

Things to Consider When Holding a Funeral Over Zoom

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March 2020

Death is a reality in this life. The church and the pastoral office of the Burial Rite have long provided a familiar and comforting container for those in grief to share their sorrow with God and one another, and to mark the life of a loved one. By the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, "The service should be held at a time when the congregation has opportunity to be present" (p. 490). However, these are not normal times, and we may be months out from a time when the congregation can gather in person. Here, we offer some thoughts about how we prayed the burial office over Zoom. These suggestions are not binding in any way and priests, pastors and families will need to make decisions based on their own context and a family's needs.

The context of our experience:

Sr. Miriam Elizabeth's mother died on March 22, 2020 after a short illness that included a possible COVID-19 diagnosis and isolation in a hospital. Her brother drove to be with Miriam Elizabeth and their mother during her illness. His wife joined them after the death. While there are plans for the extended family to gather for a burial when it is safe to travel, it is unclear when that might be.

Some of the extended family worship in varying Christian denominations, some do not attend a church and some are unchurched. Sr. Miriam Elizabeth has experience working over Zoom in small and large groups, and proposed the idea of gathering the family to pray the burial rite. The Rev. James Said (Jim) agreed to preside.

Sr. Miriam Elizabeth sent out a Word document with the rite to family members to print or have on their screen. This included the chosen lesson and psalm. She and Jim met at church (keeping appropriate physical distance and using hand sanitizer before, during and after), set up the space physically and ran a Zoom test. She, her brother and sister-in-law returned to the church later at the designated time (with physical distance and hand sanitizer) and opened the Zoom channel. Jim lead the Rite while those present and online participated as they wished in responses and prayers. We had 22 people, including 7 children, across 6 states participate. All responses to the experience have been overwhelmingly positive.

Out of our experience we offer the following:

It is important to note that, at least in our instance, the online funeral was not held in lieu of a face to face funeral, but as a "grace holder" until then. And, we recognize that under current circumstances, it's possible that an online funeral and burial might actually be the only occasion of the sacrament for a family.

1. It is possible in these times that the family will need to make a decision about body disposition that is counter to a person's wishes or to a pre-prepared plan. For instance, cremation is the least expensive, most convenient, and most socially-distanced method to hold, and then easily transport, remains for burial, and it is not every person's or family's wish. This is especially true if the burial is not going to be local. Consider how you will guide a family in this decision. Consider what resources you need to have that conversation. The funeral home is a good resource here.
2. In our instance, Zoom was the preferred program due to familiarity and the possibility of seeing people on the screen. Facebook Live was briefly considered, but the need for a Facebook account and the lack of visual and verbal interaction with those gathered led us back to Zoom. We did have someone connect over Zoom and then Facetime another family member so they could hear and that worked well.
3. A Word document of the rite, including the text of the lessons and psalm were sent out over email for everyone to print or pull up on their own screen or a second screen. We made a conscious decision not to share it on screen over Zoom or to deal with fancy visual graphics, choosing instead the gift of seeing everyone's face. It's possible that with a different or larger crowd, another decision might be made here. What's been clear in later family conversations was the importance and comfort of being able to see everyone.
4. The physical set up and what people could see through the host computer was important to us. We were able to set up a table in the center aisle of the church with the host computer screen facing the altar. Three family members sat facing that screen, with an opening between us that allowed for a visual to the deceased's photo on a stand behind us. The paschal candle was placed beside that stand with the photo and lighted. The priest stood up one step behind the photo, facing the screen, and the altar and a large cross were behind him. He did not use a microphone and did not need to, but we acknowledge that that could be necessary in other settings. While we were able to host within a church, that may not be possible everywhere. We simply suggest that consideration be given here for visual comforts and setting when at all possible.
5. It was made clear in the original email invitation to the family that this was an informal on-line gathering and assurance was given that we would indeed gather at a later date. Family members had a chance to trial logging in to the Zoom room in advance and we designated a family member as the "tech helper" before and during the rite.
6. No one had on their Sunday best, although the priest was vested in cassock, surplus and tippet. The priest was introduced to everyone prior to beginning the service. While all of our family knew one another, introductions can be important in building the temporary community for the service. We made sure everyone

knew how to mute themselves and everyone could see and hear before we began the liturgy.

7. We began the rite by ringing a solemn bell and observing a few moments of silence. We elected for one lesson and one psalm that was said in unison. We included the commendation (and we will commend again when we gather in person). We did not celebrate the Eucharist. Due to the unfamiliarity of the liturgy and the technology by many family members, the priest led and read everything. Due to the desired simplicity of this service and time constraints of some family members for the call, we chose not to have any music for this service. All of these choices, of course, might be different in your context.
8. The liturgy was read at an intentionally slow pace, with attention to specific and clear pronunciation, so that it could be transmitted clearly to the listeners through the Zoom call. Recognizing the varying transmission speeds to individuals over Zoom will help with pace and pausing throughout the prayers. Brief explanation and instruction were provided at a couple of points. For example, it was explained that everyone had a role in the prayers for the deceased and were invited to say the printed response.
9. The Zoom channel was left open after the liturgy so that everyone could say goodbye.
10. The sexton came in the following day and sanitized the church and all furniture used.

In the end, the family took great comfort in the prayers and the on-line gathering. While this was a sad time, it was clear that the family was delighted to “see” each other when they could not be together physically. Everyone’s experience, including the presider’s, was one of deep pastoral care.

While we wish such practices were not necessary, we also recognize that the need for pastoral care continues even, and especially, in these days of physical distancing and limited travel. We are grateful for this opportunity to share our experience with you and pray that it might be of some assistance to you as you continue to pastor God’s people in this time. We trust with deep faith God’s abiding presence with us and even as we stand in grief, we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.