

# Procedure for Quaker funerals

*For Friends organising funerals & memorial services*



*"Friends should come to  
a funeral with both heart  
and mind prepared."*



# **Funeral meetings**

It is possible that at the time of death we receive some of our most helpful insights into the meaning of life. While we need to show our loving sympathy for those who are bereaved, sorrow will be tempered by thankfulness for the life of the deceased. It will be helpful if one or two Friends are appointed in each local meeting to be available to advise Friends and their relatives in some detail on what is involved in making funeral arrangements.

There is no rigid pattern for the conduct of Quaker funerals; however, sometimes programmed elements may be appropriate in the worship.

It will usually be felt that at the time of the funeral there should be a short Meeting for Worship after the manner of Friends, at the home, at the Meeting House, at the crematorium or at the graveside. It may also be appropriate to hold a memorial Meeting for Worship at the Meeting House or elsewhere at a time different from the funeral – usually later. It is important to be clear when arranging a funeral whether a memorial meeting is to be held at a later date.



There is laid on all who are present the responsibility to translate their prayers for comfort and support into thoughtful, kindly and sustained actions that will continue to help those who have lost a loved one to face life anew with courage, and to adapt themselves to their new circumstances.

**George Gorman, 1973**

The Friends appointed to arrange a funeral should also promptly inform appropriate Friends in the local meeting to ensure an adequate presence at the funeral. Former as well as serving elders and overseers may, for example, be included. They should be chosen for their wise judgment and special concern for the right conduct of such occasions of worship, and the concern should be clearly laid upon them.

When it is expected that a number of people will not have experienced a Meeting for Worship, it is important for an elder, or another designated Friend, to explain briefly the nature of the Meeting for Worship, the procedure to be followed and how it will be closed. In addition, the pamphlet *Quaker funeral ceremonies*, which is designed for non-Friends, may be placed on seats prior to the funeral meeting.

While a funeral meeting or memorial meeting is assembling, music is sometimes played. Timing of such music should be carefully planned so that it does not encroach on the basically silent period of the meeting.

Arrangements should be made in advance for some Friends to sit at the front of the meeting and for one of them, usually an elder, to take definite responsibility for bringing it to an end. At the close of the Meeting for Worship, it may be desirable for this Friend to come forward to the relatives, speaking with them and indicating that they should lead the way out.

The Meeting for Worship is a time of prayer for and the upholding of those who mourn, as well as for the giving of thanks for the grace of God in the life of the person who has died. Appropriate extracts from *this we can say* (2003, Australia Yearly Meeting), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Religious Society of Friends*, (1959, British Yearly Meeting, pp. 273, 274, 188-95, 525-30) and from *Quaker Faith and Practice* (3rd edn, 2005, British Yearly Meeting, Chapter 17) may be helpful.

# **Memorial meetings**

It may be right to hold a memorial Meeting for Worship to give thanks for the life of a Friend who has died. Sometimes, when local circumstances allow little time at the place of cremation or burial, a meeting will be held before or afterwards, allowing time for Friends to travel to or from the crematorium or cemetery. Sometimes a memorial meeting will be arranged at a later date at the convenience of relatives and local Friends. Occasionally a memorial meeting may be held soon after the death, but the funeral only much later (for example, when the body has been lost at sea, or donated for medical education and research). The particular circumstances will affect the nature of the occasion and the balance of grief, loss and thankfulness.

Memorial meetings, as well as special meetings on the occasion of a funeral, demand great sensitivity to individual needs. The memorial meeting for a Friend whose life was lived in the local meeting will spring from and deepen the worshipping community of those Friends. It is a further opportunity to rejoice in the privilege of knowing the

person who has died. This will be less formally organised and may last as much as an hour. The family may want one of their number to give a brief account of the life of the deceased. This would normally be given as the first spoken contribution after the introduction by the presiding elder. Those who are present will have had more time to collect their thoughts and reflect on the life of the person. A testimony to the grace of God in the life of the deceased may be read at the memorial meeting.

If the deceased was someone whose links with the meeting were less strong, but who was well known in the wider community, the occasion may tend towards greater formality. When non-members are likely to be present, an elder, or other designated Friend, should be appointed to explain briefly how the meeting will be conducted, how long it is likely to last, and how it will be concluded. The length of the meeting may vary, but Friends will be sensitive to the wishes of the relatives as well as to the spiritual condition of the meeting as it moves towards a natural ending.

# Meeting responsibilities

Guidance notes or memoranda of good practice, which give practical advice based on the specific circumstances of each Regional Meeting, are a convenient way of pooling the local experience of Friends in the conduct of funerals and memorial meetings and keeping it readily available in written form.

Regional Meetings are recommended to produce such memoranda for members' use and to keep them up to date. It may be useful to consider some or all of following issues in the guidance notes:

- ways in which appointed office holders may become aware of local custom and practice;
- consultations with the family, bearing in mind the wishes of the deceased;
- liaison with crematorium staff and funeral directors; particular care should be taken to clarify points where Quaker expectations may differ from what is assumed to be normal practice;
- the need for firm and sensitive direction during the funeral; those present, particularly distressed mourners, will welcome clear guidance on how to proceed;
- consideration of the length of the Meeting for Worship;
- the presence of those not accustomed to our form of worship and the need to include them, allay their anxieties and preserve the integrity of the meeting;
- the opening and closing of the Meeting for Worship;
- the use of prepared ministry;
- burials: the conduct and form of any meeting by the graveside;
- policy regarding the minister's fee normally charged by funeral directors in the account rendered to the estate, bearing in mind that it is not Friends' practice to accept a fee for ministry;
- an indication that Friends should consult the current edition of the *Australia Yearly Meeting Handbook of Practice and Procedure*, in conjunction with the memorandum produced by their Regional Meeting.

# **Wider considerations**

While Friends will wish to hold a Meeting for Worship on the occasion of the death of a member of their local meeting, they may at times feel it is right to hold such a meeting for a person less closely related to that meeting, for example, a person well-known to some of its members or someone associated with the Society in the past, or a member of another meeting.

Friends are encouraged to maintain great simplicity in funeral arrangements and in the choice of gravestones. In burial grounds under the control of Friends it is traditional that uniformity should be preserved in respect to gravestones so that no distinction is made between one person and another.

In the section on ‘Right ordering of Friends’ personal affairs’ in the fifth edition of the *Australia Yearly Meeting Handbook of Practice and Procedure*, Friends are advised ‘to face with courage the advance of old age and as far as possible to make arrangements that will avoid laying an undue burden on others. In order to prevent the inconvenience, loss and/or trouble that dying intestate

may cause their friends and relatives, it is recommended that Friends make and revise their wills in times of good health and sound judgment’.

In addition to making their wills, Friends are urged to think of making available further information – such as personal particulars needed for the registration of a death; names of persons who should be informed; any wishes as to burial or cremation – which could be helpful at the time of their death.

A form titled *Information in the event of death* is available from the Quakers Australia website at: <[www.quakers.org.au](http://www.quakers.org.au)>. When the form has been completed, it should be sealed in an envelope and given or posted to the Regional Meeting clerk. The clerk will arrange with overseers that in the event of death the information can be made available without delay.

## **Sources of information**

- About Quakers* pamphlet, Australia Yearly Meeting.
- Handbook of practice and procedure*, Australia Yearly Meeting, 5th edn, 2005.
- Funeral pamphlets, Queensland Regional Meeting.
- Quaker Faith and Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting, 3rd edn, 2005.



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