

# The Funeral

## Initial contact

When the news comes through of a bereavement, it is vitally important that we prepare our heart in prayer before we visit the bereaved, if it is possible.

In meeting the bereaved be particularly *sensitive* to their response in the situation. It may vary in expression between one of great tragedy or relief. Do not be "super spiritual," but nevertheless act as the representative of God.

*Visible grief* is useful, although sometimes the initial reaction is that of numbness or even joy - irrational even though it may seem. When there is an overwhelming sense of grief, giving a hug to a person of the opposite sex may seem innocent enough, but be careful of possible inappropriate emotional bonding which in time could lead to immorality.

Be *culturally sensitive* to different patterns of grieving. Some races for example, like to have the body of the deceased present in the home, while others prefer to have the body cared for at the funeral parlour until the time of the service. Each culture must be respected.

Be careful *not to pass judgement* upon the eternal destination of the person who has just passed away. Only the Lord really knows what their genuine response was at the last moment. The Judge of all the earth will do that which is right. Many can give personal testimony to a situation, when as

disaster was about to strike, their whole life flashed before them in an instant of time enabling them to make a commitment of their life to Jesus Christ. Be wise however and do not mislead.

It is good to offer to pray with those grieving and to have a reading of comfort from Scripture. Most people, even non Christians will appreciate the offer.

## Suicide

This can certainly be even more of a challenge in giving pastoral support as the emotional responses of those grieving are often stronger and more complex. Most of those who grieve will have a sense of great *guilt*. They will often blame themselves for having failed the one who died and they will need to verbalise these feelings. Others will have feelings of *shame*. They may feel embarrassed as to what their friends and neighbours will think and so may try to disguise the fact the death was suicide. Still others, will experience feelings of *anger*, at the doctor, police or even the deceased for causing them to go through this trial. These are natural feelings and must be allowed to be expressed even if they are incorrect.

Encourage those grieving to understand that every person is ultimately responsible for the decisions they make - whether they be the right ones or not. Apart from being true, this nevertheless can sometimes relieve the pressure of guilt that they may experience.

Furthermore, nowhere in Scripture does it say that those who take their life, will not enter the Kingdom of God. "It's not that people want to take their life," so it has been said, "but that they found the pain of living more than what they could bear". Unfortunately, that is correct, unfortunately.

### **The Service**

Do work with the Funeral Director and the family involved in the bereavement period in deciding how this is to proceed. Occasionally, tensions between family members erupt over the content and order of the service and who will be involved, but normally a wise and low key approach by the pastor, resolves these conflicts.

Many prayer books and orders of service are available in planning the service. Use them as necessary and take the opportunity to bring comfort and share the Gospel.

At the conclusion of the burial or cremation service a 'Burial Certificate' must be signed. This comes from the Department of Justice (if in New Zealand), and it is to signify that you have witnessed the burial of the body. If a pastor does not sign this, then two other witnesses must do so. Although the pastor does not always view the body, he signs it nevertheless on the honesty of the Funeral Director.

### **Follow up**

At the time of the bereavement and the funeral service, the activity of the occasion normally keeps the bereaved busy. However, 3 weeks later, the pain of loneliness can become almost unbearable. It is important therefore, that the pastor follows through during

this stage.

Some people, after a period of time find it embarrassing to talk about the deceased, which is unfortunate, as this is the time the bereaved need to do just that. Let them air their feelings and any guilt that they might have and again pray with them and share appropriate Scripture. Apart from a regular visit over a period of time, it is particularly useful to visit them 12 months later. This is a particularly difficult time for them and many will have mixed emotions. Some will even not want to discuss their loved one's death as the pain is still too great. Bear with that.

It will normally take up to two years before life will return to some sort of normality again. Even then, they will not have returned to their old selves but they will have grown and matured in their experience of life.

Most people should be discouraged for a year from making significant decisions in life, such as moving house or moving out of the town, as sometimes these decisions are blurred by disturbed emotions. Time is a great healer, especially for people with a vital Christian faith.