WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAS DIED

Pastor Faith’s Guide to Funeral Planning

A sketch of basic funeral service planning for Protestant and non-denominational Christians

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You do not have to decide everything today. You do not have to decide alone. This guide walks through the choices families face, in the order they usually come, with plain words and gentle guidance along the way.

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- A simple order of service, with military honors and readings that comfort
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- An extra consideration: burial or cremation, and what a service can look like either way

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Word Before We Start

If you are reading this, someone you love has died, or is dying, or you are looking ahead to a decision you hoped would not come soon. I am so sorry.

Here is what I most want you to know. Almost nothing in the next few days has to be settled in a single sitting. Most of these choices can be made one at a time, in order, with people who care about you at the table. When you need to stop, stop. Come back to the list when you can.

Whatever you choose, you are not doing it wrong. A funeral does not have to be big, expensive, or perfect to honor a life well. It needs to be honest, and it needs to be held with love.

> **If you only read one page**
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> Take a breath. Find one trusted person to sit beside you. If you do not have a person to sit with, contact Rev. Faith. Look for any written wishes. Ask for a written, itemized price list before you decide anything. Then take the decisions in the order on the next page.

The first days, in order

1. Care for your loved one	If the death was expected and a hospice team is involved, call the hospice nurse first. If it was unexpected, call 911. Once your loved one is in care, the funeral home you choose can usually guide the next steps.
2. Look for wishes	Check for a pre-planned funeral, a will or letter of wishes, a pre-paid contract with a funeral home, and military discharge papers if your loved one served. Ask close family whether anything was ever said.
3. Choose a point person	Decide who will make decisions with you and who will be the one voice to the funeral home, so you are not all calling at once.
4. Choose a provider	Pick a funeral home or ask a few for their price lists. You are allowed to compare.
5. Decide burial or cremation	Either can be marked with a full service of worship and remembrance.
6. Choose the service	The kind, the place, and the day. Many families wait several days so people can travel.
7. Choose who will lead	There are many ways to lead, and no one has to speak who cannot. A pastor or other clergy, a family member, or a friend can lead. If your loved one had a church, start by calling that pastor.

DECISION ONE

Choose who will lead

There are many ways to lead a service, and you do not have to feel restricted. A pastor or other clergy, a family member, a close friend, or a funeral director can lead, or the leading can be shared among several people. Think about what will be most meaningful to you and to your loved one.

Funeral homes often know several clergy from a variety of backgrounds and can recommend someone who fits your family. If your loved one had a church, ask the funeral home to reach out to that pastor, or ask whether they know of a clergy person to call upon. As a pastor, I am honored to be called upon for families. If you do not have a church home, you are welcome to ask a pastor you have never met. When you talk, share a few stories about your loved one and any wishes you know of. A good pastor will listen first.

About a pastor's honorarium

Your funeral home will likely have a recommended range for the honorarium for a clergy officiant. Sometimes it is paid through the funeral home to the officiant, and sometimes the family gives it directly to the pastor on the day of the service. Ask your funeral director about the guiding practice in your area.

DECISION TWO

A simple order of service

A traditional, simple funeral has a gentle shape that has comforted families for generations. You can use all of it or only the parts that fit. Here is the outline, with what each part is for.

Military honors	If your loved one served, honors may be presented either during the service or at the graveside.
Greeting	A call and response that welcomes everyone and says why we gather.
Opening prayer	Thanks for the life lived, and a request for God's peace.
Reflections	Scripture, other readings or poems, and a eulogy or story of a life.
Sharing	Personal sharing by friends and family. It can be pre-arranged with chosen speakers, or opened up to anyone who wishes to share.
Prayer	A prayer for comfort and strength for those who mourn.
Commending prayer	Entrusting your loved one to God's care, often with the Lord's Prayer.
Benediction	A closing blessing that sends the family out held in peace.
Graveside committal*	Military honors go first when held here: the folding and presentation of the flag, Taps, a gun salute. Then words are spoken where your loved one is laid to rest. Two common choices are 1 Corinthians 15, death swallowed up in victory, or the seed image from John 12, new life from what is buried.
If cremation	A release response can be prayed when ashes are scattered or released, treating the moment with the same care as a burial.

*Sometimes a service continues with everyone traveling to a cemetery for a Graveside Committal.

Readings that have comforted many families

Psalm 23	The Lord as a shepherd who stays with us, even through the darkest valley.
John 14	Jesus' words to his friends before his death: do not let your hearts be troubled, there is a place prepared.
Isaiah 40:31	Strength that is renewed for those who wait on the Lord.

You can also choose a poem, a favorite hymn, or a short passage your loved one cherished. Ask the person leading the service to look over your selections so the whole service fits together.

DECISION THREE

Decisions about children in attendance

Children grieve too. Whether they attend, how they are told, and how they take part are decisions many families face. There is no single right answer. You know your child best.

Telling them	Use simple, true words. Say that the person died, and let them ask questions. Short, honest answers work better than long explanations.
Feelings	Do not hide your sadness. Do not tell a child to feel, or not to feel, something. Let them see that sadness is allowed.
Whether they attend	Children usually do better when they are invited, not pushed. It is fine if a child chooses not to come.
Preparing them	Tell them ahead of time what they will see and hear: who will be there, that many people may cry, and what will happen during the service.
A trusted adult	Ask someone to sit near them so they can step out for a quiet break if they need one. This is often a relative or friend who is not as deep in grief.
Ways to take part	A child might draw a picture, choose a song, carry flowers, or place a keepsake. Offer it as a choice, never a duty.
Afterward	Expect questions to return in the weeks ahead. Keep familiar routines where you can, and let them know they can always ask.

DECISION FOUR

Making it personal

The most memorable services are the ones that sound like the person who died. You do not need to add everything. Pick two or three touches that feel true.

A life story or eulogy	One person can speak for about five minutes, or a few people can each share a short piece. It helps to write it out in advance.
Time to share	Open the floor for a few memories. Naming a limit, such as three or four people and about three minutes each, keeps the service gentle.
Music	Hymns or songs your loved one loved. Live or recorded both work. Ask what the space can play. Do not feel limited to Christian music. Select what speaks to you and reflects your loved one.
Photos and keepsakes	A photo board, a slideshow, a favorite quilt, tools, or a hobby displayed near the front.
Who takes part	Grandchildren can carry flowers. Friends can read. Family can light a candle. Give people a way to help if they want one.
A gathering after	A simple meal, whether at the church, the home of a friend, or a favorite restaurant, gives people room to talk.

My Approach to Helping Families Plan

As a pastor who is called in to lead services, I notice that people often feel guilt for not wanting to speak because the grief is too much. Please never feel as if your ability to lead, speak, or share is a reflection of your love and loyalty to your loved one. I am honored to walk this part of the journey with you and to hold you up.

DECISIONS AT A GLANCE

Your one-page checklist

Print this page or keep it open as you go. Check each item as you decide. Leave blanks for what is still open. That is perfectly fine.

- ☐ **Point person chosen:** _____
- ☐ **Written wishes found?** (pre-plan, will, letter, veteran papers)
- ☐ **Funeral home chosen:** _____
- ☐ **Funeral director:** _____
- ☐ **Price list received and compared**
- ☐ **Who will lead:** _____
- ☐ **Clergy contacted, and honorarium asked about**
- ☐ **Kind of service:** church, chapel, graveside, memorial
- ☐ **Date, time, and place:** _____
- ☐ **Military honors:** yes / no, at the service / at the graveside
- ☐ **Graveside committal planned?** yes / no
- ☐ **Readings chosen:** _____
- ☐ **Time of sharing:** pre-arranged speakers / open to anyone
- ☐ **Who will speak or share:** _____
- ☐ **Children attending?** Who will sit near them: _____
- ☐ **Music chosen:** _____
- ☐ **Photos, keepsakes, or flowers arranged**
- ☐ **Gathering after the service planned**
- ☐ **Obituary written and sent**
- ☐ **Certified death certificates ordered**
- ☐ **Someone assigned to help with meals, rides, and children**
- ☐ **Extra consideration, burial or cremation:** _____

FOR YOU

Caring for yourself in the middle of it

Grief is not a task to complete, and it does not follow a schedule. In the days around a funeral, your body and heart are carrying a lot. A few small things help:

- Drink water, eat something small, and rest when you can.
- When someone says, "What can I do?", give them a job: a meal, a ride, an hour with the children, a phone call.
- Let silence be okay. You do not have to say something wise.
- Expect the wave to come later, after the guests have gone. Be gentle with yourself then.
- If grief ever feels like more than you can bear, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any hour of the day or night.

A prayer for the family

God of comfort,

You know the name of the one we have lost, and you know the names of each one who grieves. Be near to us in this hard week. Give us the strength to make the decisions in front of us, and the grace to forgive ourselves for what we cannot do. Hold our loved one in your keeping. Hold us in ours. Let us rest in the promise that love does not end, and that you are with us now, as you will be tomorrow.

Amen.

About Rev. Faith

Rev. Faith Wilkerson is a pastor serving families. She has spent nearly two decades in pastoral ministry and believes that walking in faith is something we do together.

If you would like to talk through your options, or ask Rev. Faith about leading a service, you are welcome to reach out.

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This guide offers pastoral encouragement and general information. It is not legal or financial advice. Laws, costs, and customs vary by state and by provider, so please confirm details with your funeral director and local officials.

AN EXTRA CONSIDERATION

Burial or cremation

This is often the first big question, and it is a deeply personal one. Many families already know the answer because their loved one said so. If no one knows, talk it through together and choose what feels right for your family.

Choosing cremation does not mean choosing to have no service. Choosing burial does not mean the service has to be large. Here are some ways families put these together:

Service, then burial	A funeral or visitation, then a graveside committal at a cemetery.
Service, then cremation	A funeral with your loved one present, followed by cremation. Some families then hold a small gathering for the ashes.
Cremation, then memorial	Cremation first, then a memorial service weeks later, with a photo, an urn, or both. This gives far-away family time to gather.
Committal or scattering	A simple outdoor time of prayer where ashes are buried, placed, or released, in a place that mattered to your loved one.

> **No Judgement. Freedom to Choose**
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> Your choices are set by many factors that are unique to your situation. Make decisions from a judgement free zone. No one can "grade" your choices. My approach in working with families is to honor your choices. I do not force elements of any faith tradition upon you. I am glad to help you draw together an authentic reflection of your loved one's spiritual outlook.

Options for Shaping a Service

Beyond burial or cremation, families usually choose among a few settings:

- **A funeral at the church.** Familiar, spacious, and rooted in the community your loved one knew.
- **A service at the funeral home chapel.** Convenient, with the funeral director close at hand.
- **A graveside service only.** Simple and short, held outdoors where your loved one will rest.
- **A memorial service later.** Held when the family is ready, sometimes in a favorite place.
- **A visitation or calling hours.** Time before the service for people to greet the family and share memories.