

A FUNERAL PLANNING PRIMER

by Mark Birkholz



THE STUNNED FAMILY SITS IN SILENCE IN MY OFFICE. The past 24 hours have been a nightmare. First came the shock at the sudden death of their loved one, then everything needed to be done at once — phone calls, paperwork, dozens of decisions to be made. They’ve just come from the funeral home, talking about flowers, caskets and vaults. Now it’s time to plan the funeral service.

One of them shifts nervously in his seat. He hasn’t been in a church in years. Another was confirmed here years ago, but now she attends the big nondenominational church.

None of them are my members, and some I am meeting for the first time.

Then the questions start, “Can we sing, ‘The Old Rugged Cross?’ How about that one about the garden?” Some seem more like demands: “Can’t I share a few words about Grandma?” “What do you mean the casket will be closed?”

Who will be sitting around the table planning your funeral with your pastor? Have you talked with them about what to expect? Have you thought about it yourself? You may not want to think about death, but unless our Lord returns first, we will all have a funeral.

WHOSE FUNERAL IS IT?



Your funeral is ultimately not about you. It is about Jesus and what He has done for you and through you. Unfortunately, funerals these days can tend to become a parade of people talking about what a wonderful person the deceased was. There is a time for such informal reminiscing with family and friends at the visitation and elsewhere. But your funeral is not a time to praise you. It is a time to praise Jesus.

You are a sinner, and your death is evidence of that (ROM. 6:23). But Jesus has graciously rescued you from death. He has made you His own through faith in His blood. He has brought you to be with Him in heaven. And one day, He promises to raise your lowly body — just like He was raised from death, the “firstfruits of those

who have fallen asleep” (1 COR. 15:20). Your funeral is ultimately about Jesus and His resurrection, and all the glory in your life belongs to Him.

This is why eulogies at funerals are generally a bad idea. They can draw attention away from what Jesus has done and focus on the good deeds that the dead person did. Instead, consider the *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (pages 148–49), which offers three model “obituaries” that may be printed in the bulletin or read in the service. These samples are written to focus on what Jesus has done in and through the life of the departed Christian — through Holy Baptism, through the Lord’s Supper, in Holy Matrimony, through the gifts of vocation and children. Your pastor will be able to provide guidance in this area.

DO WE HAVE TO SING?



Believe it or not, I’ve actually had requests for funerals without music. Music is one of the best ways to bring joy and life to people shattered by death. I can’t image having a funeral without music.

When it comes to choosing songs for a funeral, steer clear of the sappy, sentimental songs that

are short on substance. Look for hymns that point to Jesus’ redeeming death, His resurrection and His return in glory. In the *Lutheran Service Book*, start with these sections: “Easter” (457–490), “The Church Triumphant” (670–680) and “Hope and Comfort” (741–765).

WHO'S IN CHARGE?



A funeral is a public worship service of the congregation. It’s not just a private ceremony for the family. It is the pastor’s job to plan a funeral that faithfully confesses what we believe about death and resurrection and that fully proclaims the hope we have in Christ.

Your pastor will probably be looking for input and advice from you and your family. He wants to put together a service that connects with them, but ultimately the final decisions will be up to him. Trust him to know how best to bring comfort and peace.

WHAT NEXT?



It’s never easy when a loved one dies, but if you’ve made some plans in advance, it can make the funeral process a lot simpler when the time comes. Think through the ways in which your funeral will confess your faith in Jesus and the hope of the resurrection. Jot down some thoughts about what hymns and Bible readings

that might be fitting. Sit down and talk with your pastor, and be open to any guidance or suggestions he has. Our congregation has a simple form that we file until needed. Then make sure you let your family know your plans. Your funeral is an opportunity for them to hear of God’s love for you and for them. **LW**



The Rev. Dr. Mark Birkholz (birchholz@hotmail.com) is pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Oak Lawn, Ill.