



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### What are the marks of a Christian funeral?

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.*

*These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.*

*The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.*

The death of a baptized Christian, one who has lived in the communion of the church, is an occasion for thanksgiving and the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “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” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, introduction to the Funeral liturgy, p. 666). Although a Christian funeral honestly confronts the harsh reality of life’s ending, it witnesses to our hope in a new life beginning, both for the deceased and for those who grieve.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has no formally approved teaching document regarding funeral practices, but generous guidance can be found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, its companion volumes, and in other publications (See Resources). The notes for the funeral service may be found in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition*, pp. 43-45. Further background and practical guidance can be found in *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*, Chapter 8.

#### **Funeral Preparation**

When considering the marks of a Christian funeral, we rightly think of the funeral itself. Ministry at the time of death, however, is more holistic and includes times and occasions before and after the actual funeral service and burial.

For the baptized, each day we are reminded that we die to sin and are made alive in Christ. Death is a part of life. Yet we live in a culture that does not always confront death honestly. From an ELW companion volume, *The Christian Life*:

In many places, the church is losing, or ceding, its determinative role in shaping both formal and informal ritual actions surrounding death. Families are increasingly guided by the desire to avoid death, the need to honor the deceased and economic realities. Our death-denying culture is undeniable (p. 152).

How do Christians understand the role of the church and of secular institutions such as funeral homes at the time of death? Many, if not most Christians employ the services of the funeral business. Such businesses offer skills of organization, financial planning,

publications and other matters at the time of death. They offer important services at a difficult time. Yet grieving families need to know how to balance the role of the funeral home with the role of the church. The funeral home can help organize many details, but the planning of the actual funeral service is best done with the pastor. “The funeral is a liturgical event. And for that, the church’s witness and message are the primary point” (*A Christian Funeral*, p. 62). Both church and funeral business will also take seriously cultural factors and heritages as they plan.

Out of concern for the earth and a desire for more holistic practices at the time of death, some families are rediscovering their primary role in end-of-life care, caring for and preparing a body for the funeral and burial. Among such ecologically minded families are Christians who are asking how we return to the earth in ways that honor the earth from which we are made (Genesis 2). For more, see *A Watered Garden* in Resources.

When possible, it is a good idea to begin plans for a funeral liturgy well before the death of a Christian, thus avoiding extensive planning during a time of grieving. Some congregations regularly hold Christian education opportunities about funerals so that the entire church community understands the marks of a Christian funeral. Such planning offers an occasion for the pastor to talk seriously about the Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead through Jesus Christ. When making plans in advance, as well as with all funeral planning, it is important to keep in mind the central focus of the funeral is the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ and that the ministry of the funeral is for those who are yet living, as we have noted in the opening paragraph of this entry. It is also helpful to be mindful of the worship leaders and family members who will be present at the funeral. Plans made in advance, particularly plans made well in advance, can do this by offering flexibility for the planning process and the service itself.

In addition to the more informal meetings and planning prior to a funeral, there are services to help pastors and families as they prepare for the death of a loved one. See the following services in the companion volume to Evangelical Lutheran Worship, *Pastoral Care: When Life-Sustaining Care Is Ended* (p. 201); Commendation of the Dying (p. 211); Comforting the Bereaved (p. 223- setting for this service is often the place of death, the home of the deceased or the place of visitation, or upon arrival at the place of the funeral).

## **The Funeral Liturgy**

### ***The Centrality of Baptism***

The funeral service in Evangelical Lutheran Worship begins with an opening prayer and then may continue with a Thanksgiving for Baptism (ELW p. 280, Leaders Desk Edition notes, p. 43). Such a beginning orients the funeral as “a remembrance and celebration of baptism (that) proclaims the baptismal promise of rising from death from new life as much for the lives of those who grieve as for the deceased” (*The Christian Life*, p. 151).

Such assertion finds its roots in Luther’s own words:

The Christian life, then, “from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death. For at the Last Day God will make [The Christian] altogether new (LW 35:30-31, quoted in *The Christian Life*, p. 150).

As with *Lutheran Book of Worship*, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* suggests visual symbols and actions to further the connection of the funeral with Baptism.

- *Use of the Pall.* A pall is a large white cloth, sometimes marked with a cross, that completely covers the casket. The white cloth is reminiscent of the white garment given or worn in baptism. Moreover, the use of a pall treats every Christian exactly the same, whether buried in the costliest casket or a simple wooden box. In cremation, a white cloth can cover the urn in the same way a larger cloth covers a casket. The casket or urn can be placed near the font, visually making a connection to baptism.
- *Sprinkling:* It is also a powerful sign and comforting gesture to sprinkle the coffin at the beginning of the funeral service as part of the Thanksgiving for Baptism (Leaders Desk Edition, p. 44).
- *Paschal Candle:* The paschal candle may be lit and placed in its stand near the head of the coffin (Leaders Desk Edition, p. 43).
- *Holy Communion:* One of the images we associate with Holy Communion is that it is a meal for the communion of saints. Taking a few moments to study the hymns under the Holy Communion heading in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* reveals how much we regard this meal as a foretaste of the feast to come. Including Holy Communion at a funeral is a way to understand the meal as a communion of the saints of every time and place.

### ***Assembly Participation***

Since a funeral is a worship service, it is an assembly event that can be enriched by assembly participation. In her book, *A Christian Funeral*, author Melinda Quivik offers the following suggestions (among others) for greater participation: laying the pall, carrying the cross and bible into the sanctuary, reading of the obituary or eulogy, reading scripture, singing, assisting with communion (p. 71).

Such participation may be new to a congregation's practice, especially in a time when we have others "perform the funeral." A pastor can encourage such participation as part of the funeral planning and in other educational forums about funerals.

Consider also the space for the funeral, as "space creates meaning." How will the space be a comfort to the grieving? Will it enable assembly participation? What adjustments can and should be made? If an alternate space is chosen, such as a local gymnasium, how can it be adapted for a Christian funeral? (See *The Christian Funeral*, pp. 64-68).

### ***Music***

Assembly singing is often one of the most common and beloved ways for a community to participate in a funeral. In the words of Thomas Long, "Accompany them with singing! It is good for the voices of the community singing praise to be heard above the noisy clamor of death" (*Accompany Them With Singing*, p. 172). Music—especially singing by the whole assembly—binds the community together and brings comfort in the midst of grief.

Musical choices at the time of death, however, are not always easy. How to accompany them with singing involves factors that may be in tension. For example, a family may want to honor the favorite music of the deceased loved one. Yet what if one of these

favorite hymns or song is unfamiliar to the assembly? Or what if the favorite song is a secular one without any reference to the Christian faith? The authors of *The Christian Life* respond to this tension: “rather than simply honoring a favorite song of the deceased or the family, music proclaims the promise of God and creates comfort and hope in a way that includes the entire assembly.” (*The Christian Life*, p. 158). Singing at a funeral is for the comfort of those who are yet living, announcing in no uncertain terms the abiding presence of God in Christ Jesus.

It is becoming increasingly common for those gathered at a funeral to be unfamiliar with many of the hymns of the church just as it is less common to sing together in community. Soloists may be the primary musical voice, singing on behalf of the assembly. Again, it is best that the spirit of what is sung includes the themes of resurrection, hope and comfort. The soloist is not there to entertain but to proclaim the gospel in song. If a soloist or instrumentalist is not available, some families request the use of recorded music. This, too, presents challenges. (See also, [“Can technology help lead congregational singing?”](#))

When selecting hymns and songs for the assembly, some factors to consider include:

- the size of the assembly. If the assembly is small, more familiar hymns would be wise.
- where the service will be held and what instruments are available. A service in a small chapel with a piano may lend itself to different hymn selections than a large cathedral with a full pipe organ.
- whether the family members were involved in a church.. If a funeral is held for a member who was active in a church but whose family is not, they may be less comfortable with assembly singing. A soloist or choir can be very helpful in this situation, perhaps singing the first stanzas of hymns with the assembly invited to join on the remaining stanzas.
- the age of the deceased person. Some hymns assume that a person has lived a full life; others may have images of us being children of God. As with choosing hymns for any occasion, both texts and tunes need to be considered.
- The emotions expressed through the text and tunes of the music. The emotions surrounding a funeral will be mixed: grief but also hope, sadness but also assurance of God’s comfort. For that reason, it may be good to sing a sturdy hymn such as “O God Our Help in Ages Past” (ELW #632) next to the prayerful “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” (ELW #773).

For a list of hymns and songs for funerals, see the Funeral heading in the indexes to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (p. 1182). Other headings that would be appropriate include Heaven, Hope, Assurance, Lament, Easter and Holy Baptism.

In some regards, planning music for a funeral resembles planning for a wedding; the family, pastor and musician gather to make decisions about what music would be best for the occasion. Yet a wedding has the benefit of advanced planning, often taking many months; funerals are sometimes planned in a few hours. A congregation can have guidelines in place for music at weddings ([see also, “What music is appropriate for Lutheran weddings?”](#)), yet will likely not have such guidelines for music at funerals. Those hours for planning a funeral service are full of emotion; comfort for the bereaved is of utmost importance. Therefore, it is not often the best time for educating about why

some music might be more fitting than others. It is helpful for congregations to hold regular educational forums about Christian funerals; these can be ideal settings for learning about funerals in general, but also the role music plays in them.

## **Beyond the Funeral**

### ***Christian burial***

The Christian funeral continues with the burial or committal. In more recent practice, this has happened with less participation from the assembly. The gravesite may be far from the church. The funeral home may do much of the preparation. Theologian Thomas Long encourages full participation to the end:

It has become commonplace to consider the church funeral service as a self-contained service...As a practical matter, people will peel away at various points along the way, but we should strive to make it clear that we are not done here until we have handed our loved one over to the earth and to God. In short, we are carrying a loved one to the edge of mystery, and people should be encouraged to stick around to the end, to book passage all the way.” (*Accompany Them with Singing*, p. 176-77).

Guidance for the actual committal can be found in the *Leaders Desk Edition to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 671-674. The notes guide the conduct of the service and the committal, whether a body is to be buried in the ground, entombed above ground, commended to the sea, cremated, or donated for medical research or organ donation. The church regards all of these methods of disposition of the body as acceptable for the Christian. Some congregations provide space for the interment of cremated remains in a columbarium (where individual urns holding ashes are interred in niches) in or near the church building, or in memorial gardens ([see also, “What are columbaria and memorial gardens?”](#)) near the building (where ashes may be buried or scattered and a list of names preserved on a memorial tablet or in some other suitable way). Others are considering “green funeral practices” that involve the family more intentionally during the burial. See *A Watered Garden* in Resources.

### ***Funeral Meal.***

One way that a Christian assembly supports a grieving family is by hosting a funeral meal after the funeral service and committal. Through conversation and sharing food, families and friends are upheld by the church’s ministry. We are sustained- in worship and beyond- by sharing food around the table.

### ***Other Ministries***

Local congregations may have other ministries for supporting grieving families: prayer-chains, prayer shawls, sending cards and more. Pastors keep track of death dates so that they can provide pastoral care to the grieving on anniversaries of death. And lastly, but certainly not least, worship as an assembly on Sunday provides words of promise and strength for our living in the midst of death. “Both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God” ( ELW #639, based on Romans 14:8).

## RESOURCES

### Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ Can technology help lead congregational singing?
- ☪ What music is appropriate for Lutheran weddings?
- ☪ What are columbaria and memorial gardens?
- ☪ How do Lutherans regard organ donation and cremation?

### Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Bockelman, Karen G. *Christian Burial: A Worship Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Quivik, Melinda A. *A Christian Funeral: Witness to the Resurrection*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 Stewart, Benjamin. *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and the Earth's Ecology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.

### Other Resources

- 📖 Long, Thomas G. [\*Accompanying Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral\*](#). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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