

Choosing Speakers for a Funeral or Memorial Service

What makes a funeral service memorable? Most often, it's the words that are spoken and the special people who say them. So when you gather with family members to plan a ceremony to help you celebrate the life of a loved one, it's wise to choose your speakers with care.

There are several speaking roles to think about. Choosing the right person for each of these roles is important :

Ceremony Leader

You will need one person to take charge and oversee the ceremony. This person is responsible for starting and finishing the service, performing official duties within the ceremony, and coordinating all the activities in between. This person is called the officiant.

If your loved one was involved in a religion, the clergy from his or her church may be the logical choice. If the person who died (the deceased) was not a member of a specific church, you can invite clergy from another church or an officiant with no church connection to perform a religious ceremony.

Most clergy will follow an order of service dictated by their religious rules. This typically includes prayers, readings and blessings for the deceased and saddened family members.

If a non-religious ceremony seems right, or family members are having trouble choosing the clergy, a professional funeral celebrant may be the solution. A celebrant will work with you to design a fully customized ceremony that can meet a variety of needs.

Your funeral director can help arrange for an officiant.

Guest Speaker or Eulogist

Another important choice is the person or people who will write and deliver a speech – a eulogy – about the life of the person who has died. The speech is ideally given by someone who knew the person well enough to gather and share memories and highlights of his/her life.

Sometimes the choice is obvious within the family. There is often one person who seems to be the unofficial family spokesperson. In other cases, the family needs to look further to find the right person to have the honor. Another family member, a lifelong friend or a trusted co-worker might have the perfect combination for the job – a deep knowledge of the person who died and good writing and public speaking abilities. In some cases, the officiant, who may be a priest, minister, or professional celebrant, will give the eulogy.

Many families choose to have more than one speaker to cover different aspects of their loved ones' life. One way to do this is to follow the main eulogy with a couple of shorter presentations; perhaps a grandson reading a letter or a daughter reading Mom's favorite poem. In all, no more than 30 minutes should be planned for the Eulogy part of the service.

One last word of advice about eulogies: keep in mind that even though a family member may wish to speak at the funeral to help with the healing process, he or she may be too emotionally distressed to speak when the time comes. It's a good idea to have another speaker ready to step in and finish the speech if necessary.

Reader(s)

Many services include readings from the Bible or other sacred texts. These may be read by clergy or other guests. When planning the service, ask the clergy or celebrant whether guest readers are required or allowed. This could be a welcome honor for a family member or close friend who is not up to the task of writing or presenting a long speech. If you have guest readers, make sure they have the verses ahead of time in order to practice and double check any tricky words.

Open Microphone

It has become popular to "open the floor" to allow guests to share additional memories with the group. While this practice can provide more information about the life of the deceased and create a deeper feeling of community, it's not without some risk. Clear time limits should be set and respected. The ceremony leader must be prepared to politely guide participants who speak too long, or the ceremony can start to drag.

Final Words

There are formal and informal rules, rites and traditions involved in almost any funeral or memorial ceremony. Especially if your service occurs in a place of worship, there will be guidelines to respect. Make sure you meet with the selected officiant ahead of time so you understand what to expect and have a chance to discuss any special requests.

Most important, remember whose life you are celebrating. Their stated wishes, or your understanding of what they would prefer, should always guide your decisions.