CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP in Muslim-Christian Funerals

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ISLAM 101

Islam is one of the Abrahamic religions. In Arabic, its initial language, the word islam means "submission." Adherents of Islam are Muslims, and they believe the core of their faith is submission to the will of God, whom they name as Allah.

Islam teaches the Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible are also authentic revelations from God, but their main text is the Qur'an. They believe Muhammad was the last and final prophet of Allah, and the Qur'an contains his teachings.

Muhammad was born in Mecca (inside present day Saudi Arabia) in approximately 570 C.E. As a young man he longed for solitude. In a cave outside Mecca he found it and was able to connect in a powerful way with Allah. He received a revelation, the foundation of which was that Allah demands morality and monotheistic devotion from the humans he created. By the time Muhammad died in 632 C.E. most of people of that area of the world were adherents.

As of 2015 there were over 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide and Islam had become the fastest growing religion in the world. In the United States there were over 2,100 Islamic centers and organizations, with a membership of over 7 million.
WHAT CHRISTIAN CLERGY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MUSLIM FUNERALS

Death is assumed to be the natural conclusion of life. Most Adherents of Islam generally believe death contains a final Day of Reckoning, when all humans will need to give account for their actions in life.

The Qur'an describes the pleasures of heaven that will be enjoyed by those who are determined to be righteous, as well as the torments of hell that will be endured by those who are determined to be unrighteous. Usually, these descriptions are believed to be literal.

Muslims generally believe a body should be buried as soon as possible, therefore autopsies and embalming are not permitted, except when required by law. There will also not be a viewing prior to the funeral. Traditionally, the body is washed and then placed in a shroud for transportation and burial. Cremation is generally not used.

A funeral service usually takes place two to three days after the person has died. When you learn of a death, call or visit those grieving. If you visit, shake hands or hug the family members who are of your same gender. Sit and talk quietly. It is also appropriate to offer quiet prayer.

The ceremony itself will usually last 30 to 60 minutes, but sometimes longer. Men have no particular attire requirements, but women should wear a modest dress or skirt and cover their heads with a scarf. Dark colors are recommended. The ceremony will take place in the mosque/Islamic center or a funeral home. It is appropriate to send flowers. An imam will preside.

Guests are welcome to attend the burial or interment. There the jamazah prayers for the dead are recited. Mourning will, then, be a period of 40 days (or a number of days set by the family). You are welcome to visit during that time and to bring appropriate food for the family. Talk quietly, and only touch those of your same gender.
CULTURAL CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT

We have described here very general information about Islam in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the family members of the deceased to find out what their particular expectations are. You may also want to talk with the imam of the temple/Islamic center in which the family participates. Finally, it is important to remember that some Muslims have traveled to North America from all over the world. They have brought with them their own cultural contexts, which will vary from country-of-origin to country-of-origin. If you have questions, make sure you ask.
Resources for Deeper Study

Islamic Society of North America:
317-839-8157
www.isna.net

The Perfect Stranger's Guide to Funerals and Grieving Practices:

www.everplans.com/articles/muslim-funeral-traditions

The Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, publisher of this brochure, wishes to acknowledge the contents are intended as a guide and have been developed from a general North American context. United Methodists of other cultural contexts are encouraged to volunteer to create a similar resource applicable specifically for them.