

Guidance for religious leaders for conducting funeral services

Ministry of Health v.7 4 JANUARY 2021

People have always had a deep reverence for the dead. Rites and customs reflect their faith, their views on death and life after death. These rites give the bereaved support and assurance during the early grieving process. Religious funeral services serve not only to pay final respects for the departed, but also to remind the bereaved of teachings of the faith about the afterlife and to show solidarity and support for the bereaved. The faithful, while understanding the need for restrictions in these difficult times, have been greatly affected by the current limitations imposed on burial practices. This guidance is intended to ease the continuation of faith based funeral practices during the phase of COVID-19 community transmission.

Aim

To protect and comfort mourners and show respect for those who have died without putting mourners at risk.

General Principles

- Communication will be maintained among all partners, especially the Ministry of Health, Padayachy Funeral Investment, faith-based organisations and the Police Department, to ease the process of bereavement for families.
- All persons assisting with or attending the funeral will undergo health screening, have their temperature recorded, and have their personal details kept in a register at all designated premises.
- Designated drivers of vehicles will keep records of all transfers and persons involved
- The presence of one or two police officers at the place of worship and cemetery may be necessary to enforce adherence to recommendations.

Before the funeral:

- Take time to explain the standard operating procedures to the bereaved family; have an electronic version which can be quickly sent to them for instructions
- Explain the need for public health measures
- With the aim of respecting physical distancing, only one funeral service will take place within a day at a single venue
- Inform them that mourners who are unwell (e.g. fever, cough, runny nose, diarrhoea, loss of smell or taste) should not attend the service
- Inform the local police once a date/time is set and confirm their presence
- Advise on electronic versions of the order of service instead of booklets
- Talk about the possibility of a family member using a telephone to video the ceremony or live-streaming for real-time or later viewing by those who cannot attend the funeral
- Where ritual ablutions/cleansing of the deceased are required, they should be performed by trained staff at the morgue or funeral home only.
- **Other tips that may be given to the bereaved family**
 - Appoint a trusted person to direct the proceedings of the funerals at all locations
 - Do not provide buses for the funeral
 - For the radio announcement, inform people that it is a private ceremony; omit the date and time
 - Discourage unnecessary visitors in your home
 - Avoid stay-overs by family and friends
 - Ask people to bring their own water or refreshments
 - Should you offer refreshments for the family, get one person to hand them out as individual packs

Wakes are not permitted

At the place of worship:

Increased vigilance

- Announce that mourners who are unwell (e.g. fever, cough, runny nose, diarrhoea, loss of smell or taste) should not attend the service.
- Record the temperature and keep a register of personal details of all persons attending the funeral

Allow for physical distancing

- Remind attendees of public health measures
- Limit the number of attendees to 15-20 (close family members only)
- Get a family member or trusted person to assist with the policing of who is allowed inside the hall
- Maintain at least one-meter physical distance between attendees at all times
 - Allow only people from the same household to sit together; space out all other groups
 - Allow two or three persons per pew, depending on size
 - Use alternate pews
- Do not touch, kiss, hug or engage in other any form of close bodily contact with anyone who is not from your household
- Train and enlist ushers to advise and direct mourners before, during and after the service
- Do not allow people to group up before, during and after the service
- Remind mourners to leave in an orderly manner after the funeral.

Basic hygiene

- All persons must wear a mask properly at all times, both indoors and outdoors
- Encourage handwashing with soap and water
- Cough etiquette; if you need to cough or clear your throat, do so with your mask on
- Avoid touching face, eyes and mouth
- Have hand sanitisers and wipes on hand and dispose of used tissues in a bin or plastic bag

Limit duration of service – target less than thirty minutes

- Consider omitting optional parts of the celebration – hymns, eulogies etc.
- Do not have a choir; instead, have an individual playing instrumental music on an organ or stringed instrument
- Omit aspersion of the casket by mourners (multiple persons handling the aspergillum)
- Have a station where people can drop in offerings (without touching) instead of passing a vessel
- Avoid touching or passing microphones

Cleaning and disinfection

- After the service, close doors to prevent other people from coming into the building, leave windows open and keep the fan running to ventilate the area.
- The next day, clean and disinfect pews, high traffic areas and frequently touched surfaces/items (e.g. pulpit, doorknobs, microphones) after the service with common household disinfectant, or use other common household cleaning agents, if not feasible to wipe down wooden pews with bleach.
- Keep a checklist of what needs to be cleaned
- Have hand sanitizers available for ushers and other staff
- Wear a mask, gloves and apron for cleaning
- For additional information, follow the guidelines [Cleaning and disinfecting your place of worship](#) Department of Health V 1 6 MAY 2020)

Order of Service

- If possible, project the order of service on a screen
- If a booklet/leaflet is used, allow one person to hand out; do not allow mourners to pick it up from a stack
- Allow recording for online watching by those who are unable to attend the funeral

Burial / Cremation:

- Internment can follow normal practices, however,
 - Wear a mask properly at all times, either indoors or outdoors
 - Allow for physical distancing
 - Apply basic hygiene, as above
 - Do not touch, kiss, hug or engage in other any form of close bodily contact with anyone who is not from the same household as you
 - Only cemetery personnel are allowed to handle shovels. Do not pass spades/shovels from one person to another. Mourners may take a handful of dirt from a proffered shovel to scatter over the casket.
 - Only one or two persons designated by the family will arrange flowers on the grave once signaled by cemetery staff.
 - Have hand sanitisers and wipes on hand and dispose of used tissues in a plastic bag
- For either burial or cremation, do not remove the body from the casket/coffin before entering the crematorium area or prior to burial

After the funeral:

- Debrief with the staff; address any issues which arose
- Have a checklist of what has been cleaned and when
- Call the family and check on their wellbeing and get their feedback
- Discuss the possibility of holding a memorial service once the pandemic is controlled