

At Life's End: Preparing a Christian Funeral West Plano Presbyterian Church's Theology and Practice

In the liturgy for Night Prayer (Prayer at the End of Day), one of the prayers concludes:

When at last our days are ended
and our work is finished,
grant that we may depart in your peace,
in the sure hope of that glorious kingdom
where there is day without night,
light without darkness,
and life without shadow of death forever;
through Jesus Christ,
the Light of the world. **Amen**

Book of Common Worship

For the Christian, every day we rehearse our dying. As we give ourselves over to sleep at day's end, we practice the trust that will one day be exercised when we let go of our earthly lives and give them up to a loving God. We live and die in the hope that we belong to God and that not even death can separate us from God's love. All that the church does at the time of death flows from this confidence.

INTRODUCTION

The vision of Christian experience we gain from the liturgy is one that neither fears nor evades the certainty of death. For death has been transformed by Christ who suffered an unjust execution, was buried, and raised by God to new life. This is called the Paschal Mystery, the deep truth of God's love which we celebrate in each year's Triduum.

Preparing for our own death or that of a loved one necessarily brings to view the matter of ritual. Ritual is the way a people say and do their fundamental beliefs in times of greatest intensity. The way Christians ritualize at the time of death unavoidably raises questions including those pertaining to organ donation, funerals, memorial services, cremation, and final disposition of remains.

Approved by the Session of West Plano Presbyterian Church - September 29, 2009

Today's society has steadily gravitated towards ritual forms that are often quasi-Christian and serve more to deny death's reality than help confront it. It is common today to hear professionals speak of "designer" funerals that are centered entirely on a celebration of one's life to the exclusion of the Gospel which announces good news in the face of loss.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is clear about the meaning of a Christian's funeral; it is a proclamation of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. For this reason, such a service is called a Witness to the Resurrection. A Presbyterian funeral, therefore, is a service of worship guided by many of the same considerations that pertain to a Sunday service of Word and Sacrament.

The resurrection is a central doctrine of the Christian faith and shapes Christians' attitudes and responses to the event of death. Death brings loss, sorrow, and grief to all. In the face of death Christians affirm with tears and joy the hope of the gospel. Christians do not bear bereavement in isolation but are sustained by the power of the Spirit and the community of faith. The church offers a ministry of love and hope to all who grieve.

[Directory for Worship; Book of Order; W-4.10001]

What follows in this brochure is meant to offer guidelines for funeral planning and to assist readers in a pastoral way to understand their importance. Our Directory for Worship states that "because it is difficult under emotional stress to plan wisely, the session should encourage members to discuss and plan in advance the arrangements which will be necessary at the time of death, including decisions about the Christian options of burial, cremation, or donation for medical purposes" [W-4.10002]. This is precisely what we intend here. Though this brochure will not answer all your questions, we hope it will lead to a more extensive conversation with the pastor on those matters which concern you most.

1. A funeral or memorial service is an act of worship [W-4.10003]

As a service of worship, the funeral is “under the direction of the pastor.” Others may be invited to participate as leaders in the service at the discretion of the pastor. This service “may be observed on any day,” however it has not been traditional for Christians to bury their dead on Good Friday or Holy Saturday out of reverence for the death and burial of Jesus. More recently, Presbyterians also have observed a funeral as a part of the Lord’s Day service. This coheres with our understanding that every Lord’s Day is a celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s dying and rising as well as a gathering of the whole church which includes the communion of saints.

2. The service has a definite shape and content as an act of corporate worship.[W-4.10004]

At the heart of such a service is the Gospel. This good news is made manifest in scripture and prayer which “affirm God’s power over death, a belief in the resurrection to life everlasting, and the assurance of the communion of the saints.” A sermon and Affirmation of Faith (most suitably the Apostles’ Creed) are most commonly included. In addition, the Lord’s Prayer is always used since from ancient times, this prayer was understood to be the prayer of the baptized. Having prayed this prayer throughout our faith journey, it belongs at the heart of the service at the time of a Christian’s death. Together, these elements of worship form the context in which thankful remembrance for the one who has died can be offered God as well as petitions for God’s continuing presence in our lives.

3. Music is an essential part of the service.

Through music, the eternal truths are proclaimed and human need offered in prayer. As such, music is selected that is a constitutive part of the proclamation, praise, and prayer in the service. It is common for persons to have favorite hymns and to desire that one or more be used in the service. Usually, efforts are made to accommodate these desires. However, the final selection remains with the Pastor who must join all the elements into a coherent whole that best suits the occasion. Music drawn from outside Christian worship is no more suitable for a funeral service than for any Sunday liturgy. However, such music may be considered for a reception which often follows the service. Upon request, and when possible, the Sanctuary

Choir may sing a suitable anthem. Similarly, a soloist/cantor may sing. A member of the deceased's family may be invited to participate musically, however, all such decisions are to be made with the Pastor in consultation with the music director. Under no circumstances is prerecorded music such as a CD or IPOD to be played during the service.

4. In addition to a sermon, it is appropriate for speakers to share words of remembrance in the service.

Normally, the one preaching the sermon is the pastor of the church. In special circumstances, however, the Pastor may invite someone else to deliver the sermon. The funeral or memorial service provides a brief time of thankful remembrance for the one who has died. This opportunity allows for the sharing of memories that bring to light the life of the one who is loved and now lost to death. Since it is impossible to allow for everyone who might wish to speak, no more than three persons are permitted to participate, with each speaking no more than two minutes. Families are asked to bear in mind that this portion of the service forms only one aspect of the larger whole which is Gospel-centered. This allows for representatives of family, friends, and colleagues to share a few personal remembrances and to coordinate with one another to avoid repetition. All such persons speaking must be pre-arranged with the Pastor. Though it may be difficult to limit the number of speakers, it is necessary to preserve a proper balance with essential worship elements that form the core of our faith. For family members or friends who wish to speak but cannot, we suggest that their remembrance be typed out on a single page which can be reproduced and handed out to guests. Not only will this serve to preserve meaningful memories, it will ensure a broader sharing.

5. The service may include the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In facing the loss of a loved one, a family and the church confronts the greatest challenge to faith. In such a moment of grief and struggle, the promise of God-with-us which lies at the heart of the sacrament is a great comfort and strength. Indeed, words too often fail us in the presence of death's mystery; therefore, we trust the language of sacramental symbol to speak truths where words are inadequate. Furthermore, since "in life and in death we belong to God" (*Brief Statement of Faith*), we believe that Christ's Church is undivided even by death

so that we are together always, and never more fully than when we join our voices with the choirs of angels, and all the faithful of every time and place who forever sing to the glory of [God's] name" (from Great Thanksgiving C - *Book of Common Worship*). Therefore, it is especially appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper as part of a funeral. Such a decision requires Session approval.

Here is a general outline of the service:

Order of Service

Placing of the Pall

Hymn

Sentences of Scripture

Prayer

[Confession and Assurance of Pardon]

[Words of Remembrance]

Scripture Readings

Sermon

Hymn

Apostles' Creed

The Prayers

[Lord's Supper]

Lord's Prayer

[Words of Remembrance]

Hymn

Commendation

Charge

Blessing

6. Whenever possible, it is encouraged to have the remains present in the service.

At its best, the liturgy acts out the passage of the deceased from time to eternity believing that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"

(Brief Statement of Faith). The gathered assembly ritually accompanies the one who has died in Christ and claims the promises of God in baptism. This meaning is intensified when a pall is used to cover the casket or urn. Circumstances sometimes prevent having the remains available at the time of service. However, the presence of our loved one's remains helps the family to confront death as part of life's reality in the context of faith and trust believing that death does not have the last word. This is the principle difference between a "funeral" service and a "memorial" service. In memorial services, the family may have a photograph visible in the service of the one who has died. At all services, the Paschal Candle is lit connecting, through symbol, the Christian's death with meaning of Christ's own death and resurrection.

7. Making decisions in preparation for your funeral is a process that best involves your loved ones.

Understandably, making plans for death can be difficult, especially when others including children and grandchildren are involved. Our relatives need to be included in our thinking and planning for death because they will be the ones to carry out our intentions. It is always easier to begin holding conversations when the specter of death does not loom large. Even in those circumstances when death looms near, talking with loved ones about personal wishes is a great comfort and help to all.

8. Remember that the service is for those left behind.

It is unwise to exact promises from family members about what they are or are not to do following death. Many times a person has made his or her family swear not to do this or that after death. But we have no control over the circumstances of death or our own manner of dealing with loss. The rituals we employ in dealing with death are meant for the living. Therefore, what may be preferred by the one dying may not be what is most helpful, even necessary, for the ones who will be left behind. Insisting that family members swear an oath not to do such and such is unwise and can result in compounding stress, even guilt following death.

9. Choose the path of love, even in death.

In death, as in life, our goal should be to aid those we love in living into a future of which we will no longer be a part. If we do not allow our loved ones to grieve honestly and fully, they have a more difficult time making adjustments to their changed lives. Therefore, the most important question then, is what kind of ritualizing will most help the grieving process for those who remain. Will a viewing before the funeral be important? Which persons should be chosen as pall bearers, etc? Will the deceased's preference for a graveside service only really provide for what is needed by the family? These are but a few of the considerations that need to be discussed by families. When relational tension is present, or there is estrangement within the family, such conversations can be assisted by the presence of the Pastor.

10. "In lieu of flowers"

Throughout our lives, God gifts us with passion for life that manifests itself in special interests and concerns. These areas of passion are often recognized when people make a Memorial Gift to the church in loving memory of the one who has died. Families are invited to consult with the Pastor as to a suitable choice for such gifts to be made. Generally, the wording in an obituary is made to read, "In lieu of flowers, gifts can be made to _____." Some families may choose one or two worthy organizations outside the local church for the designation of such gifts.

11. Practical matters that need to be taken into account.

- a) Scheduling a funeral or memorial service is done through the Pastor by calling the church. Dates and times are subject to availability but everything possible will be done to coordinate with family schedules and travel arrangements.

- b) There is no fee to use the church for members.

- c) The family should expect to pay a fee for an organist. Rehearsals with a soloist/cantor require an additional fee. Additional costs may be added for special instrumental music if requested.
- d) There is no cost for the church's Pastor who presides over the service. Honorariums are optional at the discretion of the family. In special circumstances, other clergy may be invited to participate at the invitation of the Pastor.
- e) An order of service will be printed by the church office at no cost to the family.
- f) Flowers (nothing artificial) may be provided for the service. These may be brought from the funeral home or purchased from a local florist. A limit of two bouquets is permitted in the sanctuary. Other flower arrangements may be placed in the narthex. Only two flower arrangements are permitted in the sanctuary; others may be placed in the narthex.
- g) Ushers will be provided by the church.
- h) Upon request, a reception will be provided by the Congregational Life Committee of the church at no charge to the family. A voluntary donation will be accepted to help defray costs. Funeral services for non-members require a fee for the use of the building.
- i) The obituary (or another brief biographical sketch) may be included as part of the worship aid given those who attend the service. A photograph is also permitted, however, the quality of reproduction at the church is limited.

Addendum: Current Fee Schedule for WPPC Funerals

WPPC Pastor	Honorarium at the discretion of the family
Church Organist	\$100.00
Rehearsals with a soloist/cantor	\$50.00
Additional costs may be added for special instrumental music if requested.	
Printing of Worship Aids	No cost
Reception following funeral	Voluntary donation
Use of building – members	No cost
Use of building – non-members	\$150.00