

in sure and certain hope

A FUNERAL SOURCEBOOK





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INTRODUCTION

When someone dies, the church shares the grief of those who mourn and remembers the brevity of life on earth. At the funeral, we give voice to sorrow, thank God for our loved one, and entrust this companion of ours into the hands of God. Trusting in God's promise in baptism that we are claimed by Christ forever, we rest in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

Every Christian funeral is a unique celebration of Christ's resurrection. The individual life that the assembly remembers and commends to God, as well as the needs and wishes of the family and those who mourn, shape the content of the funeral service in many ways. The choices made about the service also depend on whether the deceased is a baptized Christian, whether the body or cremated remains or no remains are present at the service, whether the funeral or memorial service is held in the church, and whether Holy Communion is celebrated. Adaptations of the service for particular circumstances are a natural part of pastoral ministry at the time of death.

Fundamental to funeral decision making is that God speaks first. God invites the people to mourn, be comforted, and commend the beloved into God's care. The word of God grounds the church, family, and community, who gather in the presence of the life-giving Word to receive nourishment for continuing with their lives. Specific decisions about the funeral, some seemingly small details, contribute to supporting that purpose.

Given the secularization of our cultural milieu, the church has sometimes found it difficult to assert the promise of resurrection and to articulate why that promise is crucial at the time of death and burial. Even when people find funerals meaningful, common confusion, insecurity, embarrassment over speaking in faith terms, and lingering superstitions about death can make it hard for the funeral liturgy to be more than a utilitarian exercise.

The funeral liturgy, however, is an indispensable part of the church's life, offering rest in God's presence during a time of great suffering and disorientation. To the extent that the funeral itself proclaims the resurrection, it becomes a font of faith. In the dying, death, and burial of an individual, the church has a strong witness of hope for caregivers, mourners, funeral planners, those who conduct the rite, and those who come to honor and bury the dead.



Trusting in God's promise in baptism that we are claimed by Christ forever, we rest in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.



This sourcebook has two parts. Planning, leading, and preaching the funeral are the focus of part 1 (chapters 1 through 6). Part 2 (chapters 7 through 9) deals with the church's shared ministry in matters of dying, death, and healing.

Chapter 1, "The purpose and history of Christian funerals," offers a brief history of biblical references to death and burial, Christian funerals, and issues raised during the Reformation. This sets considerations for today's funerals in the context of a larger vision.

Chapter 2, "The funeral service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*," includes the ELW funeral service with commentary to explain the intention of each aspect. The sourcebook offers essays on the increasingly common practice of cremation and the treatment of ashes in the funeral, and on the rationale for use of a columbarium and how the funeral rite can be adapted for placement of ashes.

A more expansive look at the funeral, starting with its emphasis on baptismal identity, is in chapter 3, "Planning and presiding at the funeral." This chapter includes helpful advice on music planning, working with the funeral home, and meeting with the family to plan a funeral.

Chapter 4, "Cultural considerations," focuses on issues related to navigating the expectations of church and culture. While cultural discomfort in North America over aging and death is legendary, forces in our society are also urging all of us to think more deeply about death, its impact on the environment, our relationships with one another, and the value that we subsequently give to life. This chapter includes a rite on caring for the body of the deceased at home or at the place of death. An essay on natural burial or green burial provides information on a new movement that has arisen from concerns over the toxicity of embalming and the use of metal caskets and vaults. Next, chapter 4 addresses how to include secular rites, such as military ceremonies, at the time of the funeral. Finally, this chapter includes notes on funerals or the rites themselves from *This Far by Faith* (1999), *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (1998), and the *Chinese Lutheran Book of Worship* (2006).

Chapter 5, "Special circumstances," deals with particularly difficult funerals: the tender issues involved with the funeral of a child, new research on the considerations pastors need to make in planning for the funeral of someone who has taken his or her own life, and management of the publicity involved with a very public funeral.

Chapter 6, "Preaching the gospel at the funeral," offers advice on choosing scripture and sermon structure, and preaching when the deceased is and is not a baptized Christian.

Chapter 7, "Ministry with the dying," includes essays on a congregation's ministry of visitation with the dying, and on the concerns of a registered nurse charged with care for the dying. It also provides readings and prayers for ministry in sickness and health, and liturgies for the end of life.



Chapter 8, “Ongoing ministry with the bereaved,” includes occasional services, prayers, and scripture readings for comfort, healing, and remembering those who have died.

Chapter 9, “Planning ahead,” offers several tools to plan in advance for one’s own death and the death of family members: an adult forum series that congregations can use to help people think about and prepare for death, guidelines for what to do when a death occurs, a guide for planning one’s own funeral, and a form to keep track of critical documents. Finally, this chapter provides a list of films that may help couples, families, groups of friends, and congregational adult forums talk about dying, death, and healing.

The bibliography contains writings referenced in some of the essays and resources for further reading.

✿ The CD-ROM ✿

The CD-ROM in the back contains sourcebook materials that you can customize for your own use or distribute and discuss with individuals, families, ministry teams, committees, worship leaders, adult forums, and others in the congregation. (Pages included on the CD-ROM are indicated by an icon in the table of contents and by the copyright notice at the bottom of the page.) Print out the PDF files or customize the content using the editable RTF text files.

Melinda A. Quivik



Natural burial

Many people today are rethinking burial practices, especially some practices that became dominant in twentieth-century North America, including the use of chemical embalming, metal caskets, and underground vaults. This essay is a primer on natural burial—sometimes called green funeral or green burial—which is part of a growing movement toward natural return to the earth in death. In this essay, you will be introduced to the movement, become acquainted with the theological dimensions of natural burial, and learn how to plan for natural burial and natural burial ministries.

✿ Remembering that we are dust ✿

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Why are so many people drawn to return, year after year, to be addressed on Ash Wednesday by these words? It may be partly because the truth of Ash Wednesday is rooted in a deeper wonder. The scriptures say it poetically: our bodies are formed from earth and are filled with the breath of life, the breath of God. In our bodies the earth rises up, and for a season can see the stars, sing a hymn, paddle a canoe, explore a city. St. Augustine described our bodies as “the earth we carry” (*Confessions* 12.2). Because we are aware that our bodies return to the earth in death, the wonder of our brief season of life may be even more astonishing: the psalmist writes that our bodies are “intricately woven in the depths of the earth” and are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14-15). Along with other ritual purposes, Ash Wednesday calls us to remember the wonder of our mortal, earthly existence.

Yet even in returning to the dust in death, our tradition speaks of still more wonder: a mysterious promise of life beyond our human power. In John, Jesus says “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). Christian faith trusts that God’s desire for our abundant life and the life of the world holds us even in death. Thus, the wonders unfold over generations: our bodies come alive as “the earth we carry,” receive life from the living earth in our daily bread and with every breath, return to the earth in death, and rest in the promise of God making all things new. This is the larger wonder that the simple Ash Wednesday address invites us creatures of dust to remember.

The brief individual Ash Wednesday address is not only about mortality, earth, and body, but also about memory: *remember* you are dust. In our era, we are facing the dangers of forgetting our shared identity with the earth. Many of us were taught in school about an “environment” that seemed to exist somewhere outside of our bodies, around us, but didn’t really include us. Scientists tell us otherwise—that the separation between our bodies and the earth is largely imaginary. They warn us to *remember*: our bodies, mostly water, are part of a flowing watershed; our lungs cannot function without their partners, the trees; and most of the cells of “our” body

Augustine’s phrase “the earth we carry” is originally in the first-person singular, referring to his own body. However, it clearly refers to all human creatures and is part of a sweeping panorama: from the heavens (an earthiness above, he writes), to the planetary earth (underfoot), to the body (earth carried)—all creatures of God.

Significant portions of this essay are adapted from “Earth to Earth,” chapter 5, in Benjamin M. Stewart, *A Watered Garden* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).



Funeral practices among Latin American cultures

Funeral rites are also most often communal events within Latin American cultures. Family members, as well as church and community members, donate whatever is necessary to give the deceased a “proper” burial. Wakes frequently last a minimum of two days, with an open casket for viewing. The service is often a full funeral mass and burial in a cemetery. A distinctive custom in some Latin American cultures is the use of photography of the deceased during parts of the funeral rite. The pictures taken at the funeral service preserve the death as an important historical event in the heritage of the family. Children are significantly included in the entire funeral service, since reverence for the dead from one generation to another is held in high esteem. In general, Latin Americans show no particular interest in the adaptation of contemporary or secular rituals during the funeral rite.



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✿ A la entrada de la iglesia ✿

Los ministros reciben el féretro y a los dolientes a la entrada de la iglesia.

P Bendito sea Dios y Padre de nuestro Señor Jesucristo, la fuente de toda misericordia, quien nos consuela en todas nuestras tribulaciones.

C Demos gracias a Dios.

Puede colocarse un palio sobre el féretro por los que lo portan o por un ministro ayudante y puede decirse lo siguiente:

P Cuando fuimos bautizados en Cristo Jesús, fuimos bautizados en su muerte. Por el bautismo, por lo tanto, fuimos sepultados en su muerte a fin de que, como Cristo fue resucitado de la muerte por la gloria del Padre, nosotros también pudiéramos vivir una vida nueva; porque si hemos sido unidos a él en una muerte como la suya, ciertamente seremos unidos a él en una resurrección como la suya.

De pie

La procesión se forma y entra en la iglesia con los ministros inmediatamente delante del féretro. Puede cantarse un salmo, un himno u otra selección apropiada mientras la procesión avanza hacia el altar.

✿ Oración del día ✿

P El Señor sea con ustedes.

C Y también contigo.

P Oremos.





6

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AT THE FUNERAL

The funeral rite assumes that a sermon by the presiding minister will normally be part of the service. However it is crafted, a funeral sermon demands a clear, bold, and meaningful proclamation of the gospel. Since death marks the completion of baptism, the funeral sermon is a proclamation of God's faithful, covenantal relationship. The sermon affirms God's grace in and through this life transition in such a way that the assembly hears God's good news, even as the mourners confront the death of one of God's own children and commend a loved one into God's care.

The sermon is also shaped by how preachers regard the funeral sermon. For example, some preachers argue that people do not hear or even listen on these occasions, so the gospel is really proclaimed through the presence of the assembly, the actions of the liturgy, and music. Others feel that funeral sermons possess a certain urgency because confrontation with death makes people receptive to the gospel in ways they otherwise are not. Still others regard funeral sermons as among a congregation's best opportunities to attract members.

The primary goal for the funeral sermon is to help the assembly experience God's presence and power so that they also trust in, turn to, and rely on God's mercy and guidance as they face the future. Ideally, the sermon serves four purposes.

First, we need to hear that we can have hope again. When we are confronted by the chaos, loss, doubt, and permanence of death, we encounter in the preached word the risen Christ who has transformed the gates of death into the gateway to eternal life. God's word is hope. Funeral sermons declare Christ's victory over death, the



Funeral sermons declare Christ's victory over death, the participation of the deceased in that victory, and God's continuing presence, love, and power for the deceased and for all who mourn.



Significant portions of this essay are from Melinda A. Quivik, *A Christian Funeral: Witness to the Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). Parts of the chapter are based on Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages, Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).





7

MINISTRY WITH THE DYING

Those who plan funerals are also concerned with how the service fits in the church's overall ministry at the time of death. The Christian funeral, though the chief expression of the completion of baptism in the life of the deceased and a change in the baptismal vocation of those who mourn, is one of several opportunities for the Christian community to proclaim the gospel and witness to the hope of resurrection. The church's ministry at the time of death includes both pastoral care and worship by small groups and the entire assembly.

Sharing scripture and praying together are key elements of Christian worship at the time of death. In some moments individuals worship together informally; in other moments, the bereaved may gather more formally with the pastor and representatives of the congregation. Ancient Christian practices, including laying on of hands and anointing, confession and forgiveness, and celebrating Holy Communion, provide deep assurance both to the one who is dying and to the family. Some people find singing hymns and hearing scripture read aloud particularly comforting. The prayers of intercession in the Sunday assembly will surely remember those who are dying and their caregivers.

This chapter includes several occasional services, prayers, and scripture readings for a variety of circumstances leading up to and following the time of death. The commendation for the dying may be used with the dying person and those who surround that person as death nears. Additional services include prayer for when life-sustaining care is to be discontinued.

The way the congregation's ministry unfolds at the time of death informs the planning of the funeral. The funeral service guides the congregation's subsequent care of those who mourn (see chapter 8). Congregations might consider discovering and developing resources and establishing a defined but flexible pattern for their ministry to the dying and their families. Over time the entire assembly will come to know the funeral service as the centerpiece of this ministry rather than as an isolated event.

✿ Real-life story ✿

Reino's journey to the next life was like his life: steady, deliberate, and faithful. During the third week of the vigil at his bedside, Reino could hear the angels singing, and he sang along. We chatted about whom he was looking forward to seeing again. At ninety-two years old, Reino had suffered the loss of many loved ones, but when I asked whom he longed to see, without hesitation he said, "I want to see Jesus."

Katherine Volz Finegan





9

PLANNING AHEAD

Our society is uncomfortable with terminal illness, dying, death, loss, and grief. Individuals and families try not to think about these matters, much less talk about them. Many decisions about end-of-life care and funerals are put off until they cannot be put off any longer, leaving the family to decide at a time of great stress and emotional turmoil.

The church's ministry can provide ways for individuals, families, friends, adult forums, and congregations to broach conversations about dying, death, and healing. These conversations can lead to decisions that, at the end of life and time of death, provide the family with plans their loved one made in advance. This chapter provides tools for congregations to use in helping people enter into difficult conversations, make decisions about end-of-life matters and their own funerals, and record those decisions and plans. The films listed at the end of the chapter can stimulate these conversations and may also help those who are bereaved to talk about grief and loss in ways that open up avenues toward healing.



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