
Interchurch Families

TWO CHURCHES – ONE FUNERAL

Decisions about funerals have to be made when we are at our most vulnerable. We have just lost someone we greatly love and we are likely to be in a state of great shock. It is of special importance for interchurch couples to discuss freely their own personal feelings about bereavement and funerals, so that when the day comes for arrangements to be made a plan can be acted upon which they have long ago agreed on jointly.

It may be helpful for interchurch families first to read about the decisions and the experiences, both happy and less so, of others before trying to think about their own situation. All are true stories, but names have been changed to protect identities.

Felicity and Frank

Felicity and Frank had been married for many years when Frank died in 1990. In the past there had not been a great deal of co-operation between their local churches, and they often felt frustrated. Yet Frank's funeral was an occasion of hope for Felicity. Her Methodist minister took the service, their son read the lesson, and Frank's Roman Catholic priest took the committal at the graveside in the local cemetery. Because Felicity had had to be married in Frank's church, it was his wish that he should be buried from Felicity's chapel and that their graves should eventually be side by side. It was his way of redressing the balance, and Felicity found this arrangement, which they had agreed together, very comforting. She felt that at long last they had together achieved something.

Emily and Edward

Emily's husband Edward died unexpectedly aged 57. They had never discussed funerals and Edward had only occasionally attended services in her local Roman Catholic church, usually when their children were involved. He regularly received communion at weekday services in an Anglican church near his place of work.

When Edward died, his sons asked the vicar of the church where he had worshipped during the week to conduct the funeral at the Anglican church nearest the family home. Emily's Roman Catholic priest was present at the funeral as one of the congregation, and most of the small group with whom Edward had worshipped during the week came over to the service. There were present some members of the regular Anglican congregation and of Emily's Roman Catholic church, besides relatives and friends (some agnostic) – Emily says that she found it very comforting to be surrounded by so many people of all traditions or none. The Anglican priest conducting Edward's funeral was unwilling to offer communion to Roman Catholics, so there was no eucharist. Emily's priest made a special point of speaking about Edward at the Sunday mass, calling him "a good man" and "an example to us all" – despite earlier difficult discussions between them – and he was very kind and caring to Emily.

Edward was buried in the Anglican churchyard, and Emily will eventually be buried in the same grave, though understandably she has asked for the rites of the Roman Catholic church, with a requiem mass before the interment. Edward's name is already entered in the Book of Remembrance at Emily's church.



'You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian Unity.' *Pope John Paul II, York, 1982*

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Andrea and Adam

When a diagnosis showed that Andrea's husband Adam had a very serious illness, the news came at a time when his own United Reformed church was in process of calling a new minister. Andrea told her Roman Catholic priest about Adam's illness and he at once responded by offering himself as Adam's minister during this period. Two or three times a week he visited Adam and Andrea and held a simple and beautiful service with them in their home, giving them communion together, and he was with Adam the day he died. It followed naturally that Adam's funeral should be conducted in the United Reformed church with both a United Reformed minister and Andrea's priest taking part.

Gwen and Gerald

Gwen chose the hymns and readings for her husband Gerald's funeral, but her wish to receive communion, along with other Anglican members of the family, at the requiem mass, although discussed by Gerald's Roman Catholic priest with her Anglican vicar, was not granted. She had suggested that her vicar should take an active part in the mass and bring the family the reserved sacrament, but at the time (1988) he did not feel able to ask his bishop's permission to do this. However, he with a number of members of the Anglican congregation attended the requiem, as did the local Baptist pastor (there was no minister at the Baptist church then). Gwen's and Gerald's son suggested that the family should ask for a blessing at the requiem and this was given to them – the first time such a thing had happened. Since then Gwen has been able to receive a blessing whenever she has attended mass.

Gerald's ashes were buried in the Garden of Remembrance at the Anglican church, so it was the Anglican priest who said the words of committal.

Monica and Michael

Monica has had experience of several funerals among interchurch families. She believes that as it is the living who are taking part in the funeral, they deserve a say in what happens, so we should beware of hedging the arrangements about with conditions. She recommends at least one good cheerful hymn, and sees hymns as "a great bond in common" between the various traditions. She says, "My husband hated funerals, so we never discussed them." For Michael's funeral she chose "Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven", to which she had walked up the aisle at their wedding, and "The Lord's my shepherd", which pleased everyone. He is buried in the local cemetery; in November, when there is a Catholic procession to the cemetery, her husband's grave is also blessed.

Paul and Petra

Paul and Petra were eagerly looking forward to the birth of their first child when Petra learned that there was no trace of the baby's heartbeat. Shortly afterwards she had a miscarriage. At this sad and difficult time they were fortunate in receiving tremendous support from those around them, especially from a Roman Catholic university chaplain who was already a friend. He came to their home and combined the Catholic rite of blessing of parents after a miscarriage with a celebration of the eucharist for them both – "a beautiful way of acknowledging that our child was now with God".

Melissa and Martin

When Martin was suddenly taken into hospital, neither he nor his wife Melissa realised that diagnosis would reveal a very advanced cancer, nor that he would not come home again. They had been married for 35 years and had lived in the same town for the last 20 of these.

Fewer than twelve months before his death, Martin had been ordained an Anglican priest. He had long been active in his local council of churches and was its president at the time he was taken ill, so he was well known in the various churches in the town. He and Melissa discussed his funeral arrangements, and Martin insisted that it should be as ecumenical as possible, with as much "from the Roman

Catholic side” as could be allowed, for the sake of others who would find themselves in the same situation one day.

When the time came, Martin’s coffin was taken the night before the funeral to the Roman Catholic church, where the mass of the Resurrection was celebrated (using the Peruvian gloria he loved and quiet Taizé chants which had sustained him in hospital). The gospel was read by Martin’s Anglican vicar, and the homily given by Melissa’s Roman Catholic parish priest who reminded the “mixed” congregation that other Christians would be welcome to come up to receive a blessing at communion time. This was a cause of sadness for Melissa, as Martin’s dream and hope had been that all could share communion on this occasion, yet the way it happened was moving. At the end, everyone was invited to file past the coffin and bless it, using holy water or not, as wished – a custom from Melissa’s French background.

Martin had understood Melissa’s need for a mass in her Roman Catholic church, where they had both regularly worshipped and, for later on, the memory of his coffin there. The coffin lay in the church overnight and then was taken to Martin’s own Anglican church the following morning.

At the funeral service, the Baptist minister offered prayers, and the newly elected president of the council of churches (a Roman Catholic) and the Methodist minister read the lessons. A lady from the Evangelical Church later told Melissa, “Heaven will be like this – a crowd from various churches, but all singing together *Thine be the glory ...*” Again the coffin was blessed, everyone touching a cross much loved by Martin and being handed, by the Salvation Army captain, a little prayer card with some of Martin’s last words of trust in God. The same card had been given out in the Roman Catholic church, too.

By Martin’s express wish there was an Anglican eucharist, for family members only, at the crematorium it was celebrated on his coffin (Melissa’s wish) and the next day his ashes were quietly placed under the church which he had served.

Melissa writes: “One sure bonus is *two* caring communities for the one left behind, not just one ...”

James and Judith

James and Judith are in their mid sixties. They have no children. They have talked a little about funeral arrangements and both have chosen cremation rather than burial. Each hopes that the surviving partner will be able to arrange for a simple and dignified funeral service, without a eucharist or requiem, conducted by a sympathetic priest. Judith would like the congregation to sing William Williams’s splendid hymn, “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”, which was sung at their wedding, but does not want to impose restrictions on anyone. They have gone no further than this at the time of writing.

Aidan and Annette

Aidan had always had good health, so it was a great shock to both him and Annette, his wife, when he developed “deep” jaundice and this turned out to be masking an aggressive and fast-moving cancer. The illness took hold so quickly that there was no time for any discussion and within weeks Annette found herself having to make funeral arrangements based on much earlier conversations and on what she remembered of Aidan’s comments on funerals they had attended together.

Each had long ago told the other that there should be no requiem mass or eucharist (which they felt would be divisive) as part of the funeral, and each hoped that the surviving partner would be able to arrange a simple and dignified service. It was a help to Annette that Aidan came from a Church of England background, though he himself had become a Roman Catholic as a young man. Fortunately, when she came to talk to Aidan’s parish priest, they were able to turn to the book *An Order of Christian Funerals* (1991), which is approved by the Catholic bishops of England and Wales and makes provision for a funeral liturgy outside mass “for pastoral reasons” (among others).

The idea of a funeral without a mass was so unusual that Aidan's parish priest felt it necessary to reassure his parishioners in his weekly newsletter that it really was an approved form of service. He co-operated fully with Annette in choosing prayers which seemed most fitting for Aidan; Annette preferred those which had echoes of Biblical language, and as the coffin was to be received into the church only at the time of the funeral she suggested that it might be brought in during the saying of sentences of Scripture, in the Anglican manner (and was invited to choose the sentences she preferred).

Annette asked if in place of an Old Testament reading a friend might read the account from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* of the death of Mr Valiant-for-Truth which ends "And all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." For the New Testament reading she chose the "many mansions" passage from St John's gospel (14:1-6). And she asked for two well-known hymns, "Guide me, O thou great Redeemer" and "Love divine, all loves excelling", to be sung during the service. However, the funeral liturgy outside mass lays special emphasis on the "Song of Farewell" which comes at the end of the service, and Annette decided on the modern hymn based on Isaiah 55:12, "You shall go out with joy", so that the moment when the coffin left the church for the crematorium would be one of hope rather than of continuing sadness. (Many people commented on this choice after the service and seemed to approve of it. The idea that "the trees of the field shall clap their hands" was also particularly appropriate for Aidan, a lover of nature and a landscape painter.)

As the funeral took place in Aidan's church, naturally his parish priest presided, but Annette's Anglican vicar, the curate from the Catholic church, and Canon Martin Reardon (co-chair of the Association of Interchurch Families, who had known Aidan and Annette for more than twenty years and who gave a moving and uplifting address) followed the coffin into the church saying the sentences together, and Annette's vicar led the intercessions. At the point when the coffin was about to be removed, Aidan's parish priest invited the other clergy to join him in giving a blessing. This generous gesture helped to emphasise the ecumenical nature of the occasion.

The short service of committal at the crematorium also followed the outline given in *An Order of Christian Funerals* (there is special provision for a committal when a funeral liturgy has immediately preceded it). Although there is a point in the service for a hymn, Annette felt that this could be left out as three hymns had been sung at the church and there were likely to be only a few people at the crematorium. So the final act of farewell was kept very short and simple. Annette felt that she had done her best to fulfil Aidan's wishes, and that she had been given great support by members of their two parishes and by their many friends of all denominations and none.