Choosing to Die Well

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die… a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4b
Dear friends,

As long as we enjoy the gift of life, we can choose to die well. As Christians, we can be confident that through Jesus Christ we are saved from sin and death for life eternal. We don’t have to fear death. However, because we live in a culture which tends to avoid the topic of death, many of us delay making decisions concerning end of life issues until it is too late. The result? Not only are our wishes not honored, but our families and friends are denied the comfort of knowing they are honoring our lives by honoring our wishes.

We can’t predict when or how we will die. And we may never look forward to death. But we can choose to make decisions and begin conversations today which can ensure that we and the people we love are prepared for our deaths.

As part of a January 2014 sermon series entitled “How to Die Well,” our Associate Pastor Rev. John Seaton and I, along with our wonderful church staff, prepared this simple checklist and resource list. It is not intended to be all-inclusive or exhaustive. Instead, it is intended as a gift, to help all of us take steps toward dying well. It is our hope and prayer it will not only help all of us begin to make decisions concerning end of life issues, but also help us begin conversations concerning death with the people we love. For we are convinced: these decisions and conversations are crucial. They can not only help us die well; they can free us so we can enjoy life!

Here at West U Methodist, many families have given our pastors (Associate Pastor Rev. John Seaton, Pastors Emeritus Rev. John Collier and Rev. Charlie Hall, and me) the privilege of helping them make end of life decisions and begin end of life conversations. If we can help or advise you in any way, please don’t hesitate to call on us.

Grace and peace,

Rev. Carol Bruse
Senior Pastor
Choosing to Die Well Checklist

As part of a January 2014 sermon series entitled “How to Die Well,” we prepared this simple checklist and resource list. It is not intended to be all-inclusive or exhaustive. Instead, it is intended as a gift, to help all of us take steps toward dying well. It is our hope and prayer it will not only help all of us begin to make decisions concerning end of life issues, but also help us begin conversations concerning death with the people we love. For we are convinced: these decisions and conversations are crucial. They can not only help us die well; they can free us so we can enjoy life!

- Write a Current Will 
- Execute a Durable Power of Attorney for Finances
- Execute Healthcare Directives
- Consider Healthcare and End of Life Costs
- Check your Beneficiary Designations
- Write an Obituary or Ethical Will
- Consider your Memorial of Funeral Preferences
- Collect your Decisions and Preferences
- Communicate your Decisions and Preferences
- Live Well

Additional Resources
Write a Current Will

Your will is a written document, signed by you and by two or more witnesses. In some states, your signature must be witnessed by a notary public. If the will is believed to be authentic by the probate court, it is used to determine the distribution of your property. If the will is not valid or you do not have a will, the court will follow state law for those without a will. Many of the court decisions might be completely contrary to your desires. For example, without a valid will, a judge might choose guardians for your minor children, select trustees to manage your property and even award property to your distant relatives. The actions of this judge may contradict your desires entirely. With a valid will, you are able to choose who will inherit your property and who will administer your estate as executor or personal representative. If you have minor children, you can choose a person to raise your children. With a trust, you are permitted to decide who will manage the trust for family members.

A valid will is an essential part of transferring your property at the right time to the right people at the lowest cost. Without a valid will, costs, delays and the probability of expensive conflict increase. You can provide a wonderful legacy for family with an updated will and a sound estate plan. (1)

First, make a list of everything of value you own, and decide to whom you want your property to be transferred after you die. Include personal and/or family heirlooms and items which hold religious or sentimental value. A completely handwritten will, dated and signed, is better than no will at all. However, we recommend that you seek professional help. Name a guardian for minor children and an executor for your estate. Please consider a gift to West University United Methodist Church or our endowment, the West University United Methodist Church Foundation.

Execute a Durable Power of Attorney for Finances

You are probably a very good financial manager. As long as you are able to manage your affairs, things will be fine. However, there may come a time when you are in poor health or perhaps in the hospital. While lying on your hospital bed, you do not want to worry about your property being neglected. A durable power of attorney for finances is the solution that protects your property and yourself. If you are no longer able to manage your property, the person that you select in this durable power has the right to act as your agent. Even if you are disabled or incapacitated, this person will have the legal right to manage your property. If you do not have a durable power of attorney for finances, it will be necessary for the court to appoint a conservator. The court may select any person as conservator and there often will be expensive reports, audits and costs in the management of your property. If you sign a durable power of attorney for finances, the person that you select may manage your property without all the expense of a court-appointed conservator. (1)

Free forms are available online. However, we recommend that you seek professional help. If you engage an attorney to help you write a will, that attorney can prepare this form for you as well.
Execute Healthcare Directives

There are two general types of healthcare directives: a durable power of attorney for healthcare and a living will. In some states, they are combined into one document call an advanced directive.

The durable power of attorney for healthcare allows you to select a person who can assist your doctors in making healthcare decisions while you may be incapacitated. You may have a serious medical condition and the doctor will need the advice of another person regarding the best possible care for you. Your designated holder of the durable power of attorney for healthcare can help the doctors ensure that you have high-quality care. The living will is a second document (in most states) and covers the time before your probable death. In the last days and weeks of life, there are a number of decisions regarding care, nutrition, hydration and resuscitation that need to be made. The living will gives you the opportunity to offer recommendation to medical staff about the types of care to be provided to you at that time. (1)

If you choose to be cremated, you can also execute in advance the right to designate cremation.

Free forms are available online. However, we recommend that you seek professional help. If you engage an attorney to help you write a will, that attorney can prepare these forms for you as well.

Consider Health Care and End of Life Cost

Review your current life, medical and long term care insurance policies. Be sure you understand how costs will be covered when you can no longer care for yourself.

Check Your Current Beneficiary Designations

Double check each current life insurance policy, pension and retirement account, 401k and IRA account in your name. Who have you designated as beneficiary? Make sure the beneficiary listed matches your end of life wishes.

Write an Obituary or Ethical Will

As a gift to those who will be left behind to honor your life, consider writing your own obituary.

Rabbi Earl Grollman, author and speaker on issues of death and dying, describes an “ethical will,” a personal document that outlines the values, important accomplishments, and memories, and the legacy of work that the individual would like to be continued by friends and family. This kind of document is a way of telling those who remain how you would like to be remembered and can be a great help to those who plan your memorial service and those who grieve your passing from this life to the next. Of course, your life is the best witness to your values, hopes and dreams, but putting something on paper for your loved ones can be a great comfort and help. (2)
Begin by writing down all the important details of your life. Then continue, including everything you consider truly important.

Your full name
Name called/favorite nicknames
Date and place of birth
Name of Parents
Name and relative ages of siblings
Childhood home
High School
Colleges/Universities
Undergraduate/Graduate degrees
Occupation(s)
Military Service (description, branch, rank, etc.)
Spouse(s) and date(s) of marriage
Children
Grandchildren
Other close relatives
Religious affiliation/history (baptism date and place, church membership)
Interests/hobbies/favorite places
What is most important to you?

What are you grateful for?

What do you hope for?
Consider Your Memorial or Funeral Preferences

As a gift to those who will be left behind to honor your life, consider sharing your funeral or memorial service preferences.

Consider answering the following questions:

Do you prefer to be cremated, embalmed and buried, other?

   If embalmed and buried, where do you prefer to be buried?
   
   If cremated, do you prefer your cremains to be buried?  
       If so, where?  
   
   If not, do you prefer that your cremains be retained?

If you have already purchased space in a cemetery, mausoleum, or columbarium, include contact information here:

If you have prearranged your funeral or memorial with a funeral home or church, include contact information here:

Do you prefer a funeral (with a casket) or a memorial (without a casket)?

   If a casket is present, should it be open for visitation before the service or closed throughout?
   
   If a casket is present, should any special items be included in or beside the casket?

Do you prefer a service at a church, funeral home, cemetery or other location?

Should a military contingent or lodge member present?

Any worship guide preferences?

Do you prefer that there be any visible remembrances or photos at the service?

Do you have any flower preferences?

Any particular pallbearers preferred (if casket is present at service)?

Are there meaningful scriptures you wish to have included in the service?

Are there specific hymns or musical selections you wish to have included?
Any musicians, instruments and/or soloist preferences?

Other preferences?

Here at West U Methodist, it would be our privilege to assist you in planning a service to celebrate your life. Typical orders of service for funerals, memorials and graveside service follow.

**Typical Order for a Funeral or Memorial Service**

- Pre-service music
- Words of Grace and Greeting
- Opening Prayer
- Opening Hymn
- Scripture Readings
- Celebration of Life (Eulogy)
  - (Special music or hymn)
- Celebration of Faith (Sermon)
  - (Prayer of Commendation, if a memorial or if no interment)
- Prayer of Thanksgiving
- Closing Hymn
- Blessing
- Postlude

**Typical Order for a Graveside Service or Interment**

- Words of Grace and Greeting
- Opening Prayer
- Scripture Readings
- Brief Celebration of Life and Faith
- Prayer of Commendation
- Blessing

**Collect Your Decisions and Preferences**

In one safe place, collect all of your important papers, decisions, and preferences (or create a listing of every important paper and its location). Share that location and/or a copy of the list with your attorney and/or chosen executor. Make sure your spouse, children, and/or a close friend knows how to access this information in case of an emergency. Review your end of life decisions each time you experience a major life or estate change (for example, the birth or death of a family member, guardian, or executor; a change of employment or marital status; a move; a significant change in your financial status or portfolio); when your youngest child reaches 21; and when you retire. Many adults choose to review their end of life decisions annually. Some choose to begin transferring estate assets (money, stocks, land, and heirlooms) to churches, charities, and family members as they begin to downsize and take steps toward retirement. Giving away portions of an estate during life can not only provide significant tax advantages; it can allow you to experience the joy of giving today.
Communicate your Decisions and Preferences

Initiate a conversation about end of life issues with everyone you love—your parents, spouse, siblings, children, and close friends. Having discussions ahead of time can alleviate the stress of making such decisions and opening sensitive conversations in the midst of physical upheaval or trauma. It is never too early to make end of life decisions and discuss them thoroughly with the people you love. (For help getting the conversation started, download "Your conversation starter kit" at www.theconversationproject.org)

Make sure the people you love know the location of your important papers. Make sure they understand the decisions you have made—especially concerning whom you have chosen to raise your children, manage your estate (your “executor”), and to whom you have chosen to steward your resources in the event of your death. Clearly share your preferences concerning health care, end of life issues, and memorial or funeral plans.

Live Well

Embracing the reality of death and preparing to die well can free us to live well—to truly appreciate and enjoy every day of life. If one of our pastors here at West U Methodist can help you consider end of life decisions, don’t hesitate to call on us.

“What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Footnotes

1. Heartspring Methodist Foundation
2. Living Fully, Dying Well, by Rueben Job
Additional Resources

For Adults

Living Fully, Dying Well - Reuben Job, ISBN – 9780687466405

When the Game is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box - John Ortberg, ISBN – 9780310325055


Planning Your Legacy - Heartspring Methodist Foundation, Houston, TX

For Children


When Someone Very Special Dies - Marge Heegaard, ISBN - 0962050202