

Children and Funerals

A reflection on practice by Silvia and Chris Purdie

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One of the great privileges of pastoral ministry is working with people at both ends of life; often both at the same time. Helping children to participate in processes around death is for me a high priority, which will look different in every family situation. In Western societies we used to try to protect children from death, but we've learned the hard way that this prolongs and complicates grief. We have learned much from the Maori approach to death, which includes children at every stage.

This resource includes ministry experience and suggestions from my own practice and that of my husband Chris who is an Army Chaplain.

In the funeral

Funerals are inter-generational worship events. There are almost always children present in funerals. Churches need to be prepared for children, and celebrants need to attend to children, so that it is a good experience for them.

Ask beforehand

In the funeral preparation, ask about children who will be coming; their ages and relationship to the deceased. Find out what children called the deceased (Nana? Uncle Ernie?). Ask about special needs (e.g. allergies). Invite children to participate as they feel comfortable.

Good old Clipboards

Every church needs a stack of clipboards, refreshed with blank paper (don't have worksheets or colouring in for funerals – let kids draw and respond to what they're there for). And pots or pencilcases of felt pens (forget the old crayons & busted coloured pencils, just keep buying decent quality felts). Give children the opportunity to place what they draw on the casket at the end of the service (or to take their drawings home).

Pipe cleaners

An excellent activity for children sitting in pews is playing with pipe cleaners. They're cheap (get the soft, coloured ones), instantly attractive, and allow for heaps of creativity. They're easy to hand out (give each child about 5) and don't make a mess.

Space for kids to move

Those looking after babies need to be about to get to the door. Toddlers need somewhere they can go (preferably in the church) where they can play. Kids space needs toys that are: quiet, safe, tidy & attractive. I recommend clear plastic boxes:

- toy cars
- plastic animals
- soft toys
- duplo

As well as books of course.

Support appropriate participation

Children don't want to be up-front at funerals. A funeral is a time to sit with very difficult emotions and feel surrounded by people who love you and to feel the presence of God. It is not a performance. Standing up in front of strangers is unlikely to be a good idea. However, children do need to feel valued. They might like to come up and hold the hand with someone who is speaking. They might like to bring a special toy or drawing to give to the deceased.

The best way to ensure children feel included is generally to acknowledge them from the front by name, together with their family, and to tell them how much they meant to the deceased.

Give kids jobs to do

Older children & young people often respond well to being asked to help. Get them to carry out photographs at the end of the service. They can hold a basket of flowers for people to place in the car on the casket.

Honour special intergenerational relationships

In one recent funeral we presented a medal of bravery to the deceased's granddaughter (an old coin with a hole drilled in it, put on a lanyard). The girl had been on her own with her grandmother when she had a heart attack, and she responded immediately carrying out the plan they'd already agreed, going next door and calling the ambulance. She was very proud of her medal and it will give her something tangible to remember her grandma. Funerals are a place for naming strengths and values, as well as the pain.

Connect with kids who aren't there

Set up a Skype link with families far away. Last week we had a grandson live on the laptop, with his mother, tucked up in bed in England at 1am. As people spoke through the service they waved and talked to him, and he asked questions and chatted back.

Take photos

Suggest that families take a photo of the casket and the church before the service, and include any children in that if they want to be. We normally don't take photos at funerals, but some photographic record can be helpful for children in telling the story about it later and continuing to process the event afterwards.

Before the funeral

Chris as an Army Chaplain has dealt with traumatic deaths, particularly of young people. The NZ army has adopted the Maori cultural practice of fully embracing a family in grief, and resourcing the family to bring the body of the deceased home for the few days before the funeral. Chris has found this to be a wonderful process for involving children and dealing in the most healthy way possible with a sudden death.

Having the deceased at home is all-encompassing event. People come and go. Mattresses are brought in to the room (often the lounge) and people are with the deceased 24 hours a day. Grief is processed in a continual flow. The hands-on tangible nature of being around the dead body is confronting for those who have not experienced

this, but as the hours and days pass this is a deeply transformative experience and the best way to support healthy grieving.

In the at-home approach children are fully involved and surrounded by people who love them. To start with, kids will stand off and watch. Some kids see and recognise the dead person and are quite natural; “Oh, there’s grandma. Here’s my picture grandma so you can take it with you.” Some kids are quite matter-of-fact, and curious about the details of death.

When children visit a funeral directors to view a body they don’t have time to process it. They might get a quick look at the dead body, but it is a strange space and a strange experience. Having the body in the home for several days is completely different, giving children time to get used to it. Children learn by watching how other people deal with it; if they see adults sitting next to the body and talking to it they will learn to express what they are feeling freely and directly.

Chris talks about his role as Chaplain:

I do prayers morning and night with whoever is around. In a Maori context this would be like a normal evening prayer service, with a reading and a Psalm, maybe a few words, and a couple of songs. For children the times of prayer are a quiet time.

Decorate the casket

Chris describes two instances of an open casket where the children decorated the casket. In both the casket was painted plain white.

The one at home, the casket was lying in the lounge, and the lid of the casket was placed on the floor. As people came to pay respects the children would sit around the lid of the casket, and draw pictures with felt pens (vivid work well), and adults would also sign it to say goodbye. When the lid got filled up with drawings people started drawing on the casket itself. This was cool because they had an activity to do; some kids gravitated to the craft activity but were able to talk, and then as they became comfortable they would become curious and draw close to the body.

As everyone became more OK about it all, the children of the deceased sat longer beside the casket and started talking directly to the deceased, often drawing at the same time: “I’m drawing you a giraffe now daddy”. I found it very moving that the children became able to ‘chat’ with the deceased, expressing more and more during that time.

When the casket is in the home, my role as Padre is to hold that space in a spiritual way. With the children I modeled to them clear expectations; I lay on the floor beside the casket lid and got the felt pens out and said “This is for you to draw on, messages and things you want to say goodbye”. The lid sat there for a couple of days with an icecream container full of vivid. This provided a distraction and a safe focus. Adults then started to do it as well, so the casket itself became a big farewell card.

Open casket at the church

For another funeral we decided to get the children to decorate the lid of the casket in the church before the funeral. The family gathered about an hour before the big public funeral, took the lid off the casket and got the children drawing on it while the family had a short prayer service. Then the lid was placed on the casket for the more formal funeral.