

MAIDSTONE INTER-FAITH NETWORK

BEREAVEMENT

**A SUMMARY OF KEY PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES
FROM DIFFERENT FAITH PERSPECTIVES**

APRIL 2021

Note: This information is a summary and is not exhaustive – readers should enquire further to obtain more detailed advice and guidance where required. Each statement has been prepared by individual members of the Maidstone Inter-Faith Network. More information about the network can be found at www.mifn.org.uk.

1 ISLAM - prepared by Nicky Younosi

Muslims believe that death is a surety. All will die except God. To Him we belong and to him we will return. Our time is written and nothing can change that. Death needs an excuse, so one says a person died of age, illness or an accident. A Muslim does not say, "if this were so the person would not have died". When our time is up, our time is up. Muslims believe that life, death, suffering and joy are derived from God and God, only God, gives us the strength and patience to endure and survive. Death of a loved one is accepted as God's Will and a Muslim bows his head and accepts.

The funeral takes place as soon as possible, usually on the same day or within twenty four hours. Under exceptional circumstances e.g. an immediate family member is travelling to attend the last rites, the funeral may be delayed, but not for too long. A Muslim must be buried, never cremated. Sea burials are permitted.

Grieving may never really or fully end and the mourning period is three days, when special prayers are offered. Special prayers are offered for forty days after which widows come out of seclusion. Special prayers will be offered on the first anniversary of death.

The period of mourning is one of devotion and receiving visitors for condolence. When a person dies or at the news of a death, Muslims say, "to God we belong and to God we return".

Support is not sought outside the family and close circle of friends. In fact it is not sought at all as it is already there, very generously provided.

2 JUDAISM - prepared by Anne Goldstein

The Jewish practice of burying the deceased very soon after death, often within 24 hours, means the mourner has to act at speed to get arrangements in place. Most members of synagogues belong to a burial society that helps with this. As well as their family, the bereaved are supported by their rabbi, their synagogue and their community. Jewish people say that a sorrow shared is a sorrow halved.

While Orthodox and Reform Jews do not accept cremation, the Liberal Jewish community allows this. Clear stages of mourning support the bereaved through the time that follows. After a funeral, the emphasis in Jewish tradition moves from honouring the dead to supporting the mourner and affirming the continuity of life. Customs vary with the level of observance of the mourners and not every Jewish people follows all these. It is usual to light a memorial candle when the bereaved person returns from a funeral. Some will eat a mourners' meal of consolation, which include hard-boiled egg. This is a symbol of the cycle of life.

A seven day period of mourning at home begins on the day of the funeral, known as shiva (seven). Visitors come to give comfort and bring food to the mourners, who sit on low chairs, reflecting their low spirits. It is not the Jewish custom to send flowers. A letter of sympathy is valued, or a donation to an appropriate charity. The Mourner's Kaddish prayer is said each evening during a service at home. This is a statement of faith in God and a hope for peace. A tribute to the deceased is given and visitors wish the mourners the traditional 'long life'. Synagogues aid bereaved people who do not have family to support them and rabbis respond to burial requests from non-members of their congregation.

The next stage of mourning is the thirty days of sheloshim (thirty). While the bereaved person goes back to work, cooks and does housework, Jewish tradition recognises that life has changed. Mourners will not attend celebratory events, such as parties and concerts, during this time. For people who have lost a parent, the mourning period continues for a year. The Kaddish prayer is recited daily.

A stone-setting ceremony or consecration, from between nine to eleven months after the death, is held at the burial ground. Flowers are not used in a Jewish cemetery, but it is a custom to leave a stone on top of the grave when you have visited.

Rabbis are trained in giving support through bereavement. Synagogues also have volunteers who are responsible for welfare. They help members by keeping in regular contact, phoning the mourner on the Hebrew date of their bereavement (yahrzeit) and reminding them to light a memorial candle. Synagogues also read out the name of the deceased during the service and the bereaved may be asked if they would like to read from the Torah to honour the memory of their loved one.

There are three ascending levels of mourning: with tears – that is the lowest. With silence – that is higher. And with a song – that is the highest. A Hassidic Jewish teaching

3 CHRISTIAN SCIENCE - prepared by Elinor Hutchison

Christian Scientists are likely to turn to God first and foremost when dealing with any challenge and this would also include a bereavement. They believe in a loving God who cares for all his children and is always there for them. Most Christian Scientists would turn for comfort to the inspirational writings of the Bible and to the works of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder and discoverer of Christian Science.

Church members may be asked to pray for the bereaved person. Loving support could be given by any church member as requested. While bereavement is often very distressing and hard to deal with Christian Scientists have the hope that grief can give way to the gentle, irresistible comfort we gain through our understanding of our unity with God, His infinite love and His unfailing care for all of us and the Biblical promise of the eternity of Life. A deeper understanding of this can give such comfort to the one "left behind".

If needed the recently bereaved may decide to contact a Christian Science Practitioner for further support. A Christian Science Practitioner is someone who is in the full time practice of Christian Science healing. They offer comforting prayerful support as well as answering questions or offering deeper spiritual insights as needed.

Each church has a Care Committee which is made up of a number of selected members. Their role is to offer confidential practical as well spiritual help as needed and they will often offer this to a bereaved member.

Christian Scientists are free of course to contact any other external agencies if they feel the need to do so.

"Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." The Bible, Matthew 5.

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Church email: csmaidstone@gmail.com Website: www.csmaidstone.co.uk

4 METHODIST (Christian) - prepared by Bonni-Belle Pickard

Methodist churches are known for the ‘pastoral care’ of our congregations, so the time of bereavement is one in which we try especially be aware of pastoral needs of the family. In multi-cultural Britain, this can range from sending cards and making phone calls to providing meals and going to sit with family members in the days after the bereavement; the care can and is provided by lay members of the congregation as well as the minister.

A funeral and/or Service of Thanksgiving is usually performed by the minister of the church in close consultation with the family. The funeral service will include prayers, scripture readings, and hymns as well as the formal Commendation and Committal (of the deceased into God’s care) and usually takes place at the crematorium/cemetery. The Service of Thanksgiving will often take place at the church, either before or after the funeral. During that service, family members and friends often give tributes to the deceased and celebrate the life they and the congregation shared together. A tea with a spread of cakes and sandwiches often follows in the church hall with photos of the deceased sparking conversations and about shared memories.

The bodies of most deceased Christians in contemporary Britain are cremated, though burials are still performed when and where burial plots are available to the family. Following cremation, some Christians choose to scatter the ashes of their deceased members in a place of significance to the deceased; there are prayers available for such services.

Each year near the beginning of November, many churches will offer ‘Remembering’ or ‘Bereavement’ or ‘All Souls’ services during which they especially remember those of the congregation/community which have died over the past year. The service often includes lighting of candles, prayers, and hymns – and is followed by cake and coffee. This service is usually a week before the national Remembrance Day services in which the larger national memory is directed back especially to those who died during times of war and conflict.

5 BAHÁ'Í - prepared by David Grant

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion. The fundamental principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, are the Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religion and the Oneness of Humankind. Bahá'u'lláh taught that divine revelation is a continuous and progressive process and that the missions of the Messengers of God represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.

The purpose of human life for Bahá'ís is to know and love God, to acquire virtues and spiritual qualities, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation. Bahá'ís view life in this world as a preparation for life in the next world. The soul comes into existence at conception and is immortal. Bahá'í teachings describe life and death as parts of an eternal process of growth. In this world and after death an individual's soul develops and evolves as it draws nearer to God. Heaven is described as nearness to God; hell is separation from God. The soul is not reborn in a different body. Bahá'u'lláh said that death is reunion with God.

The anguish of earthly separation from a loved one may be assuaged by a dignified funeral conducted in a spiritual atmosphere which combines respect for the dead person with the awareness of the richer and wider experience that the soul is now enjoying. Bahá'í funerals often include prayers, writings and music but there is no set format – this is a matter for the family of the deceased to decide. Given that the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy, the funeral would usually be hosted by a member of the nearest Local Spiritual Assembly, a local Bahá'í or a member of the deceased's family. Essentially, there are only three requirements for a Bahá'í funeral:

- the body must be buried (not cremated)
- the burial must take place within one hour's journey from the place of death
- the 'Prayer for the Dead' should be said before the interment
<https://www.bahaiprayers.org/depart1.htm>

When someone passes, family and friends will provide support as necessary – there are no formalities or rituals associated with the period after a person's passing. In some cases a memorial service may be held to remember and celebrate the person's life. Should additional help be required to support the family, this can be accessed via the pastoral care team at the Offices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the UK. Bahá'ís may also access any reputable support agency that can provide help (e.g. CRUSE - <https://www.ataloss.org>). The nature and type of support provided will depend on individual circumstances.

More information about bereavement, preparation of the body prior to interment and funerals can be obtained from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the UK, 27 Rutland Gate, London SW7 1PD Tel: 020 7584 2566 www.bahai.org.uk

6 BUDDHISM - prepared by Pam Warner

Funeral rites vary in Buddhism due to the different cultures where Buddhism has taken root. In southern Asia Buddhist funerals are held in temples and led by *bhikkhus* (male monks) who chant prayers and give blessings to the deceased and their family. The burial or cremation is performed quite soon after the person has died due to the hot climate.

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there is a belief that the consciousness of the deceased is held in a *bardo* – a state of existence intermediate between two lives on earth, which lasts for 49 days. The belief is that after death and before one's next birth, when one's consciousness is not connected with a physical body, one experiences a variety of phenomena which will lead to another birth. Family, friends and the monastic community will sit and quietly chant for the deceased person to have a fortunate rebirth. In the plateau of Tibet they would have a 'sky burial', which is when a person, skilled in cutting up a human body, lays the body parts high in the mountains for the birds and animals to consume. This act is symbolic of the elemental nature of our bodies made of earth, water, fire and air, and returning them back to nature.

In western traditions, if possible or in a monastery, the body is displayed in an open casket with an image of the deceased and an image of the Buddha nearby. Mourners may also lay candles, fruit, flowers and incense around the body. They also meditate and chant verses on universal loving-kindness (*mettā*), rejoice in the deceased's good qualities and talk about the person's life. After the ceremony, the deceased is either buried or cremated. Some families like to incorporate Christian or Jewish elements. Buddhists generally favour cremation, but embalming is allowed as well: families choose according to their personal preference. In the West, there is no rule governing when the burial or cremation takes place, and organ donation is not prohibited.

Rebirth is a key teaching in Buddhism: it is dependent upon actions of multiple previous lives including the last life of the deceased. As a general rule of thumb, kindness, compassion, generosity and other skilful acts lead to a favourable rebirth. Hatred, ill-will, stinginess, sexual misconduct and other unskilful acts lead to an unfavourable rebirth. The whole process of rebirth is very complicated, and one cannot judge a person for having a disability or being disadvantaged as there are many other causes and conditions for birth to take place. This is important to understand. Another important part of Buddhist practice in everyday life is to contemplate our own mortality and that of all sentient life. Encompassing impermanence and change allows us to embrace life in its fullest, appreciating each moment as it could be our last.

7 THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND (Christian) – prepared by Ruth Bierbaum

As with all Christian denominations, for practicing Anglicans, (that is, those who describe themselves as “Church of England”), death is not the end. We believe that Jesus Christ has conquered death in his resurrection, and that we will, at the last, share in his victory. Thus, although death can be undeniably painful, belief in Biblical promises of eternal life bring comfort.

The whole of Britain is divided into areas known as Anglican parishes. Because the Church of England is the “Established Church”, everyone has the right to request support from their local parish church, at any time, but in particular, when someone is dying. Often the local parish priest or (if in hospital) a chaplain is called. Typical prayers such as *Psalm 23* (The Lord is my shepherd) and *The Lord’s Prayer* may be said. Some Anglicans request a formal Confession, Holy Communion and/or anointing with blessed oil. As the Church of England is a very broad church, the religious elements of end of life care will vary greatly from person to person, and most Anglicans are not worried about receiving this sort of ministry from a cleric from a different Christian denomination.

There is no set time-period within which the funeral needs to take place, and no dictum as to whether the body needs to be buried or cremated. As everyone in this country lives in a parish, everyone has the right to ask the priest of that parish take their funeral and (if the churchyard is still open) be buried there. Others who can be buried in a Church of England graveyard which is outside of their own parish, are members of that particular church, and those who have a member of their immediate family already buried in the churchyard. In addition, sometimes people who live outside a parish but who have a strong connection with it, make funeral preparations by seeking written permission from the parish (via the Priest-in-charge) to be buried there. Church of England funerals seek to remember the deceased in the context of God’s love. The soul of the deceased is commended to God’s care and the body (or ashes) committed to the ground. Funerals are often highly personalised with tributes, poems and congregational singing and other music. Sometimes a memorial service will take place separately, depending on the wishes of the next of kin.

Parish clergy are often very involved in on-going pastoral support of the bereaved. In addition many Anglican churches have dedicated bereavement teams and/or pastoral assistants. These will be trained voluntary lay-workers who will seek to offer pastoral support to the bereaved for as long as it is desired. The emphasis on the visits is on being alongside the person in their grief and offering a compassionate listening ear. There is no set period of mourning. Many Anglican churches hold services on or near All Saints Day (1st November) to remember those who have died in the parish, and specifically name those who have died in the past two years. Bereaved families are invited and there is often a ritual of lighting candles. Some Anglican churches will pray for the dead. Most will rather focus on giving thanks for their lives and praying for the bereaved.