
Death and Memorials

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

Now I am clear, I am fully clear!

From George Fox's last words, 1/13/1691

They that love beyond the World cannot be separated by it. Death cannot kill what never dies. Nor can Spirits ever be divided that love and live in the same Divine Principle.... They live in one another still.

William Penn, 1693

Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-worn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home to Itself.

Thomas Kelly, 1941

A Friends' memorial meeting for worship is a beautiful ritual, in its celebration of the life of the person who has died. But an elderly Friend in our meeting once expressed concern after a memorial that we had only spoken of the person's life, not of their dying and death.

Part of the beauty of a memorial meeting is that it allows for not only memories and recollections, but for the immediate and continuing experience of deep connection with the person who has died, and shared connections among those who loved that person. In a sense, our memorial meetings are held for "that of God" in the dead person, and held by and with "that of God" in each of us. Therefore, the Friend who reminded us to acknowledge dying and death along with life was reminding us that "that of God" was present not only in the active life of this individual in the world, but also in her essential, stripped-down presence as she died.

Kirsten Backstrom, 2001

See "The Meeting and Friends of All Ages" in Chapter 4, "Friends Testimonies," for discussion of the spiritual and community aspects of death and bereavement.

Death often faces us with the most difficult of questions, yet it may be the occasion of our most profound insights into the meaning of life. As Friends seek to surround the bereaved with love and care, the sustaining power of God can bring to all concerned not only courage but a transforming truth about death and life itself. Although life instinctively avoids death, death is not the opposite of life. It is essential to the ongoing, changing nature of life.

Preparing for Death

Individual Friends' Responsibilities. Knowing that significant disability or death may come at any time, adult Friends take care to make and communicate health care and end-of-life decisions. Friends prepare their wills and other documents concerned with end-of-life planning—such as trusts, health care power of attorney, financial power of attorney, and POLST (Physicians Orders for Life

Sustaining Treatment) forms—in a timely way. Friends keep wills current in order to provide properly for members of the family, particularly minor children, and for the stewardship of property. Friends may write a simple will, mindful that it will be most effective if written with the knowledge of applicable law. Will preparation may require the assistance of an attorney. Preparation is particularly important for those with children or those who place themselves at risk for conscience's sake.

We take care that health care and end-of-life choices are not made under the influence of depression or undue pain. Because medical technology can extend life beyond our wishes, we consider in advance the ways to prepare ourselves for the end of life. There may come a point when focusing on palliative care is the most compassionate choice. In states that permit it, some Friends may consider whether they wish to implement physician-assisted dying.

Friends consider how we can apply our values when preparing for the end of life. For example, there may be questions about how and when to move from independent living to assisted living, to skilled nursing or home care, and perhaps to hospice. Friends may observe our testimonies of simplicity and stewardship by planning for a green burial or a home funeral. We may also wish to be organ donors or donate our bodies to research. Friends who wish to minimize their contribution to military spending by minimizing estate taxes may wish to explore options toward that end with a professional. These are all difficult decisions, to be made under the guidance of the Spirit. Friends may need, and meetings may offer, care committees or clearness committees to aid in making or acting on these decisions.

Many Friends belong to memorial societies which contract with given mortuaries for prompt, simple, and inexpensive disposition of the body, frequently through cremation. The monthly meeting may keep on file, often with membership records, members' own personal suggestions about arrangements desired at the time of their death, including a list of persons to be notified. A suggested form for this purpose is found in the Appendix of Forms. Friends provide only the information they are comfortable having held by the meeting. Meetings are responsible to remind members to review and update this information every few years.

The Meeting's Responsibilities. When Friends suffer the loss of a loved one, there is a sustaining strength in the loving concern and help of the meeting and its members. Meeting's role is to support the spiritual journey of the dying Friend and their family, and to assist with after-death arrangements in accord with the Friend's express wishes and the needs of the family. It is important for the meeting, and especially the Pastoral Care Committee¹, to be prepared for its responsibilities. The committee works out a general process in advance for dealing with the death of a beloved member. If the dying or deceased Friend plays an important role in the meeting, the committee may recommend how the Friend's service to meeting will be covered after their passing.

The committee may ask appropriate Friends to visit and counsel with the family or friends of the dying or deceased, to offer any needed assistance, such as notifying relatives and friends, or helping to plan a memorial meeting, and to assist in whatever ways the particular situation suggests. Some meetings form Support Committees to assist families, particularly when a child is involved, or in the case of a suicide. Such a committee may be critical if the Friend has chosen physician-assisted dying.

¹ *"The Oversight Committee" is a traditional Quaker name for the committee that organizes memorials, handles requests for membership or marriage under the care of the meeting, and coordinates help and comfort for Friends in need. In many meetings this function is combined with care for the community's spiritual life, hence the common name "Ministry & Oversight Committee"—the name used by NPYM and its quarterly meetings. However, "oversight" has connotations of slavery for many Friends, and they may use some other name in their meetings, such as Ministry & Counsel for a combined committee. Each Friends' group names its committees in its own way. Reflecting the concern about "oversight," this Faith and Practice uses "Pastoral Care Committee" for the committee in a local Friends group that has responsibility for memorials, memberships, etc.*

Memorial Meetings

The Quaker testimony on simplicity and consideration for the wishes of the family govern the arrangements to be made. Friends generally feel that prompt and simple disposition of the body is appropriate, followed at a suitable time by a memorial meeting held in the regular place of worship or at some other suitable place.

For Friends, a memorial meeting is a meeting for worship on the occasion of death. Such a memorial meeting is approached in a spirit of peace and trust. It is an opportunity to come together to celebrate in the Light a life that has held meaning for us, and to support each other in healing our grief. Music or a prepared statement may be used if consistent with the spirit of the meeting and the desire of the family. The use of flowers in such a meeting is much the same as it might be in a meeting for worship. If people other than Friends are expected to be present, it is helpful to have available a prepared statement explaining a Friends memorial meeting. Near its beginning, a selected Friend may talk briefly about the manner of the meeting, and describe how it will close. Some meetings follow the practice of reading a brief biography of the deceased Friend and find that it frequently supplies information and insights of which more recent acquaintances have been unaware, and helps to draw a more complete portrait of the Friend's life.

In some meetings, Friends may hold a memorial meeting at the death of a public figure, to recognize the effect of a natural disaster, or to acknowledge a public tragedy. Some Friends hold an annual meeting for remembrance to commemorate the passing of loved ones.

Memorial Minutes

The Pastoral Care Committee prepares a memorial minute about the deceased member and presents it to an upcoming meeting for business for inclusion in the minutes. Memorial minutes typically include a brief biography (often with special emphasis on the person's activities among Friends), mention of the surviving family, and the date of the memorial meeting. The clerk or recording clerk sends copies of the memorial minute to the family and to the yearly meeting. Copies of the minute may also be sent to *Western Friend* and other Friends publications.

Planning a Memorial Meeting

Pastoral Care Committee responsibilities:

- Check meeting records for wishes at time of death.
- Name an ad hoc arrangements committee.
- Name member(s) of committee who will meet with the family to:
 - offer condolences and help;
 - discuss wishes for memorial meeting.
- Update meeting membership files.

The Pastoral Care Committee or an arrangements committee will help the family with the following:

Notifications

- Send obituary to media if desired.
- State where to send donations.
- Write memorial minute; send to family, to NPYM, to Quaker publications if desired.

Logistics

- Plan physical arrangements:
 - location, date, time;
 - expected attendance;
 - room set-up;
 - seating for close family;
 - display tables if desired;
 - parking;
 - equipment if needed;
 - help for guests with special needs;
 - extra chairs if needed.
- Plan child care if needed.
- Plan social gathering & food if desired.
- Designate greeters.
- Designate clean-up help.
- Plan for guest book & pens.
- Plan for flowers if desired (order, placement, what to do with them after the memorial).

Program planning

- Write & produce printed program:
 - order of service, if any;
 - biographical sketch or memorial minute;
 - photograph;
 - description of memorial meeting in the manner of Friends.
- Designate who will open the meeting and introduce Friends practice at memorials.
- Designate who will close meeting.