

Memorial Services: A Brief Guide

After the death of a family member, friend or colleague, it may seem appropriate to have a service celebrating that person's life and work – a memorial service, or, as it is sometimes termed, a service of thanksgiving. In planning a memorial service, you need to decide first whether a *formal* service would be more suitable than an *informal* one. The University Church provides a suitable setting for a more formal memorial service, but the clergy will always be happy to help you with the planning of a more informal service.

A memorial service in church is a religious ceremony and the content will reflect that, with certain aspects being determined by Anglican practice and custom. While the service will include a reading from the Christian scriptures and prayers (including the Lord's Prayer), the overall shape can be adjusted to allow the participation of members of the congregation, with eulogies, tributes, the sharing of memories, non-biblical readings, and instrumental music, as well as the usual hymns, psalms, readings and choral music. The shape and style depends very much on the person whose life is being commemorated, their tastes, interests and concerns. The clergy will help you to create an appropriate service.

It will often begin in a way that expresses the loss experienced through the person's death but it will end in a joyful and hopeful way. The service begins with a bidding, a paragraph leading to a prayer, which states succinctly why we are present, beginning "We are here today to give thanks for the life of *N.*" The officiant will ask you to assist in preparing this.

When the memorial service is separated from the funeral service by a matter of a few months and the funeral itself was private or people were unable to attend for other reasons, the beginning may be rather sombre, using funeral music, prayers and readings. This can lead to a transitional hymn and then one or more addresses, readings, and choral or instrumental music.

It is unlikely that you will want the service to exceed 45 -50 minutes in duration and this will determine the number and length of the addresses. A person's life sometimes divides neatly into two or three periods of time (e.g. university, working life, retirement pursuits) or aspects of living (e.g. work, family, public life) and these divisions may suggest both topics and speakers. The maximum length of an address (if there are two or three) should be six minutes (600 words). A single address should be no longer than eleven minutes (1,100 words). There should be no more than a total of three addresses.

Members of the family often want to speak or to read poetry or some favourite text. It is an emotionally demanding experience and should only be undertaken by those confident that they will manage it.

St Mary's has a strong choral tradition and an excellent professional choir. The readings, hymns and music are chosen in consultation with the minister who will officiate and the Director of Music as appropriate. Hymns often include 'The Lord's my shepherd', 'The King of Love my shepherd is', 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven', 'Guide me, O Thou Great Redeemer', 'Who would true valour see', or 'Lord of all hopefulness'.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who can officiate at the service?

Clergy other than those on the staff at St Mary's are welcome to participate in the service with the agreement of the Vicar. However, the service will always be led by a member of staff at St Mary's and the service must be planned with the Revd Dr William Lamb, the Vicar of St Mary's, from the outset.

Occasionally, one of the University's Colleges will request the use of St Mary's for a Memorial Service. The request should always come from the Head of House or the Chaplain. In such cases, the Chaplain will officiate at the service and the Vicar of St Mary's will give the blessing at the end.

How many people does the church hold?

Services may take place in either the Chancel or the Nave. The capacity of the Chancel is 80. The capacity of the Nave is 400. With COVID restrictions, the capacity is 120. Seating areas can be reserved for the family and close friends. We usually recommend that four ushers who know the family are appointed to be on duty half an hour before the service is due to begin. Their task is to welcome people and hand out Orders of Service.

Can a Book of Remembrance be organized?

It is possible to place a book in the De Brome Chapel for people to sign to indicate their attendance at the Memorial Service.

Can recorded music be played?

A sound amplification service is available but there are no facilities for playing CDs or other recordings. All arrangements for music must be made with the Director of Music and the Organist in the first instance. Colleges are welcome to bring their own choir to sing and their own Director of Music. Our Organist will usually play the organ.

Does there have to be a collection?

There can be a collection during or after the service to support any designated charity.

How much will the service cost?

The cost of the service will depend upon the musical resources used but, with a choir of four, organist and director of music, it is generally in the region of £1,000.

Is it possible to organize flowers?

Flowers may be put in the church for the service. Please liaise with the Church Office about your requirements in the first instance. Flowers are normally left as a gift to the church.

Is it possible to organize refreshments after the service?

It is sometimes possible to organize refreshments in the De Brome Chapel or the Old Library following the service. However, only our accredited suppliers may provide catering and refreshments within the University Church.

Further Information

Please contact the Church Office: 01865 279111 or admin@universitychurch.ox.ac.uk