

WHAT ABOUT FUNERALS?

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 promise of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every activity surrounding such a death and burial should point to the good news of the gospel.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has no formally approved teaching document regarding funeral practices. Specific material intended to guide the way this church approaches the burial of the dead, however, can be found in *Lutheran Book of Worship* in the form of liturgical texts, rubrics (directions), and "Notes on the Liturgy," found in the *Minister's Edition* (pages 37-39). These notes guide the church's practice in a variety of circumstances. Although the most common form of the Burial of the Dead involves worship in church with the body of the deceased Christian present, the notes make it clear that adaptations are possible if the body cannot be present. The notes also 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. Many 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 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).

Although the church understands the Burial of the Dead to be a service of worship to God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, it does not allow social or fraternal societies to introduce rites or ceremonies into its liturgy. These ceremonies should not be mingled with the church's worship of God either in the church building or in any other setting (such as a funeral home, mortuary, or at the grave side). Military honors and fraternal tributes and rites should be kept separate from the funeral and committal services of the church.

For pastoral care and to help in planning, the pastor should be notified immediately upon the death of a member of the congregation. No plans for the funeral should be made apart from consultation with the pastor and appropriate staff. When possible, it is a good idea to plan the funeral liturgy well before the death of a Christian to avoid planning during a time of grieving. Such planning offers an occasion for the pastor to talk seriously about the Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead through Jesus Christ.

The worship book of the church provides for the celebration of Holy Communion at funerals. At such celebrations, the invitation to commune is extended to communicants present at the service — not only to the family and immediate circle of mourners. The book also encourages the use of a pall to cover the casket of baptized Christians from the time it is brought into the church until it is carried out. A pall is a large cloth, sometimes marked with a cross, that completely covers the casket. The use of a pall treats every Christian exactly the same, whether buried in the costliest casket or the simplest wooden box. The casket is always closed for the liturgy, whether it is celebrated in church or in some other setting. The cremated ashes, with suitable adaptations, can be treated the same way when they are present for the liturgy. Lighting of the paschal candle and placing it near the casket as it rests in the church also points the assembly to the promises of dying and rising with Christ that God makes at the time of baptism.

Christians will strive to keep the gospel hope of the resurrection at the center of all observances associated with the death of a Christian. Practices associated with the mortuary or funeral home or the family home, such as viewing the body of the deceased or watching with the family, are not within the purview of this review of church practices.

Pastors and congregations may choose to extend their care to unchurched people and their families at the time of death and bereavement. Modifications in the burial rite for Christians must then be made, whether the rite is used in a funeral home or church setting.

Although actual practices in congregations may vary, the resources provided for use by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are an important place to look for the established patterns of the church's practice. *Lutheran Book of Worship Ministers Edition* (or the *Ministers Book Edition*) describes the church's practice in some detail (pages 37-39 and 331-39 respectively). Additional materials are available in *Manual on the Liturgy* (pages 355-65) and *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* (pages 74-507).

Prepared by Paul Nelson
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Resources

Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Edition. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, Philadelphia, Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978.

Pfatteicher, Philip H. and Carlos R. Messerli. *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979.

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WHAT ABOUT ORGAN DONATION AND CREMATION?

Organ Donation

- People are becoming increasingly aware that internal organs donated from a person who has recently died can sustain the precious gift of life in others.
- Judeo-Christian tradition affirms that God chose to breathe the gift of life into human flesh. The bodily incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is the ultimate witness to God's love for humankind.
- The decision to donate organs is personal, yet can be informed by faith. There is no church law or theological reason preventing Lutheran Christians from choosing to be organ donors.
- Lutheran theology and confession affirms the resurrection of the body. God's promise to resurrect the dead is not compromised by organ donation. Almighty God, who created our bodies, has the capacity to resurrect them with or without the presence of specific organs.

Cremation

- For a number of reasons, cremation (burning the body and reducing it to ashes) is becoming more prevalent. Lutheran theology and tradition do not favor any particular form of burial. God's ability to give resurrected bodies to those who bear the name of Christ cannot be stymied by any human action, including organ donation or cremation.
- Bodies may be buried in the traditional manner or cremated, according to the preferences of the deceased and the deceased's family. The concern of the church is that after death, baptized Christians be commended to God in hope of the resurrection.
- Cremated remains, often called "cremains," should be accorded the same dignity given to a body. When cremated remains instead of the body are present for the rite of Burial of the Dead, they should be treated in the same manner as a body.
- Cremated remains are often housed in an urn made of metal or pottery or another small receptacle. Just a white pall is placed over a coffin as a baptismal symbol for the hope of the resurrection, a small pall can be made to cover the urn or receptacle. As would a body, the urn may be carried in procession. It may be placed on a small stand and surrounded by flowers and the paschal candle, as would a body.
- In the absence of the body, some families choose to provide a photograph of the deceased that may be placed beside the urn during the burial rite. This may provide comfort for those who may want some symbol of presence besides the cremation urn.
- At times, cremated remains are buried in a cemetery or in the ground, in the same manner as a body. In other instances families may request that the cremated ashes be scattered over a field or water or housed in a columbarium, a small niche in the wall of the church, dedicated for this purpose.
- All matters surrounding burial are sensitive and require pastoral guidance, care and wisdom. The important constant in the presence of diverse and shifting societal burial practices is that proper dignity be accorded to all the baptized who have died, regardless of the manner of burial.

*Prepared by Karen M. Ward
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Resources

Congregations interested in building columbaria may contact the church building design consultants and resource representatives from the ecclesiastical arts department of Augsburg Fortress at 800-348-5887.

