



MASSACHUSETTS COUNCIL of CHURCHES

GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN FUNERALS DURING COVID19

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Introduction: For Christians, gathering to mourn the dead, celebrate their life, and proclaim the hope of Resurrection are essential practices of our faith. During the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID19 outbreak, our usual mourning rituals have been interrupted. We think of the women on that first Easter, who went to follow their familiar mourning ritual to anoint Jesus's body, to find it disrupted. We remember their initial shock and confusion and feel this, too. We're waiting to feel the hope of Resurrection. In times of trial like the death of a loved one, we turn to the familiar practices from our faith and ancestors. And so, we know that this disruption for a grieving community is doubly hard. *We grieve this disruption with you.*

We also know that every Christian community gathers differently based on culture, custom, and tradition. These guidelines offer some basic principles. This guide comes from a broad ecumenical perspective, *with a review from public health officials*. We also know that no guide can perfectly account for every scenario. We trust you to make wise pastoral judgement that errs on the side of safety for vulnerable populations, especially elders and those who are immunocompromised.

We will not risk more deaths in the celebration of life. These guidelines are hard, and necessary to limit the spread of the virus. Abide by them. We believe the good news of life in Christ Jesus can be proclaimed in every circumstance, even this one.

During the COVID19 outbreak, on March 10, 2020 Massachusetts declared a [State of Emergency](#). On March 23, Gov. Baker issued an [emergency order](#) closing nonessential businesses and limiting gatherings to no more than 10 people. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) has also recommended no gatherings larger than 10 people. We offer this guide to help pastors, chaplains and other Christian leaders make hard and necessary decisions to stop the spread of the virus.

God forbid a funeral at your church become a source of more suffering and death.

First, create a policy for your church that can be standard for the deaths in your congregation/parish and community through the outbreak. You've already made a thousand small decisions each and every day during this crisis. You need a policy to minimize more decisions (see page 4). Depending on your governance structure, solicit the engagement or affirmation of your deacons, vestry, governing board or elders. What we're noticing through this pandemic is that folks are wearing themselves out from an overload of decisions. Set the policy now and abide by it.



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Pastoral Concerns after a Death:

1. **Begin funeral planning remotely.** While our best and most familiar pastoral work often happens in person, this pandemic calls for us to physically distance to flatten the curve. This feels counter to everything we know as Christians, as Jesus draws close to those who suffer. Name explicitly these extraordinary circumstances, and how you would wish to be physically present, but out of care for their lives, you will be doing the funeral planning remotely. This is unbearably hard. Keep your pastoral care and planning to phone, email, and video.
2. **Acknowledge the pain.** the family and friends of the deceased may likely be upset by this death and as the awareness sets in, they may be doubly upset by the prospect of a funeral that is not as they imagined it. Acknowledge their pain, expectations and disappointment. When appropriate, share your church's guidelines.
3. **Appeal to external authorities.** If there is resistance to the modified rituals and timeline, appeal to the external authorities of state and federal guidelines in addition to this guide and the policy from your church. Following the policy is an act of compassion and an affirmation of life for the living. We put these policies in place to keep other people alive.
4. **Presume we're all doing the best that we can.** Be gracious with yourself and others. Operate with the presumption that everyone is doing the best that they can, and so extend extra grace. This is really, really hard. Folks are taxed emotionally and financially. As best you can, let as much as you can go. This is not business as usual, and so we're all going to have to be flexible. Invite the family into this flexibility, even in their grief.
5. **Delaying some rituals.** There's a tree that grows in New England called a "Service Berry" folklore says, because it didn't bloom until the ground had thawed enough till you could bury a body and have a service. In this place, we have always delayed some rituals. Cremation is one such way to delay some Christian practices for some communities. Another possibility is a family funeral or graveside service now, and possibly larger memorial service later. And, we may end up in a situation where the number and frequency of deaths exceeds pastoral capacity. You could say, "We can have a conversation after June 1 (or some later date) about when to have a later memorial service."
6. **Find ways to "stay connected in this time of uncertainty, to one another, and to the One who is our source and strength."** Gather the physical address of the immediate family members when you meet. Are there members of your congregations who can be drafted into service in card writing? Can there be a calendar of people who can call the family on designated days? A video conference call "wake" for a time of remembrances and storytelling? Can you print extra copies of a bulletin to send to family members who cannot gather in person? Can you post a copy of the program online? Can these tasks be delegated out to other members of the community as you do the work of caring for the grieving family in new and different ways?
7. **Overcommunicate:** In your newsletters to the congregation, in your homily at a graveside service, in the emails to the family, repeat and reiterate how hard and complicated this is.

Logistical Concerns for a Funeral during COVID19:

- 1. As always, be in regular contact with your local funeral home.** Your local funeral home will also have new guidelines from the State and [Massachusetts Funeral Directors Association](#) that guide their work. Collaborate and know both or your limits. Be clear and upfront about expenses, including your time. As best you can, care for the funeral home staff.
- 2. Make a list of the 10 people who will attend the funeral service or graveside.** With the family, make a list of who they would like to have physically present, naming only those who are well enough to attend. Acknowledge the pain of this work and affirm the act of compassion it is to self-limit. Encourage social distancing as much as possible here too. Members of the same household can be close as they presumably already are at home, but a relative visiting from out of town might be encouraged to keep her distance for her safety and that of others. The same applies to church volunteers, members of the clergy, etc. Suggest ways above (#6) to connect more broadly.
- 3. Communicate clear guidelines to your church and community:** This is unbelievably hard, but you need to overcommunicate to your congregation that they may not attend any part of the funeral. Share with the family and your church that they must resist the urge to gather unmasked either outside the funeral home, outside the church, or at the graveside. It's important to safeguard the health of others by preventing interactions as much as possible. Similarly, discourage members of the community from visiting grieving family members in person as a stream of one-on-one visits to the house is nearly as risky as a large group gathering of the same total number. There's nothing special that makes 10 people safe and 11 dangerous, it's about contacting as few people as possible during this outbreak.
- 4. If possible, set up a live-stream of funeral.** Ask if this is desired. Could you set up a private link or offer an option that is password protected? Who else in your community can be in charge of this work so you can be attending to the needs of the gathered community?
- 5. Limit the variables.** Dear pastor, heaven forbid we get into a situation with catastrophic numbers of deaths. We need you alive and pastorally attentive. If you wear yourself out, you will get sick. You cannot do every single thing for every single funeral. Pastoral compassion can also run into compassion fatigue. Please limit the number of variables. Do you really have enough volunteers to hold a wake and a funeral? This may mean saying to a family, "I am so very sorry. We cannot do this at this time." Knowing that we are finite and limited is an acknowledgement that we are not God.
- 6. Learn new gestures to minimize your physical contact:** Keep your Bible/prayer book/iPad in your hands at all times. Tell the family in advance that for your safety and theirs you will minimize physical contact. This will feel painful and strange. Put out hand sanitizer and individual tissues. Wash your hands again and again. One of the reasons to not have a large gathering is that it is so hard to limit physical contact when we are grieving. We do not want to be the pastors policing the hugging and weeping of the mourners.
- 7. Follow established protocols for cleaning the Church:** You know this, but pews, handrails, communion rail, etc. Anywhere where anyone has been must be cleaned.

Considerations for someone who has died from COVID19:

You know this, but do not shame nor condemn those who have died from COVID19.

The CDC has questions and answers for someone who has died from COVID 19 [here](#). There are currently no known risks of attending a funeral of someone who has died from COVID19, and we do not know all of the ways the disease spreads. Current [CDC recommendations state](#) “People should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19. Older people and people of all ages with severe underlying health conditions are at higher risk of developing serious COVID-19 illness. 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.” CDC has additional recommendations for particular religious practices around shrouding, wrapping, and washing the body.

Sample Funeral Policy for _____ Church during COVID19:

For Christians, gathering to mourn the dead, celebrate their life and proclaim the hope of Resurrection are essential practices of our faith. During the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID19 outbreak, our usual mourning rituals have been interrupted. We think of those women on that first Easter, who went to follow their familiar mourning ritual to anoint Jesus’s body, to find it disrupted. We remember their initial shock and confusion and feel it too. We’re waiting to feel the hope of resurrection. In times of trial like the death of a loved one, we turn to the familiar practices and rituals of our faith and ancestors. And so we know that this disruption for a grieving community is doubly hard. We grieve this disruption with you.

During the COVID19 outbreak, on March 10, 2020 Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a [State of Emergency](#) and then limited gatherings to no more than 10 people. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) has recommended no gatherings larger than 10 people.

Until the State of Emergency is lifted for Massachusetts, we will be limited in our funeral practices in the following ways:

Viewing/Wake:

[We advised *against* having a wake or a viewing during this pandemic. The potential for large gatherings and contact is too high. Churches would need many volunteers/ushers to do impossible work of policing the casket, forbidding touching of the casket, preventing hugging of the family, limiting access of ten at a time into the church, lining up outside with appropriate distancing, restringing seating in the church, cleaning of the church. The logistical and safety considerations are too great. We advise *against* an in person wake or viewing during the outbreak].

- a) We are not able to accommodate a wake at this time.

Funeral:

- a) We are able to host a funeral service at the church but only allow in ten people in the sanctuary.
- b) We are able to host a funeral service at the church but only allow in ten people in the sanctuary, and we are able to live stream the service.
- c) We are not able to host a funeral service at the church at this time.

Graveside:

[We recommend graveside memorial services outdoors where possible as a preferred venue, so as to limit the possible surfaces and spaces as sources of contamination]

- a) We are able to host a graveside service outdoors and require that all people practice social distancing of 6 feet between one another. We are able to accommodate 10 people present.
- b) We are able to host a graveside service outdoors and require that all 10 people practice social distancing of 6 feet between one another and we can stream the graveside service.
- c) We are not able to host a graveside service outdoors at this time.

Repast/Collation:

[We advised *against* the church hosting a repast or collation during this pandemic. The logistical and safety considerations are too great in hosting at the church and cooking on site. Family should limit the size of any home gathering to avoid spreading the virus and consider postponing a memorial meal to a time when the crisis is past.].

- a) We are not able to host a meal following the funeral at this time.

While we are limited in what we are able to host at this time, we are able to plan for memorials after the pandemic has passed. We would welcome the opportunity to host a memorial service for your loved one at a later date when we can all safely gather and celebrate their life.

Hear our affirmation: it is always sacred work to bury the dead. This is additionally complicated. Thank you for using the best of your pastoral skill, wisdom and experience to show the enduring love of Christ to grieving people. Through you, those who mourn know that they are not alone.

Thank you. Bless you.

Thoughts, feedback, questions or concerns? Contact council@masscouncilofchurches.org
More resources for pastoring through COVID 19 can be found at www.masscouncilofchurches.org