

Chapter 17

Quaker funerals and memorial meetings

INTRODUCTION

- 17.01 Friends should come to a funeral with both heart and mind prepared. We want to experience a deep sense of communion with God and with one another, which we hope will comfort and strengthen those who mourn. There are at least two aims in our worship: to give thanks to God for the life that has been lived, and to help the mourners to feel a deep sense of God's presence.

Hardshaw East Monthly Meeting Elders & Overseers, 1986

- 17.02 The funerals of Friends should be held in a spirit of quiet peace and trust. Natural sorrow there will be, especially for Friends taken away in youth and in the strength of their days, but often our thought will be one of a great thankfulness for lives which have borne witness to the upholding power of Christ.

1925

- 17.03 Friends should not adopt any rigid pattern for the conduct of funerals. In some cases it is best to hold, separately from the committal or cremation, a 'meeting for worship on the occasion of the death of our Friend', at a weekend, when Friends are free to attend and there is time for the spirit of quiet trust and dependence on God to overcome natural grief. In other cases the brief meeting for worship at the crematorium is all that is either possible or desired... If Friends really believe that all meetings of every kind are meetings for worship in which the presence of Christ is with them and that they are in unity with the living and the dead, they will not experience difficulties or find the occasion of a funeral imposing a pattern of unbalanced eulogy of the deceased. Arising from a gathered meeting, messages of a general character, even from those

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who have not known the deceased, will enrich the worship of all who are there.

Berks & Oxon QM Ministry & Extension Committee, 1951

- 17.04 A feeling of hesitation as to speaking at funerals is most natural, for great wisdom and tenderness are required. On the other hand, these gatherings give opportunities of a very special character, and we urge all on whom the gift of the vocal ministry has been bestowed to consider whether it may not be their duty and privilege to use it on these occasions, even if in some degree contrary to their convenience and inclination. There is also need for the presence of others, and [their] attendance in a loving and sympathetic spirit is a very real service.

Warwickshire North Monthly Meeting Ministry Committee, 1912

- 17.05 The value of vocal prayer at a funeral can hardly be overemphasised. If offered under guidance it will often touch hearts too much distressed to listen to an address and will bring real comfort. This is above all to be borne in mind where there is some special ground for sorrow, when the anxious mourners may thus be helped to open their hearts to the healing stream of divine love.

Warwickshire Monthly Meeting Elders, 1960

- 17.06 Quakers do have something very special to offer the dying and the bereaved, namely that we are at home in silence. Not only are we thoroughly used to it and unembarrassed by it, but we know something about sharing it, encountering others in its depths and, above all, letting ourselves be used in it...

People so often talk of someone 'getting over' a death. How could you ever fully get over a deep loss? Life has been changed profoundly and irrevocably. You don't get over sorrow; you work your way right to the centre of it.

Diana Lampen, 1979

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PROCEDURE

Conduct of funerals

- 17.07 Area meetings shall satisfy themselves that adequate arrangements are made for advice to be available on the holding of meetings for worship as on other matters in connection with funerals. This responsibility is the subject of a separate section: see 17.14-17.15.
- 17.08 Quaker funeral arrangements are the responsibility of the area meeting (4.10.p). It shall notify its members at regular intervals of the names of those Friends currently appointed to arrange funerals on its behalf.

It is for each area meeting to determine, and to keep under review (4.10.p), how these Friends are best chosen. They may be the area meeting elders as a group, or a subcommittee of elders, or a funeral arrangements committee constituted in some other way. Alternatively, the area meeting may delegate this responsibility to the elders, or to a specially appointed member, of each local meeting. What is important is that in each area meeting its preferred procedures for arranging funerals are clearly understood and followed.

- 17.09 The Friends appointed should consult with the relatives of the deceased and with local elders, who take particular responsibility for the right holding of the meeting for worship on such occasions (12.12.f). Sometimes programmed elements may be appropriate in the worship. It is important to be clear at this stage whether a memorial meeting (17.10) is also to be held at a later date. The Friends appointed to arrange a funeral should also promptly inform appropriate Friends in the area 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

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such occasions of worship, and the concern should be clearly laid upon them.

Where it is expected that a number present will be without experience of a meeting for worship, it is important for an elder, or another designated Friend, to explain briefly the nature of the meeting for worship and the procedure to be followed.

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.

Among passages which may be suitable to be read at funerals are 21.49-21.73 & 22.93-22.95

Memorial meetings

- 17.10 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. If the deceased was someone whose links with the meeting were less strong, but who was well known in the wider community,

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the occasion may tend towards greater formality. When non-members are likely to be present, a great responsibility is laid on the local elders to ensure that the meeting is rightly held, and that its purpose is made clear to those who attend (12.12.f).

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.

Burials

Burials in Friends' burial grounds and interment and scattering of ashes

- 17.11 Area meetings possessing burial grounds are to appoint a Friend or Friends authorised to issue on behalf of the area meeting(s) an order for burial (or interment or scattering of ashes). Books of blank forms and counterfoils for these may be obtained from the Recording Clerk. No grave is to be made, nor ashes interred or scattered, without such an order.

Immediately after the burial, or interment or scattering of ashes, the order is to be countersigned by a different Friend, witnessing that this has taken place. The countersigned order shall be presented at the next area meeting, which shall record the relevant facts in a minute. If the deceased was a member of another area meeting, the clerk shall transmit the information to the clerk of that area meeting.

Register of burials and interment and scattering of ashes

- 17.12 After the order for burial (or interment or scattering of ashes) has been presented to the area meeting possessing the burial ground, and the clerk has certified that the relevant facts have been recorded in a minute of that meeting, the order now bearing all the signatures required shall be returned to the first signatory and re-attached to its counterfoil. Such completed orders and counterfoils constitute the

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register of burials (and interment and scattering of ashes) and shall be preserved with the records of the area meeting (see 4.40.c). It is open to the area meeting, if it wishes, to maintain a register book as well. In any case, entries and indexes in the register should be cross-referenced, as appropriate, to the plan of burial plots and record of burials and interments maintained under 15.17.

In respect of the burial of bodies, the proper maintenance and preservation of a register of burials by the area meeting possessing the burial ground is a requirement of Section 1 of the Registration of Burials Act 1864. In respect of the interment or scattering of ashes it is not a legal requirement; but it accords with Quaker practice over the years by ensuring that a full record is kept of the use made of Friends' burial grounds, and that no distinction is made with regard to inclusion in registers between those whose bodies are buried and those whose ashes are interred or scattered.

Burials of non-members and interment and scattering of ashes

- 17.13 Burials of non-members may be allowed in Friends' burial grounds, but it is hoped that, save in exceptional circumstances, they will be conducted as are the burials of Friends; and likewise the interment or scattering of ashes of non-members. The Friends appointed to arrange meetings for worship on the occasion of a funeral are to exercise discretion as to complying with any application that may be made in such cases. Alternatively, a area meeting may entrust this exercise of discretion directly to the Friend or Friends authorised to issue orders for burial (or interment or scattering of ashes), if it judges that they will not feel overburdened by this additional responsibility.

Responsibilities of area meetings

- 17.14 Area meetings shall ensure that a sufficient number of Friends are familiar with the practical arrangements for funerals at the particular crematoria and public cemeteries within their compass, as well as for those conducted in their own burial grounds.

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It is good practice for those who hold these responsibilities to take counsel together regularly (whether through meetings of elders or otherwise) on the right holding of Quaker funerals and memorial meetings within their area meeting.

- 17.15 Several area meetings have produced guidance notes or memoranda of good practice, giving practical advice based on the specific circumstances of each area. This is a convenient way of pooling the local experience of Friends in their conduct of funerals and memorial meetings and keeping it readily available in written form. Area meetings are recommended to produce such memoranda for members' use and to keep them up to date. There follows a list of those matters which area meetings have found most useful to include:
- a. ways in which appointed office holders may become aware of local custom and practice;
 - b. consultations with the family, bearing in mind the wishes of the deceased;
 - c. 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;
 - d. the need for firm and sensitive direction during the funeral; those present, particularly distressed mourners, will welcome clear guidance on how to proceed;
 - e. consideration of the length of the meeting for worship;
 - f. 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;
 - g. the opening and closing of the meeting for worship;
 - h. the use of prepared ministry;
 - i. burials: the conduct and form of any meeting by the graveside;
 - j. 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;
 - k. an indication that Friends should consult this chapter in conjunction with the memorandum produced by their area meeting.

Conclusion

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- 17.16 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

See also 15.17-15.20 Burial grounds, *21.49-21.58* Death & *22.80-22.95* Bereavement