

remembering God's promises

A FUNERAL PLANNING
HANDBOOK

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Introduction



Thankfully, we do not become expert at knowing what should happen or how things get done for a funeral. We are confronted with the tasks sometimes suddenly or sometimes after a long time of caring for someone who dies slowly. Then we take the steps needed to mark the death. This book is meant to help you, your family and friends, and your church plan for those occasions when you are called on to honor the dead. What needs to happen and when? What should a funeral look and feel like? What is the point?

In our time, a pastor often hears these words from a grieving family or in general conversations about death and funerals: “We just want to have a celebration of life.” As a pastor who has seen powerful, deepening faith and healed relationships through the planning and experience of the funeral, I say, “Of course!” Celebrating is, in fact, what a funeral is all about. We celebrate all at once the love we have for the one who has died and the love of God in Christ who holds us in mercy especially when we are grieving and lost.

When people speak as if the funeral needs to take a lighter tone, to focus only on celebrating, they may be remember-

ing times in the church's history when the funeral was much like a dirge or mournful song: somber, stiff, melancholy, even emphasizing fear of death. Today, in contrast, we recognize with Martin Luther that the funeral has two chief goals: to comfort those who mourn and to commend our beloved into God's care. The music at a funeral can be varied and healing. It can be contemplative or upbeat—or both. Comfort and commendation are not solely about mourning. Comfort offers not just recognition of pain; it offers joy as well. In a funeral the commendation essentially says: "We want you, Holy One, to embrace this beloved one throughout eternity."

A funeral offers ritual time and place for both grieving and giving thanks. A celebration, in fact, can be an occasion when a complex of emotions emerges. Just as in a wedding we celebrate love and acknowledge a relationship that involves separations, in a funeral we celebrate our love for one who has died and acknowledge the finality of death. The funeral gives us comfort when we hear God's promise that nothing in all creation—not even death—"will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Whether the body or ashes are present, the funeral is a ritual event that has the capacity to carry our emotions and give us the peace that arises when we have marked a serious occasion. Someone who has been a part of our lives will be missed, and we need to name the words and deeds that live on in those who are mourning. Emotions never come one at a time; they

are complicated. And when we are faced with a monumental change in our lives because someone we have relied on for decades or welcomed into our lives for only a short time has died, we want to express our love. We cry and laugh at the same time when we remember our loved one. Recent studies from the field of social work, and especially from grief counselors, have shifted our understanding of grief from being something to shut out of our lives or recover from to seeing grief as an essential response to our love. Our tears mix gratitude and sadness because grief comes from love. Grief is love. A funeral is the occasion for giving over to God all the feelings that arise.

Grief counselors tell us that we need time to grieve because ignoring sorrow does not make it go away. It only gets bigger. When grief is ignored, it can take form in our bodies and spirits—in our lives!—as addictions that attempt to mask our feelings. We may self-medicate, shop more, spend too much time working, fail to eat well, or any number of other unhealthy exaggerated expressions that only contribute to tearing us down. We cannot truly turn our backs on grief. It will assert itself in us. A funeral is one vital first step in responding to death.

A critical aspect of ritual (and a funeral, like all worship, is a ritual event) is the fact that it has an ending. The funeral begins and, at the end, the moment comes when we leave the gravesite. We return to the church for a meal. A curtain has been lifted and then lowered. Life goes on. We do not forget the one we yearn for and will continue to miss in the future,

but we have given that relationship a ritual ending. Our grief is not over. It will come and go over the years or maybe forever, but holding a funeral puts a boundary around the conclusion of a life.

The funeral rite (which can also be used as a memorial service if held without a coffin or urn) found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) begins with the promises of baptism: “When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death . . .” or “All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . .” And then with prayer, song, scripture readings, preaching, holy communion, and commendation, we surround ourselves with God’s word that says we are not alone, we are not abandoned. At a time when hearts most need consolation, the funeral offers it.

How to use this book

Planning a loved one’s funeral

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of this book are especially helpful for family and close friends planning a loved one’s funeral. Chapter 1 deals with many of the immediate tasks and concerns that follow a death. You and your pastor might look at chapters 2 and 3 together as you plan the funeral service. Chapter 2 presents the funeral service as it appears in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, with additional notes and commentary. For lists of suggestions for scripture readings and hymns, as well as information on other planning options, see chapter 3. The funeral

planning worksheet (pages 57-62) provides space for you to write down information and keep track of decisions that need to be made.

Chapter 4 points to a variety of resources you may find helpful later as you grieve the loss of your loved one.

Planning ahead

Should we plan ahead for our own funerals and for those of our loved ones? Yes. This can be a work of love, giving guidance to those who live on after we are gone.

Individuals can record preferences and decisions for their funerals using “A guide for my Christian funeral” in chapter 5. The guide walks you through questions such as whether and where you have purchased a burial plot and whether you wish to have your body embalmed. Chapters 2 and 3 offer information and suggestions for scripture readings, music, and more in the funeral service. You may also want to examine the environmental issues surrounding death and burial and explore whether a natural or “green” burial site is available in your area (see pages 100-110).

Family members, friends, or your church study group can use the film list (pages 72-77) to spark conversations about dying, death, funerals, and burial options. Help those you love—and let them help you—to face the inevitable with grace and courage.

Pastors are encouraged to use this book as a teaching tool in a congregational adult forum. The funeral pattern (page 23) will give you an opportunity to bring out the power of God's word to address the fear and the helplessness that accompany death. The gathering, word, and meal prepare us for the commendation so that we are ready in the sending to accompany the body to the grave. We have been bolstered by God's presence. Looking together at the funeral service in detail (pages 24-37) can show adults how to shape a funeral that expresses gratitude for the love of God and the life of God's people. Discreetly using examples from your pastoral ministry with families in grief and laying out the range of options that are available to mourners regarding scripture readings, music, participation of family and friends in the service, and including holy communion where appropriate can show congregation members the deep benefits of a funeral. Today when so many people see the church as an institution that serves to divide rather than connect people, discussing the church's proclamation of the gospel's healing power in the face of death may offer a more truthful view of Jesus' mission to heal and teach God's love.

Visit www.augsburgfortress.org to download the free pastor's guide. (Search for "funeral handbook.") It includes customizable pages for the funeral planning worksheet, "A guide for my Christian funeral," and a congregational adult forum with four sessions.

The funeral service with notes and commentary



Gathering

Decisions about the procession, placement of the pall on the coffin or urn, the location of the baptismal font and paschal candle, and the remembrance of baptism all depend on the space where the funeral takes place and the particular circumstances.

The immediate family may take part in the procession or be seated in the assembly (those gathered for worship) prior to the service.

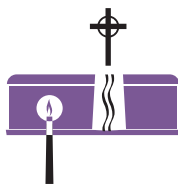
Words of introduction from the presiding minister offer a gracious welcome.

When the deceased is named in the funeral liturgy, it is appropriate to use only the Christian name, the name that was used at baptism.

In addition to placing a pall on the coffin or urn as a reminder of being clothed with Christ in baptism, other reminders of the gift of baptism may be used, such as sprinkling the coffin or urn with water from the font.

The gathering may conclude with a time when relatives or associates comment briefly in thanksgiving for and remembrance of the one who has died. These comments ought not overshadow the proclamation of the word of God that follows. (Alternative times for such remembrances would be during the gathering of the bereaved the day before or during a meal after the funeral.)

Funeral



At a person's death, 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 hope of the resurrection. When the church gathers to mark the end of life, Christ crucified and risen is the witness of worship, the strength of mutual consolation, and the hope of healing.

This service may be used when the body or ashes are present, or it may be adapted for use as a memorial service. A remembrance and expression of thanksgiving for the life of the deceased may take place after the prayer of the day or before the commendation.

FUNERAL

Gathering

The ministers may meet the coffin and the bereaved at the entrance to the church. The assembly stands and faces them.

The presiding minister may address the assembly using one or both of these paragraphs, or in similar words.

Welcome in the name of Jesus, the Savior of the world. We are gathered to worship, to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, to remember before God our *sister/brother* name , to give thanks for *her/his* life, to commend *her/him* to our merciful redeemer, and to comfort one another in our grief.

OR

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.

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Thanksgiving for baptism at the beginning of the funeral sets before the assembly a sign of being clothed with Christ in baptism. Family members, pallbearers, or other assisting ministers may lay the pall, a cloth, over the coffin or a smaller but similar cloth over the urn before the thanksgiving for baptism. The pall may be placed in silence—before, after, or in place of the spoken words—thus allowing the symbol to speak for itself.

When the pall is in place, the presiding minister may lead the acclamation, naming and proclaiming each person of the triune God.

The **greeting** gathers the mourners in the name of the triune God. At a time of death, we proclaim Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, and pray.

Thanksgiving for Baptism

A thanksgiving for baptism may follow. As a sign of being clothed with Christ in baptism, a pall may be placed on the coffin by family members, pallbearers, or other assisting ministers. The minister or a representative of the congregation may say:

When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

OR

All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In *her/his* baptism, name was clothed with Christ. In the day of Christ's coming, *she/he* shall be clothed with glory.

The presiding minister may lead this acclamation.

Eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, who formed us from the dust of the earth, who by your breath gave us life, we glorify you.

We glorify you.

Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who suffered death for all humanity, who rose from the grave to open the way to eternal life, we praise you.

We praise you.

Holy Spirit, author and giver of life, the comforter of all who sorrow, our sure confidence and everlasting hope, we worship you.

We worship you.

To you, O blessed Trinity, be glory and honor, forever and ever.

Amen.

A procession may form and enter, the ministers leading. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung.

Greeting

The presiding minister and the assembly greet each other.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

The **prayer of the day**, offered by the presiding minister, concludes the gathering section of the service. It typically directs the assembly to baptismal promises or to a key emphasis of the day or season. It may also anticipate the scripture readings that follow.



Word

Readings appropriate to the occasion and to the church year or having special significance to the deceased may be chosen. Family members, friends of the deceased, or congregation members may serve as lectors. The participation of several people in various capacities makes the funeral an expression of the whole community's role in sustaining an individual's life and caring for that person even after death.

A **sermon** by the presiding minister will normally be a part of the service. Martin Luther taught that the word—both read from scripture and preached—reveals the living Christ. At a funeral the sermon is the proclamation of hope through life in Christ.

The sermon is not a eulogy. A eulogy is a speech that praises the person who died. Certainly there is room in the funeral—even in the sermon—to relate the admirable qualities and accomplishments of the deceased, but the sermon will do this while illustrating how God's power was at work in this person's life. (Brief comments in thanksgiving and remembrance separate from the sermon might take place before the reading of scripture by giving a summary of the obituary's main points.)

The **hymn of the day** is the principal opportunity for the assembly to express both grief and hope through song.

Prayer of the Day

The presiding minister prays the prayer of the day.

Let us pray.

A brief silence is kept before the prayer.

O God of grace and glory, we remember before you today our *sister/brother*, name . We thank you for giving *her/him* to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. In your boundless compassion, console us who mourn. Give us faith to see that death has been swallowed up in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may live in confidence and hope until, by your call, we are gathered to our heavenly home in the company of all your saints; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

OR

Almighty God, source of all mercy and giver of comfort, graciously tend those who mourn, that, casting all their sorrow on you, they may know the consolation of your love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

OR *(at the death of a child)*

Holy God, your beloved Son took children into his arms and blessed them. Help us to entrust name to your never-failing care and love. Comfort us as we bear the pain of *her/his* death, and receive us all into your everlasting arms, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Word

Readings

The assembly is seated. Two or three scripture readings are proclaimed. When the service includes communion, the last is a reading from the gospels. Responses may include a psalm in response to a reading from the Old Testament, a sung acclamation preceding the reading of the gospel, or other appropriate hymns, songs, and psalms.

Sermon

Silence for reflection follows.

Hymn of the Day

The assembly stands to proclaim the word of God in song.

the service is not required of anyone, however. Some individuals may turn down an invitation to take part—especially family members and close friends who want or need to spend the funeral time grieving in private ways. For others this involvement will be a wonderful offering they are honored to give.

Scripture readings

At the processions

Psalm 23 *The LORD is my shepherd*

Psalm 90 *Our dwelling place in all generations*

Psalm 118 *God's steadfast love endures forever*

Psalm 130 *Out of the depths I cry to you*

Isaiah 41:10 *Do not be afraid, for I am with you*

Matthew 11:28-29 *Come to me, all you who are weary*

John 11:25-26 *I am the resurrection and the life*

John 14:27 *Peace I leave with you*

Romans 14:7-9 *Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's*

Revelation 1:17-18 *Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last*

Revelation 14:13 *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord*

In the service

Old Testament

Job 19:23-27a *I know that my Redeemer lives*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 *For everything there is a season*

Isaiah 25:6-9 *God will swallow up death forever*

Isaiah 40:1-11, 28-31 *Comfort, O comfort my people*

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-19, 25 *I am about to do a new thing*

Isaiah 49:13b-16a *I have inscribed you on the palms of
my hands*
Isaiah 54:10 *My steadfast love shall not depart from you*
Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-13 *Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters*
Isaiah 61:1-3 *The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me*
Isaiah 65:17-20, 23-25 *A new heaven and a new earth*
Isaiah 66:10-14 *As a mother comforts her child*
Jeremiah 31:8-13 *I will turn their mourning into joy*
Lamentations 3:22-26, 31-33 *The steadfast love of the LORD
never ceases*

Psalm

Psalm 23 *The LORD is my shepherd*
Psalm 25:1-10 *To you I lift up my soul*
Psalm 27 *The LORD is my light and my salvation*
Psalm 42:1-5 *As a deer longs for flowing streams*
Psalm 46:1-7 *God is our refuge and strength*
Psalm 63:1-8 *Eagerly I seek you*
Psalm 84 *How dear to me is your dwelling place*
Psalm 90 *You have been our refuge*
Psalm 116 *You have rescued my life from death*
Psalm 121 *I lift up my eyes to the hills*
Psalm 122 *Let us go to the house of the LORD*
Psalm 130 *Out of the depths I cry to you*
Psalm 139:7-12 *The gracious omnipresence of the LORD*
Psalm 142:1-6 *I cry to the LORD with my voice*
Psalm 143 *Hear my prayer, O LORD*

Additional opportunities for music

Wakes and vigils, receptions, and other gatherings held after your loved one's death provide times to share additional songs as well as stories.

Hymn suggestions

- 629 Abide with Me
- 377 Alleluia! Jesus Is Risen!
- 779 Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound
- 468 Around You, O Lord Jesus
- 362 At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing
- 838 Beautiful Savior
- 425 Behold the Host Arrayed in White
- 728 Blest Are They
- 656 Blest Be the Tie That Binds
- 732 Borning Cry
- 781 Children of the Heavenly Father
- 607 Come, Ye Disconsolate
- 855 Crown Him with Many Crowns
- 790 Day by Day
- 422 For All the Saints
- 427 For All Your Saints, O Lord
- 879 For the Beauty of the Earth
- 770 Give Me Jesus
- 428 Give Thanks for Saints
- 543 Go, My Children, with My Blessing
- 564 God, Who Made the Earth and Heaven

721 Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil
483 Here Is Bread
637 Holy God, Holy and Glorious
414 Holy God, We Praise Your Name
413 Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!
856 How Great Thou Art
636 How Small Our Span of Life
485 I Am the Bread of Life
619 I Know That My Redeemer Lives!
815 I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light
769 If You but Trust in God to Guide You
630 In Heaven Above
429 In Our Day of Thanksgiving
867 In Thee Is Gladness
628 Jerusalem, My Happy Home
621 Jesus Lives, My Sure Defense
595 Jesus Loves Me!
697 Just a Closer Walk with Thee
592 Just As I Am, without One Plea
409 Kyrie! God, Father
660 Lift High the Cross
765 Lord of All Hopefulness
730 Lord Our God, with Praise We Come
767 Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me
750 Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart
631 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
759 My Faith Looks Up to Thee

Funeral planning worksheet

If your loved one made any arrangements or requests for his or her funeral, use them in making these plans.

About your loved one

Full name

Nickname (if any)

Date and place of birth

Date and place of baptism

Date and place of death

Age at death

Military veteran

- An honor guard will be present at the interment
___ Yes ___ No
- The national flag will be presented to the family
___ Yes ___ No

Family information

Parents' names

Siblings

Spouse's/Partner's name

Children's names (including spouses/partners)

Grandchildren's names

Other significant persons

Memories and stories

How would you describe your loved one?

Childhood stories

Favorite activities

Talents and skills

Interests and passions

What will you miss most about your loved one?