

What May Happen at Protestant Rituals of Mourning



Autism & Grief Project

Protestant Christian rituals will vary widely, depending on the denomination of the church (Baptist, Methodist, non-denominational, African Methodist Episcopal, etc.), the wishes of the individual and family, and customs that vary by ethnicity and geographic region. Many Protestant clergy work closely with the family to plan a funeral or memorial service, so even in the same church or denomination services may not follow the same pattern. This guide describes what may take place at a wake, funeral, or burial service.

Wake

- There may or may not be a wake, which is a time to pay respects to the person who has died and their family before the funeral or memorial service.
- The wake may be held at a funeral home or (more rarely) in a family's home. It often takes place during one or two afternoons or evenings.
- The deceased person's body will lie in a casket at the front of the room. The casket may or may not be open, typically depending on the wishes of the family.
- Visitors may approach the casket to pay their respects to the person who has died. Sometimes people touch the body. Sometimes people talk to the deceased. These are all ways of communicating their love for the person.
- There may be photos of the person who died and flowers around the room sent by people wishing to pay their respects. The family may stand in a line near the casket or another part of the room to accept condolences.
- There will usually be a book for visitors to sign. The book is given to the family.
- It may be that many people will attend the wake to express their sadness, share memories, and communicate their condolences to the family.
- It is also possible for family members to arrange private times at the funeral home without visitors, either before or after official visiting hours.
- Sometimes during the wake people take a break and go into the lobby of the funeral home or outside for a short walk before returning to the wake.

Funeral and Memorial Services

- The funeral service may be held at a church, funeral home, or cemetery.
- A service that is held after someone already has been cremated or buried is called a memorial service. Earlier there may have been a short burial service at the cemetery for family and close friends.
- Funerals and memorial services last about an hour. The service will often include prayers, music (sometimes specially selected music), Bible readings, and a sermon, with or without a eulogy (a talk about the person who has died and their life) by a family member or friend. Sometimes the sermon and eulogy are combined. Sometimes people plan their own funeral services before they die or select the scripture readings and songs that will be used.
- In some Protestant traditions, there is a great deal of congregational singing. The service itself may be called “A Celebration of Life.”
- The casket is closed during a funeral service. Photos of the person who died, flowers, and/or other items special to the individual and family may be placed around the casket.
- Communion is usually not part of a Protestant funeral service.
- Sometimes there is a receiving line outside the church where participants can greet the family and offer condolences after the service. There also may be a reception in the church after a memorial service.
- A hearse (a black vehicle that carries the casket) will bring the body from the funeral home to the church or cemetery. Family members may ride in cars that follow the hearse, or they may meet the hearse at the church or cemetery.

Burial Service

- A burial ritual may take place after a funeral, or before or after a memorial service. Sometimes it is an event only for family and close friends. At other times, people who attended the funeral or memorial service are also invited to the cemetery for the burial ceremony.
- A burial ceremony at the cemetery is typically led by the minister and includes a few prayers and readings. The casket is positioned above a hole that has been dug in the ground.

- There may be photos of the deceased and flowers placed near the casket.
- Members of the immediate family usually sit in a row of chairs in front of the gravesite to observe the ritual at the cemetery.
- Sometimes people are invited to drop a flower on the casket or a handful of dirt before or after it is lowered into the grave.
- When the event is over, people may be invited to a reception, or members of the close family and friends may gather at a restaurant or home for a meal.
- Alternately, if there has been a cremation there may be a short ceremony for interning the ashes in a dedicated part of the cemetery.

Later: Dispersing the Ashes and Visiting the Cemetery

- If a memorial service is held after a cremation, the family may hold their own private ceremony for burying or dispersing the ashes at a later time. For example, sometimes people gather to disperse ashes over a lake or ocean.
- Family members and friends may often visit the cemetery, and at special seasons, holidays, or anniversaries may place a decoration near the grave—for example a Christmas wreath, spring flowers at Easter, or a flag on a veteran's grave on Memorial Day or the Fourth of July.