trust of the Funeral Directors so they will personally recommend us.
- There will often be a large number younger people in attendance. Because they have only limited life experience, especially in the area of grief and loss, they are still learning how to process their emotions and may express them in unexpected, and sometimes disconcerting, ways.
- The stigma surrounding suicide is still real. Be open and honest about what has happened. Acknowledge it up front and don't let this be the elephant in the room that no one is willing to speak about. By being open and honest, we give others permission to be open and honest as well.
- Acknowledge the range of emotions people are feeling and the questions they are asking: guilt, anger, confusion, loss, "Should I have seen this coming," "Could I have stopped this?" Give people permission to feel what they feel and ask what they need to ask, even if there are no answers.