**Best Practices for Funerals**

**During Social Distancing**

**Pastoral Care**

* Prioritize face-to-face meetings for absolutely necessary pastoral reasons only; delegate all logistical conversations to phone calls, emails, or video calls. Offer and encourage virtual visits.
* Maintain social distancing guidelines during face-to-face meetings (maintain a distance of at least six feet if possible, refrain from handshaking, hugs, etc.)
* Encourage loved ones to designate one person in the family to interface with the funeral director and/or clergy whenever possible
* Make sure the meeting place is clean and well-ventilated with adequate handwashing supplies. Distribute individual packets of tissues rather than passing around a shared box.
* Act as a non-anxious presence to loved ones, offering pastoral care and guidance, and calmly explain the options available for the safest ways to remember, grieve, and celebrate the lives of their loved ones in the current circumstances
* Encourage the family to start thinking about what they would like in the future memorial service; collecting memories and mementos can be a helpful part of the grieving process.
* Continue to follow up with families via phone, email, and when the COVID-19 crisis has passed, in person
* When dealing with multiple deaths simultaneously, clergy should avoid interfacing with multiple families in one day to prevent super-spreading. This can be done by sharing responsibilities with other staff or nearby clergy, limiting to one in-person meeting per day whenever possible, or by deferring to video communication.
* When using anointing oils or other supplies, take care not to cross-contaminate clean products (i.e., don’t double dip)

**Funeral and Memorial Services**

In person

* Loved ones are being recommended to strongly consider cremation as the best method to ensure the physical health and safety of mourners, clergy, and funeral home staff. (The CDC has deemed it is safe to cremate those who are infected with COVID-19.)
* Cremation allows loved ones to postpone a memorial service until such a time when all mourners may attend and/or to host a prayer service or memorial service online or via conference call. Families may wish to have an online service now *and* an in-person memorial service at a later date.
* Hosting wakes or visitations at home is not advised
* If loved ones choose to proceed with holding a service at this time, there are strict guidelines as to how many people may attend a service.
  + Through March 31, 2020 social gatherings of more than 10 people should be avoided (according to federal guidelines:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/03.16.20_coronavirus-guidance_8.5x11_315PM.pdf>)

* + Following March 31, the CDC recommends that at least through May 10, 2020, gatherings of 50 or more people should be avoided or postponed. In these instances, social distances should still be maintained.
  + The CDC suggests limiting to select family and livestreaming the service for those who cannot attend; services could also be recorded and the video shared with whomever the family deems appropriate. They further advised that those who are ill and are at-risk (e.g., elderly, immune-compromised) should be encouraged to stay home. Funeral homes should also urge attendees to follow recommended healthy habits such as social distancing, hand hygiene, covering coughs and sneezes, etc.
  + Check with local health officials to determine whether there are any prohibitions on holding public events, such as a visitation or funeral. These take precedence over national guidelines.
* If loved ones choose burial instead of cremation, encourage a small graveside service only to minimize the number of places the deceased as well as guests need to be transported.
* If there is a funeral procession, it is better to use personal vehicles than shared limousines.
* Thoroughly clean and sanitize any rooms that will be used prior to the service.
* Encourage mourners to maintain distance from one another in pews/chairs.
* Avoid passing of the peace or any other greetings through physical touch.
* Post clear signage in your church about healthy habits,such as “How to Stop The Spread of Germs,”<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html>
* Keep soap dispensers filled in restrooms. The CDC has several informational flyers on handwashing you can post in public and staff restrooms.
* Offer alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol to guests
* Have extra tissues on hand (single packs, not boxes).
* Consider keeping the front door open (weather permitting) or ensuring someone is always available to open a door during visitations and services to prevent people from touching the door knob
* Family members may lay hands on or touch the body in the coffin after it has been prepared for viewing but no kissing; assume that every body is a carrier for COVID-19 even when it was not the cause of death.
* Do not assume you know the cause of death; assume that every body is a carrier for COVID-19. At this time, it seems unlikely to transmit the virus from the deceased to a person, but it is not impossible.
* Mourners should wash their hands after touching the body before touching their face again.
* Avoid using condolence books (see below ideas for condolences)
* Thoroughly clean and sanitize all rooms used after the service.

Livestreaming/Online

At a funeral home/for funeral directors:

* NFDA (National Funeral Directors Association) webcasting license allows performance of ASCAP, BMI and SESAC copyrighted music on Facebook and YouTube as would occur during funeral services.
* If you do not currently have a NFDA funeral webcasting license, more information can be found here: <https://www.nfda.org/resources/compliance-legal/music-and-webcasting-licenses>
* Please note: In some cases, Facebook or YouTube may take videos down or stop a live stream because they are unaware the funeral home has the appropriate webcasting license and is permitted to stream funeral services with copyrighted music.
* If you hold a webcasting license and find your streams or videos are being blocked or taken down, please take a photo or capture a screenshot of the notification you receive stating your videos or live feeds are being blocked/taken down. Send this photo or screen shot to NFDA (nfda@nfda.org) and the issue will be directly addressed with Facebook and/or YouTube.
* NFDA offers sample legal forms that give authorization for funeral homes to webcast funeral services and direction to record funeral services

At a church/for church leaders

* To set up online services, including livestreaming, go to <https://www.gnjumc.org/disasterresponse/coronavirus-information/ministries-and-resources-during-the-coronavirus/worship-resources/>
* Encourage the family to start thinking about what they would like in the future memorial service; collecting memories and mementos can be a helpful part of the grieving process.
* Obtain written permission from the family giving authorization for the church to livestream the service and direction to record the service
* Follow their wishes to password protect, privately link, or otherwise restrict access to services. Not everyone wants their grief broadcast in front of the world. This is particularly important when children and youth are involved.
* With the family’s permission, record and share the live-streamed event (not all live-streaming automatically records!) so that ill or quarantined mourners and their caregivers can watch it later when they are available.

**Remembering Lost Loved Ones and Connecting**

* If (as recommended above), loved ones choose not to hold a service at this time, or to strictly limit those in attendance, consider offering those making the arrangements to provide the church phone number and/or email address to other mourners for sharing condolences. Pass any condolences received onto the loved ones.
* Avoid using condolence books
* Consider holding a “sympathy card shower” for the family by having friends and others send sympathy cards to the family or to the church, to be delivered/picked up by the family. Make sure congregants have the correct address (physical and email) for the family.
* Make a virtual receiving line by encouraging people to send videos to the family.
* Encourage people to send groceries and homemade meals\* to the family but leave them on the doorstep and text/ring the bell. (\*As of 3/16/20 there is no evidence COVID-19 can be spread through food).

**Mourning Someone Lost to COVID-19**

* Though there is no known risk associated with being in the same room with the body of a person who has died from COVID-19, the CDC states that people should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19.
* There may be less of a chance of the virus spreading from certain types of touching, such as holding the hand or hugging after the body has been prepared for viewing.
* Other activities, such as kissing, washing, and shrouding should be avoided before, during, and after the body has been prepared, if possible.
* If washing the body or shrouding are important religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff on how to reduce their exposure as much as possible.
* At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear disposable gloves. If splashing of fluids is expected, additional personal protective equipment (PPE) may be required (such as disposable gown, faceshield or goggles and facemask).
* After removal of PPE, perform hand hygiene by washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available. Soap and water should be used if the hands are visibly soiled.

**Special Note**

When funeral homes reach maximum capacity, places of worship may need to offer to house prepared bodies in their caskets as needed until the family/graveside service and burial.

**SOURCES**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

<https://www.nfda.org/covid-19>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/coronavirus-funerals-to-be-held-under-controlled-conditions-1.4202127>

<https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/1jp2i6bFvSTfLbDf0nu5QWsKI3aF_toK_uN1o0yvujEA/mobilebasic>