

Reunion Memorial Services Overview and Best Practices

Memorial Services Overview

The Memorial Service, honoring deceased classmates, is one of the most treasured events of the reunion experience, and many classes maintain their own traditions regarding program elements. The HAA looks forward to honoring those traditions.

Typically, 5th—20th Reunion classes hold their service in a smaller space on campus. For the 5th and 10th Reunions, the committees can decide if they want to honor all classmates who have passed since they started their time together as students, or only those who have passed away in the past five years. For the 15th and 20th, it is common to honor those who have passed in the past five years since the last reunion. Beginning with the 25th Reunion, the service is held in Memorial Church.

The planner(s) will work directly with the HAA staff liaison on all details related to the service and not with the Church staff. The HAA staff liaison will share all details with their Events colleague, who will coordinate with Church staff on all programming for the service. Once all the details of the service are finalized, the HAA staff liaison will put the planners in contact with clergy, organists, etc. as needed. Your HAA staff liaison will also coordinate any rehearsal requests with the church staff – please do not reach out to the church staff independently.

Your HAA staff liaison will share the time and location of your Memorial Service. The Church requires specific timing between services, so timeslots will be assigned. Your staff liaison will work with you and discuss your class's traditions and goals to determine the best approach depending on your reunion year, your assigned location for the service, and the number of classmates who have passed away. While there are recommended best practices, these programs will ultimately be tailored to the experiences and personalities of your class and of those who have passed away.

While it can be difficult to gather to speak about classmates who have passed away, volunteers and alumni have shared how important these services are to their reunion experience and their class community and appreciate the chance to celebrate the lives of their classmates.

For a more inclusive service, we highly encourage the organizers to find ways to incorporate multiple religious faiths. Classes will select clergy and all musical contributors.

Memorial Service Planning

The volunteers focused on the memorial service will be dedicated to the organization of the Memorial Service program, which may include the integration of music, readings, and participation from both the class and clergy.

Your HAA staff liaison can share a list of classmates who have passed away since your last reunion. It is helpful for class leaders to review this list to ensure it is accurate, as sometimes Harvard is not notified of the death of a classmate. This list can be reviewed up until the service to ensure all are honored.

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The lead volunteers will:

- Select classmates to participate in the Memorial Service as service coordinators, ushers, readers, clergy, and musicians (many of these roles are for the 25th and above).
- Select readings and music for program and service
- Create the final copy for the printed memorial program based on the template provided by your HAA staff liaison
- Submit the final copy of the memorial program to the HAA (usually by the start of April) where the content will be proofread, fact-checked (spelling of alumni names, etc.), and placed in layout and design
- Review and approve the final copy of the program before it goes to press

Generally, only the classes beginning with the 25th Reunion will have a formal printed program, so volunteers from the 5th—20th can decide if they want to create an alternative or forgo it (a simple digital-only run of show program or no program at all is completely fine).

Honoring Deceased Classmates

Listing and reading the names of deceased members of the class is central to the memorial program and service starting with the 25th Reunion. Reunions classes through the 20th Reunion can determine the best way to honor their classmates. For the 25th and beyond, the HAA updates a printed program with a current list of deceased classmates, obtained from the Class Report Office and updated just before the print deadline for the program, with asterisks next to the names of those who have been reported deceased in the last five years. The print deadline will likely be at least three weeks prior to the service. If a classmate passes within this time period, they cannot be added to the printed program, but can still be honored during the service verbally.

The class volunteers determine the format for the reading of the names during the service—some classes read the list aloud in its entirety and others read only the names of those who have died in the last five years. At the close of the reading, a solemn silence is observed during which The Memorial Church bell is tolled “in memory of voices that are hushed,” as the inscription on the bell reads.

When Reunions were held virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, many classes chose to use a platform called Kudoboard to create a digital memorial board to honor the classmates who have passed away. There is a fee to create a memorial board, but classmates can be invited to post text and images of memories of classmates, and the board can also be downloaded. This is just an option to consider in addition to your in-person memorial service as another way to gather stories and memories from your classmates. If your class would like to pursue this, your HAA staff liaison can advise on next steps.

Recommendations for Music and Readings

The lists below represent music and readings that past classes have used for their memorial services.

Music

- Prelude in E-flat Major, BWV 552, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
- Prelude and Fugue in G Major, Op. 37, No. 2, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
- Hymn, no. 4, “For the Beauty of the Earth”

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- Hymn, no. 5, “Now We Thank All Our God”
- Hymn, no. 27, “We Gather Today to Ask the Lord’s Blessing,” Anonymous
- Hymn, no. 29, “This is My Song, O God of All the Nations,” Jean Sibelius
- Hymn, no. 23, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” Hymn to Joy
- Hymn, no. 40, “Morning Has Broken”
- Hymn, no. 83, “For All the Saints”
- Hymn, no. 210, “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”
- Hymn, no. 327, “God the Omnipotent! King, Who Ordainest”
- Hymn, no. 358, “Fair Harvard”
- Hymn, “Radcliffe Now We Rise to Greet Thee”
- Spiritual, “Deep River”
- Spiritual, “Peace Like a River”
- Spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”
- Hymn, “Amazing Grace”
- Hymn, “Still, Still with Thee”
- Anthem, “For He Shall Give His Angels,” Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
- “The Last Invocation,” Walt Whitman
- Postlude in E-flat Major, BWV 552, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
- Postlude “Alleluia”
- As We Remember Them”

Readings

- Psalm 23; Psalm 46; Psalm 139: 1–8
- Ecclesiastes 3: 1–8
- Isaiah 43: 1–2, 18–21
- Revelation 21: 1–7
- Matthew 5: 1–16, The Beatitudes
- 1 Corinthians 13: 1–13
- Readings from the Holy Qur’an, “True Servants of God,” 25: 63–64, 67–68a, 72–76
- Readings from Hindu scriptures
- Teaching on death and impermanence from the Buddhist traditions
- Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi
- “When Death Comes,” Mary Oliver
- “At That Hour,” James Joyce
- “Fear No More the Heat o’ the Sun,” William Shakespeare
- “The Truly Great,” Stephen Spender
- “Remember,” Christian Rossetti
- “Let Evening Come,” Jane Kenyon
- “Dear Lovely Death,” Langston Hughes
- “We Need One Another,” George E. Odell

Prayers

- Interfaith Prayer
- The Kaddish
- The Lord’s Prayer