

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. Many classes maintain their own traditions regarding program elements, and the HAA looks forward to honoring those traditions.

Typically, 5th–20th Reunion classes hold their service in a smaller space on campus. For 5th and 10th Reunions, committees may decide whether to honor all classmates who have passed away since they began their time together as students or only those who have passed away in the past five years. For 15th and 20th Reunions, it is common to honor those who have passed away since the previous reunion. Beginning with the 25th Reunion, the Memorial 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 Memorial Church staff directly. The HAA staff liaison will share all details with their Events colleague, who will coordinate with Church staff on all programming for the service. Please do not reach out to Church staff independently.

Once all details of the service are finalized, the HAA staff liaison will put planners in contact with clergy, organists, and other contributors as needed. The HAA staff liaison will also coordinate any rehearsal requests with Church staff.

Your HAA staff liaison will share the time and location of your Memorial Service. Because the Church requires specific timing between services, timeslots will be assigned. Your staff liaison will work with you to understand your class traditions and goals and determine the best approach based on your reunion year, assigned location, and number of classmates who have passed away.

While there are recommended best practices, each Memorial Service will ultimately be tailored to the experiences and traditions of your class and those being honored.

Although it can be difficult to gather to remember classmates who have passed away, volunteers and alumni have shared how meaningful these services are to their reunion experience and class community.

For a more inclusive service, we strongly encourage organizers to incorporate multiple religious faiths where appropriate. Classes will select clergy and all musical contributors.

Memorial Service Planning

Volunteers focused on the Memorial Service will organize the program, which may include music, readings, and participation from classmates and clergy.

Your HAA staff liaison can provide a list of classmates who have passed away since your last reunion. Class leaders should review this list to ensure accuracy, as Harvard is not always notified when a classmate passes away. The list can continue to be reviewed and updated until the service to ensure all classmates are honored.

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The lead volunteers will:

- Select classmates to participate as service coordinators, ushers, readers, clergy, and musicians (many of these roles apply primarily to 25th Reunion and beyond).
- Select readings and music for the program and service.
- Create the final copy for the printed memorial program using the template provided by your HAA staff liaison.
- Submit the final memorial program copy to HAA (usually by the beginning of April) for proofreading, fact-checking (including spelling of alumni names), layout, and design.
- Review and approve the final program before it goes to press.

Generally, only classes beginning with the 25th Reunion create a formal printed program. Volunteers from 5th–20th Reunions may decide whether to create an alternative format or forgo a program entirely. A simple digital-only run of show or no program at all are both acceptable options.

Honoring Deceased Classmates

Listing and reading the names of deceased classmates is central to the Memorial Service beginning with the 25th Reunion. Classes through the 20th Reunion may determine the best way to honor deceased classmates based on their traditions.

For 25th Reunions and beyond, HAA updates the printed program with a current list of deceased classmates obtained from the Class Report Office. The list is updated shortly before the program print deadline, with asterisks identifying those reported deceased within the past five years.

The print deadline will likely be at least three weeks before the service. If a classmate passes away after the print deadline, they cannot be added to the printed program but may still be honored verbally during the service.

Class volunteers determine how names are read during the service. Some classes read the full list aloud, while others read only the names of those who have passed away within the past five years.

At the conclusion of the reading, a solemn silence is observed while The Memorial Church bell is tolled “in memory of voices that are hushed,” as the inscription on the bell reads.

During the years when Reunions were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many classes created digital memorial boards through Kudoboard to collect memories and photos of classmates who had passed away. While there is a fee to create a memorial board, it provides another way for classmates to share stories and memories and can be downloaded.

A digital memorial board may be considered as an additional way to gather memories alongside an in-person Memorial Service. If your class is interested in pursuing this option, your HAA staff liaison can advise on next steps.

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Inviting Widows and Widowers

Widows, widowers, and family members of deceased classmates have long been important guests at Memorial Services.

The HAA encourages classes to invite widows, widowers, and family members to attend the service and participate at the discretion of volunteer class leaders.

(Note: The recent change in the Class Reports program to discontinue the Memoriae Society chapter in books makes invitations to Memorial Services especially meaningful for family members.)