

Pastoring the Dying and Funeral Preparation



by the Rev. Daniel Torkelson

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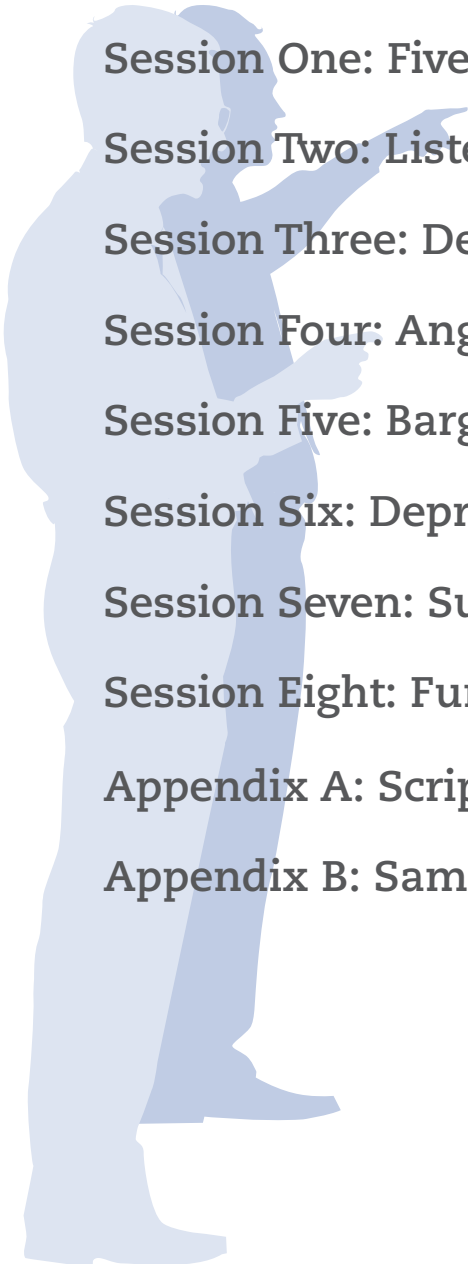
In 1994, he married Jennifer (nee Ness), and they have been blessed with six children: Matthew, Rebekah, Emily, Nathanael (adopted in China in 2007), Bethany and Jonathan



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Session One: Five Aspects of Dying

In her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published findings she reached through research on terminally ill patients. In her study, she identified five “stages of dying”:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Kübler-Ross’ study has become the standard for understanding the dying process. Nevertheless, it is not without its critics, some of whom have made valid points. Before we look at the criticisms of the model, consider this question:

*What potential risks can you think of in accepting this model as both **sequential** (always following the same sequence) and **universal** (common to all dying people)?*

Critics have rightly noted that the Kübler-Ross model may have been misunderstood as being overly prescriptive that these stages are both sequential and universal to all dying people. Pastors with some experience under their belts can probably relate to how differently their people have gone through these so-called “stages.” Many with deeply rooted faith move from the initial news of their illness to “acceptance” (better understood as “submission”) rather quickly. More fearful people often bounce around among the “stages,” which suggests that they are not stages at all.

It’s probably most accurate to think of these five phenomena in dying people as “aspects of dying.” There is no script that says that the dying person

will go through these sequentially or, indeed, that they will go through all of them. Factors from attitude to depth of trust in God often have much to say about how a person will actually travel through the dying process.

This means that all people are wonderfully different, even when they are dying. This also means that dying is not “unrehearsed” for baptized Christians.

What comfort does our baptismal theology offer the person who is dying? What comfort does the same theology offer the dying person’s sometimes-nervous pastor? What comfort does it offer the dying person’s loved ones?

To some extent, Kübler-Ross also has been misappropriated by the psychological community to explain the grieving process for loved ones. While some of these aspects may be observed among those who are grieving for the dying person, these aspects cannot be seen as sequential or universal. Just as people die differently, they grieve differently as well. A pastor’s faithful witness to both the dying person and his or her family needs to be facile enough to address dying and grieving as matters that are related but separate.

Most pastors know what it feels like to lose a loved one, sometimes even tragically. Still, this experience with grieving and loss should not be mistaken for expertise in it.

How can a pastor’s own experiences with grieving be a liability in ministering to the dying and grieving? How can they be a liability to the pastor himself?

“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). A pastor’s attention to the dying and rising of our Baptism keeps him focused on the Good News that is true for us all. Personal stories or analogies often have more comfort for the pastor than for the dying person and his or her loved ones. While the pastor may need that comfort, especially at a time like this, he would do well to get that comfort from a trusted brother in the ministry and not seek to comfort himself by thinking he is comforting the dying person.

When You Have Time

Write on the lines below some of the skills you think are most necessary for a pastor to develop in order to minister faithfully to dying people and their families.

Session Two: Listening

The challenge of being a medical doctor is in treating each patient as a unique person and individual, while also recognizing that many medical phenomena are common across a broad spectrum of people. In short, this means that the challenge is in keeping every person human and unique in a vocation where you treat a lot of people for the same problems.

The biggest risk of the Kübler-Ross findings — the five stages of dying — is thinking that all people travel through these stages sequentially and universally. It is the risk of treating all people as being fundamentally the same, rather than recognizing the unique ways in which the dying process affects the dying person and his or her family and friends. Remember that there is no script to dying and to how one moves through the five aspects associated with it. Nearly every person will travel this road in a different manner.

This fundamental truth puts a lot of stress on developing one significant skill for the faithful pastor: *listening*. Dr. Beverly Yahnke, executive director for Christian Counseling at DOXOLOGY, teaches pastors in the program about the importance of listening for all of the ministry by saying, “Listen. Listen some more. Then listen some more, and when you think you are done listening, listen some more.”

What is it about the importance of listening that seems so counterintuitive to how pastors think about and perform the ministry?

What specific benefits can you think of that come from giving people a good listening?

Another challenge for the pastor is learning to listen reflectively and responsively, not anxiously and reactively. We react to much of what we hear, both positively and negatively. A person can say something and immediately bring forward anxious thoughts in the hearer. It is important for the pastor to check nervous impulses at the door and keep asking questions. This helps him to “listen some more.” The best counselors learn to ask questions as a bit of a reflex against their own personal reactions. An anxious reaction to what a person says can easily become the excuse for a pastor to “start preaching” when a sermon is not necessarily called for. A good reflex to learn in active listening is the reflex of continuing the discussion through asking questions, especially when the pastor is getting uncomfortable.

It is tempting for the pastor to think that there is not enough time to listen to the dying person. This is a time to maximize the dying person’s opportunity to hear the Word of God. While we certainly want to share the Word of God, as long as the dying person is not “irretrievably dying” (meaning death is imminent), there is time for the pastor to listen. It also is important to remember that science has demonstrated that hearing is the last of the senses to leave, leaving for many at the point of death itself. God has created us in such a way as to maximize our opportunity to hear His Word, right up to the very point of death.

Why are conversations about death — and conversations with dying people — uncomfortable for us? What does the Bible have to say about death and our hope in Christ that should help us understand and alleviate that discomfort?

All of this listening has one important goal: that the dying person might submit to the will of God and, as a result, die strongly in the peace of Christ. What Kübler-Ross named in her fifth stage of dying as “acceptance” is for the Christian more of a “submission” to a God whose will is always good and gracious. When we pray, “Thy will be done,” we pray He would be good and gracious to the dying person as well.

Submission to God’s will can be a bit of a challenge for the family and loved ones of the dying person. This submission is often mistaken for “giving up,” which can lead some to suggest that their dying loved one is depressed or suicidal. For some, it seems, this submission to death is not an option. Again, a pastor’s “listening ears” can be trained to hear these concerns and respond lovingly to them. God’s will is always done. The challenge is in helping all involved to recognize God’s good and gracious will, even if they struggle to comprehend it or submit to it. This cannot be forced. Again, all people are different. The love of God in Christ Jesus — expressed consistently, faithfully and lovingly by the pastor — makes all the difference.

Session Three: Denial

A full-throttle teaching of the theology of death in the Bible might look contradictory to many. 1 Cor. 15:26 refers to death as “the last enemy.” Yet in Phil. 1:21 and 23, Paul can look at his own death as “gain” and “far better.”

How do we reconcile these two very different positions from the same author?

The fact that death comes to us all is proof of the Bible’s negative judgment of it as “the last enemy.” Regardless of faith, most people view death this way, and they are not entirely wrong. The poet Dylan Thomas wrote his most famous poem, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” for his dying father. In it is the famous refrain: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Death is an enemy. It is the opposite of life. Life resists death.

It is this resistance to the very idea of death that probably drives the first aspect of dying: denial. It is easy for the dying person to begin to think, “This can’t be happening to me.” Indeed, it is a common thought for all of us when bad news strikes. Such thinking is certainly not restricted to the news of impending death.

Think about times in your life when you were thinking, “This can’t be happening to me.” As your family and friends helped you, which approaches did you appreciate? Were there any “helps” that were not helpful?

Can denial, especially in a dying Christian, be understood biblically?

The faithful pastor often walks a tightrope in pastoral counseling. Falling off on either end is not an option. On the one side of the tightrope is the temptation to justify all emotions/feelings based on the Bible. The other side of the rope is to deny all emotions/feelings in an attempt to force a perfect righteousness even though the matter is perhaps too difficult for that. Telling a dying person that they should not feel denial or anger over the matter not only threatens to stifle the discussion that needs to happen in order to heal, but it also undercuts the fullness of the comforting Gospel that the pastor brings through God’s Word.

The fact for the dying person is that *it is happening*. This will end in death, short of a miracle or some unforeseen factor. Letting the person have their thoughts and allowing them to talk about them freely opens so many more doors for the pastor to proclaim the Gospel.

For the dying person who is a Christian, there is much more to be said. Death is not the nice, quiet end to all things, nor is it an enemy against which we must continue to strive with all our might as if it was not already defeated. Death is defeated. It is a defeated enemy for those who live in Christ’s victory. Now is the time to begin to re-unpack baptismal theology for the dying person. Now is the time for them to know why “being in Christ” today and “being with Christ” after death is so comforting.

What affinities does Paul have, in writing to the Philippians, with all dying people? What is his hope?

How does the daily dying and rising of the baptismal life help to reframe the whole discussion of dying with dying people?

The idea that “departing and being with Christ is far better” can be interpreted incorrectly by dying people and their families. It would be a mistake to take Paul’s words and use them as a justification, for instance, for suicide. This thinking often comes into play when medical decisions have to be made for the dying person. Concerns arise as to whether refusing a treatment should be considered suicide.

Case Study

A 90-year-old man who has been on dialysis three times a week for three years is told that his kidneys are only functioning at 15 percent and he probably has less than four weeks to live. The doctor announces that the man’s options include receiving dialysis at the same frequency, receiving it daily or ending the course of treatment. The man, citing contentment with his long life, tells his family that his “bags are packed” and he’s “ready to go see Jesus.” The man’s daughter privately shares a concern with you that this thinking is suicidal. She asks you to speak with her father.

What risks underlie this situation? What strategies would you use in speaking with the daughter? What about other members of the family?

It is important for the pastor always to remember that the only “side” he represents is the side of Jesus expressed in the words of the Bible. Such situations can triangulate — even quadrangulate — the pastor. Remembering who you work for is the best way to avoid this triangulation.

The goal in all situations of dying is, quite simply, to keep the dying person and his or her family in the rhythm of dying and rising daily so that when it comes time for the body to die in its finality, this dying is seen in its baptismal context.

Is a baptized Christian’s last day of life any different from all the other days of his or her life? How does this help the Christian to cope with denial in particular?

We’re dying every day thanks to sin. We’re dying to sin and rising to new life every day thanks to Christ.

Concluding Exercise

List other verses from Scripture that particularly help the Christian to face the reality of death with hope.

Session Four: Anger

The Nature of Anger

Faithful pastoral care requires that the pastor have a good facility with the Word of God. Quality pastoral care requires that the pastor also have a good facility with the human condition. Understanding that most of the “problems” we face have other problems behind them that drive them is a good way of showing facility with the human condition. An excellent reflex for the pastor to learn is to ask himself: What is the problem behind the problem?

Anger is an emotion. As such, it is not a sin. It is better understood as part of our emotional makeup, part of how God has “hard-wired” the human system. The human brain has recently been referred to as “triune,” having three parts in one organ. One such part, the limbic system toward the base of the brain, is the driver for angry reactions. Anger is, if anything, usually a reactive emotion. We get bad or unwanted news. Our brain determines a threat and ignites the limbic system, the brain’s “emergency response system,” and we either flee the threat or we fight it. Anger often underlies the reaction of fighting such threats.

Think of the last time you were angry. What led to the anger? What problems or concerns were behind it? What other responses could you have had to these problems? Why did it result in anger for you?

While there are other possible responses to bad news, anger is not necessarily always a bad one. Again, the pastor has to be careful not to squelch the person’s feelings on the spot. While anger in others is often uncomfortable to witness, most

likely that anger is not being projected at you, the pastor. Anger often projects outward at other people or circumstances, so it’s important for the pastor to live in God’s grace and keep his ears open for the causes of a holy and righteous anger.

What about the absence of anger? Is this a good thing? If you suspect there is anger in a dying person but they are not showing it, should you help them let it out? What strategy would you use?

The Limits of Anger

While anger is not by definition a sin, unchecked it can quickly lead to sin. This is why the Bible is careful to put limits on anger. Psalm 4 even, in a sense, commands it with an imperative followed by a caution: “Be angry, and do not sin.” When Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4, he puts time limits on anger, encouraging the Ephesians not to let the sun go down on their anger. The attentive pastor, upon seeing anger the first time, should make sure that he keeps an eye out for it in future visits.

What are the implications for the dying person who shows anger over a succession of pastoral visits?

Use the lines below to develop a strategy for helping the person address his or her anger.

Session Five: Bargaining

Law and Gospel and the Dying

Preaching the Law is a particularly difficult thing to do when working with the dying. First, the pastor has to fight through his own misplaced fears of “getting in enough Gospel” before the person dies (as if there was such a standard). Second, the Law often preaches itself. While the pastor struggles to preach the Gospel to people in nearly all circumstances, the Law has a power of its own that is often made manifest before the pastor even opens his mouth. Many people feel the sting of the Law without any words having to be said. The pastor may feel the temptation to avoid the Law in light of this.

While Law and Gospel should be front and center in everything a pastor does for the dying, it is particularly as the pastor sees the dying person bargaining with God that it becomes most important and poignant. The person who is making offers to God to live a better life or do something differently in exchange for not dying is a person whose pump has been primed by the Law. The bargaining aspect of dying offers the most familiar territory for the experienced pastor, but it also is the most dangerous one if not addressed faithfully.

Do people bargain with God even when they are not dying? Have you ever tried to make a bargain with God? In retrospect, what did this teach you about faith?

All sin is, at its heart, a breaking of the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods”). Of course, while many things vie for our attention

as our “gods,” the greatest of them is the false god of self. “Pride goes before the fall,” and nothing hurts human pride more than death. Death is the end of the plans we had for our lives. It is a bitter reminder that our plans are still in the hands of God in Christ Jesus. God has made other plans for us and, once the anger subsides, all that is left is either to submit to God’s will or to try to make some ill-advised bargain with God.

In the end, bargaining is all about control. It is a “quid pro quo” arrangement in which the dying person pays lip service to aspects of his or her life that could have been lived differently and offers to do those things differently in order to get more time in this life. A sensitive pastor needs to hear the quiet confession that underlies such bargains. For the first time in the dying process, the dying person might be admitting to particular sins that he or she believes may be the reason for impending death. Rather than denying the bargaining, the sensitive pastor needs to dig deeper into the very bargain the person is trying to make.

Case Study

Janet was diagnosed with a terminal illness four weeks ago. When you walk in on her at home, you see her hands folded in her lap and her eyes shut. As she hears you enter, she opens her eyes and greets you. “Hi, Pastor,” she says. “I was just praying.” “What were you praying about?” you ask. “Well, I was just offering to give my children more of my time if He would heal me.”

What beginning point did Janet just offer you in starting a good Law-Gospel discussion to alleviate her desire to bargain? Write out a question based on her last statement that would get this discussion going.

How can Janet address her regrets more faithfully?

A Word for Private Confession and Absolution

Martin Luther wrote, “Waste no time denying your sins.” For this reason, private confession and absolution should be a regular part of the life of every Christian. For the sin-troubled Christian, private confession and absolution offers the Good News that God forgives even that sin, the one that troubles me most. Private confession is not bargaining with God. It is laying those sins of regret at the cross of Christ and letting Christ’s sacrifice suffice for our shortcomings. Every pastor should know how to listen to confession and learn to speak absolution for all sins with biblical exhortation to help the confessing Christian to live in the grace of God in Christ.

Session Six: Depression

When All Else Fails...

While denial, anger and bargaining are all normal responses to the bad news of a terminal illness, none of them change the inescapable fact of dying. One cannot deny or bargain a way out of death. Inevitably, if the dying process goes on long enough, the dying person reaches the crossroads where death moves from being viewed as an option to an inevitability. When all else fails, and there is nothing left but for the dying person to die, depression seems like yet another very understandable reaction in the dying process.

To pastors who have counseled depression in non-terminal cases, depression often looks like a peculiar manifestation of Luther’s old definition of sin itself, *incurvatus in se* (being “curved in on oneself”). While this definition is probably too simplistic to serve as a satisfying definition of the term, one of the more significant symptoms of depression is a loss of perspective. Often, the depressed person fails to understand circumstances beyond how he or she is being personally affected. Factors like family and friendships become complicating factors during this period, rather than supportive ones. The dying person who is depressed recognizes that separation will happen and may start to desire it too soon. The irony of this aspect of dying is that the depressed dying person starts to devalue the help of family and friends at the time when that same support is most valuable and helpful.

How can family and friends influence the development of depression in the dying person? At the same time, how can they offer much-needed help to the depressed person?

Platitudes, like “I’m still here; I guess the Lord has some plan for me” or “Someone else probably has it worse than I do,” offer no help. The pastor should train his ears to listen for these. Sometimes leaning in to the same self-centered loss of perspective helps. A pastor can say, for instance, “It may be true that somebody else has it worse than you, but I’m here because I’m concerned about you.” People who struggle with depression often use these platitudes to create walls of separation from the help they need the most. Pastors should not be afraid to knock down those walls.

Knocking down walls of separation involves introducing hope into what looks like a hopeless situation for the dying person. Life is always valuable because Christ took on our human flesh, was put to death and then took up life again on Easter Sunday. With resurrection ensuring the fact that our death is not the last chapter for our bodies, our lives in the body have purpose every day. That purpose may be limited to simply being present with and for loved ones, but this is still a holy purpose, an opportunity to serve that requires nothing more than being there. Effective treatment of depression means refocusing the dying person off of the internal factors of dying and back onto the external factors of daily life. The best way to die for a Christian is to live.

What role do family members play in this aspect of dying? What message does the pastor’s care for the family send to the dying person? What message does the pastor’s care for the dying give to the family?

The dying person is not caught between “the devil and the deep blue sea.” Living somewhere between the good thing of remaining with loved ones and the better thing of departing and being with Christ, the dying person has an opportunity to serve his or her family by teaching them to live

in the face of dying. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9 are a good reminder for the dying person wrestling with depression.

He writes, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air" (1 Cor. 9:24–26).

Closing Exercise

Develop a strategy for communicating with and thus involving the family in proactive ways to address each of the aspects of dying.

Session Seven: Submission

God's Will and Faith

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross called her last “stage” of dying “acceptance.” The term has an active sense, as if it was driven by the will of the dying person. It almost suggests that the dying person has more control over death than he or she really has. In Rev. 1:18, Jesus tells John that He has “the keys of Death and Hades.” The sinful nature seeks control, and it will claim it has it even when it doesn't. For our purposes, we will bring this aspect of dying under God's will by labeling it “submission.”

Immediately, however, we are confronted with a problem, one of a theological nature. It was not God's will for death to be in the world, and yet, conversely, it appears to be God's will that the life of the one to whom we are ministering should soon come to an end.

How would you go about reconciling this paradox? For the dying person? For his or her loved ones? For yourself?

Critical for the dying person and his or her loved ones is the fact that this submission, or yielding, is to God's will, not to death itself. In ethical circles, this distinction is often seen in the difference between being “terminally ill” and “irretrievably dying.” A person might be terminally ill, but still able to go to the ballpark and enjoy a game this evening. The person who is irretrievably dying has reached that stage where death is no longer merely inevitable, it is imminent. In the former category, a person may be dying, but he or she is still able to live normally, with minor limitations. In the latter category, the person is on the deathbed, still living, but no longer in the

way to which he or she was accustomed. Both of these categories are best understood by the dying Christian under the teaching of God's “good and gracious will.” God's will is that we should live. His will also is that we should depart and be with Christ, which is “far better.”

What implications does this distinction have for a dying person's medical treatment? You are shepherding a dying person who has developed an infection from chemotherapy. Should the person be treated with antibiotics to ward off infection? What explanation would you give to the dying person and his or her loved ones for your advice?

“I Will Give You Rest”

The whole end of the Gospel is that, in the forgiveness of sins, the Christian might live, as Luther put it, “free lords of all.” While death often hangs over the world like a pall, the pall is lifted in Christ. Christ takes our sin and removes it “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). Removing the ultimate burden of sin allows for the “rest” Jesus speaks of in Matt. 11:28.

When the pastor, through the Gospel, can help the dying person to place death at the foot of Jesus' cross, rooting that dying in the hope of bodily resurrection as Jesus was raised, the “rest” of Jesus' gracious invitation can begin. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see this rest, this confidence of soul, even before a person dies. The Gospel we preach of Christ crucified and risen again is the only source of real peace and rest in life and in death.

At the Deathbed

If you've ever been at the deathbed of a loved one, record what you learned through keeping the vigil with family and friends. Think about these questions as you write. Was the Gospel preached? Was there joy, or was it simply sad, maybe even hopeless? Was the dying person comfortable? Was

the family at peace? If not, what would you have wanted to happen differently?

When the dying person crosses the threshold from “terminally ill” to “irretrievably dying,” the pastor’s presence and work often changes. The vigil is often not a place for sermons, but it may be a great opportunity for the pastor to keep the Word in the ears of the dying person while engaging in loving discussion with that person’s loved ones. The most captive audiences a pastor will ever have are at the deathbed.

Scripture and prayer, along with the “Commendation of the Dying” rite in the *Pastoral Care Companion*, are a pastor’s best tools for continuing to minister to the imminently dying person. Reading Scripture — a psalm, for instance — followed by a prayer based on the words of the psalm, done at regular intervals, keeps the Word in everybody’s ears and keeps the family praying also for God’s will to be done. Singing, if it is the person’s will, also is a tremendously powerful vehicle for comforting with the Gospel at this time.

Between Scripture readings, the pastor has a wonderful opportunity to engage in discussion with those keeping the vigil. It is not inappropriate for the pastor to encourage storytelling and even laughter at this time. While a pastor is never to be mistaken for a “cruise ship director,” at deathbeds the pastor is often the most emotionally qualified person to guide loving discussion and reminiscences.

The pastor should keep an eye on unreconciled relationships at this time. Grief often leads to guilt when a relationship with the dying person goes unreconciled all the way to the person’s death. Moreover, the deathbed also may provide opportunities to reconcile the griever, whose mutual grief may be all the common ground that

is necessary to reconcile their differences and allow their loved one to die in peace.

Above all, the pastor should remember that he is there for everyone. He brings Christ to the dying and the grieving. This holy work is pure privilege, and its impact, guided by the Spirit, can be the catalyst for much good in the lives of those left behind.

*No saint on earth lives life to self alone
Or dies alone, for we with Christ are one.
So if we live, for Christ alone we live,
And if we die, to Christ our dying give.
In living and in dying this confess:
We are the Lord’s, safe in God’s faithfulness.
(LSB 747:1)*

Session Eight: Funeral Planning and Follow-Up (Videos 8 and 9)

Funerals: Whether and When to Plan

It's fair to say that a good many funerals a pastor will do in his career simply "happen." The death may have been unexpected or the illness short enough that little time was afforded for planning the funeral. Funeral plans happen, quite often, after a person has died and are made by the grieving loved ones.

A very sudden, unexpected death (suicide, accident, etc.) can be particularly challenging. The grief of the family members can often be magnified. Shock is no easy factor to work with.

What sort of "character" is most helpful for the pastor to demonstrate in situations of unexpected death? How might a pastor demonstrate these proactively for the family when it comes time to plan the funeral?

The Bible cautions against anxiety and worry in several places. While sudden deaths can cause great anxiety for a pastor as well as the mourners, it is critical for the pastor to learn to "hide in his Office." It's at times like these that the grievers need to see more than you, they need to see the Christ who is the substance of the Office to which you have been called. An unanxious presence is a great, Christ-like place to start.

Another challenge for pastors is posed by more protracted dying scenarios, like a terminal illness. Planning the funeral *may* be a wonderful way for the pastor to help the dying person and family through to the goal of submission to God's will. It is particularly helpful in the depression aspect,

since it gives a measure of control back to the dying person at a time when he or she is about to give up. Still, the pastor probably should not insist on planning the funeral, but rather offer it as an option.

How would you go about making such an offer? Develop a strategy for approaching the subject. Under what circumstances would you suggest funeral planning? Under what circumstances would you not make the suggestion?

Policies: Avoiding Pitfalls and Pratfalls

Many a pastor has probably lost members of the congregation to decisions he made over weddings and funerals. More often than not, these decisions are made with the best of intentions, namely so as not to contradict the Gospel, where the true comfort is for grieving families in the case of funerals. Sadly, because many today do not recognize that these "occasional services" are still worship services — centered on Christ, proclaiming His Gospel and giving all glory to Him — conflicts often do arise. Another factor working against the pastor is time. There simply is not enough time in most cases to catechize a family in proper funeral etiquette for the sake of the Gospel.

There is enough time, on the other hand, for the pastor to catechize the congregation on the matter. Taking the time, perhaps in Bible study, to talk about death and dying and funerals is an excellent place to start. Building on the foundation of this teaching, the pastor is wise to suggest writing a policy for funerals (and weddings too) that can help in working through the pitfalls of funeral planning.

How would you go about beginning the process of writing a policy for funerals at your congregation? Which boards would you involve in the process?

How would you get the boards from “idea” to an actual policy? (See the sample policy included with these materials.) What would you use from the sample policy? What wouldn’t you use?

If you write a policy, it’s good to have the voters assembly approve it. This gives the pastor an extra level of protection in enforcing it. He can invoke the will of the congregation and not simply his own will in his decisions.

After the Funeral

Most pastors know that a protracted illness is an excellent opportunity not only to shepherd a dying person, but to evangelize a family, particularly family members who have fallen away or may have never known Christ. Pastoral care is foundational to getting at hard hearts. A caring pastor gains a platform from which he can speak credibly about the love of God in Christ Jesus. Your love for someone’s loved one sets an excellent table for bringing Christ to others.

Still, the pastor should not see these opportunities merely as opportunities to “gain a member.” The pastor, even after the funeral, needs to keep an eye on the real challenge, namely bringing Christ to human grief.

Think back on your personal experiences with grief. Did you feel pressure to “get over it and move on”? Were others around you uncomfortable with your grieving? Have you ever been uncomfortable with someone else’s grief?

Grief, for the Christian, is not a selfish activity. We grieve because we have lost someone who was a gift of God to us. By all rights, if the person

being grieved was a gift of God to us, we should grieve. The pastor’s presence after the funeral should primarily give the message that it is good to grieve and that you are there to listen as they mourn.

Develop a strategy for post-funeral follow-up visits. What skills would you need to employ in order to ensure a good visit? What Bible passages would be good for speaking to grief? How can the whole congregation be involved in helping the grieving?

Because the funeral service is one of the church’s services, it is good to remember that the congregation can play a role in offering comfort as well. The pastor should not feel that all work with the mourners belongs to him alone. While he has a special role in offering the comfort of the Gospel, the congregation through works of mercy can be a great help and assistance to the grieving as well.

Appendix A: Scripture Passages for Families of Dying Loved Ones

When a loved one is dying and is in need of comfort from the Scriptures, the person often wants to hear a familiar voice. Because the sense of hearing has been proven to stay with a person to their death, this can be a very comforting reality. Unfortunately, as family members also are in the grieving process, they often don't know which Scripture passages to turn to. The Scriptures below are offered as suggestions for putting the Word in the ears of a dying person. It is important to read them slowly, loudly and intermittently, taking breaks between readings. God bless your service of love to your loved one.

- › Psalm 4
- › Matt. 11:28–30
- › 2 Cor. 4:7–18
- › Psalm 23
- › Matt. 27:27–54
- › Gal. 3:26–4:7
- › Psalm 27
- › John 3:16–21
- › Eph. 2:8–9
- › Psalm 46
- › John 10:27–29
- › 1 Thess. 4:13–18
- › Psalm 51
- › John 14:1–6
- › Heb. 12:1–4
- › Psalm 90
- › Rom. 6:1–11
- › 1 John 3:1–3
- › Psalm 121
- › Rom. 8:31–39
- › 1 John 3:16
- › Psalm 130
- › 1 Cor. 1:18–31
- › Rev. 7:9–17

Appendix B: Sample Policy for the Conduct of Christian Funerals

<Church Name, City, State>

The Christian funeral service is, first and foremost, a service of praise and thanksgiving to God for the life of the deceased. As such, the members of <congregation name> have established this policy in order to assist the pastor and families of the deceased in planning a service that is centered on Christ's death and resurrection, rather than on human sentiment.

1. Funerals are reserved for members of <congregation name> or sister congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Funerals for nonmembers may be conducted in the event that the deceased was in the care of the pastor at the time of death.
2. Only the pastor(s), elder and musician(s) play any role in the directing of the funeral service. The funeral home director plays an assistive role in consultation with the pastor.
3. An alternative location for a funeral may be sought in the event that attendance will be too great for our seating capacity (est. ###). <Congregation name> will still be considered as “sponsoring” the service, and we request that this policy remain applicable.
4. The called and installed pastor of <congregation name> at the time of the funeral is to have a role in the funeral service. Only another LCMS pastor may be involved in the service and must share roles with the current pastor of <congregation name> in the service unless otherwise agreed to by the pastor loci. We request that our pastor not be asked to do services in churches of a confession other than our own.
5. We prefer you use one of our church organists. If one is not available, we prefer you use one who has experience leading worship at another church.
6. Music needs to be Christ-centered and appropriate. While families often wish to have contemporary or popular songs at funerals, these often reflect secular ideas about death that are not in harmony with the Bible's teaching on the matter. Please consult the pastor for ideas concerning appropriate music. We recommend all music for the funeral service be chosen from our hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*.
7. The members of <congregation name> kindly request that no eulogies or other expressions of human sentiment (poems, etc.) be given during the funeral service. Eulogies, like music, can often reflect worldly ideas about death. They also can take the emphasis off of Christ and His gifts to the deceased. We recommend that all personal remembrances be saved for the reception.
8. The taking of pictures during the funeral service, in particular flash pictures, is strictly forbidden. Please notify your family and friends that pictures are to be taken either before or after the service.
9. The chancel area may not be redecorated or rearranged. All permanent fixtures of the chancel (i.e., candles and the like) remain in their places. Flowers should not be placed on the altar, but on stands around the chancel. A separate table also is recommended for the unity candle, if one is used.
10. Picture boards must be removed from the worship area before the service begins.
11. Any candles used besides the church's own must be dripless and protected.
12. No pets or animals are allowed in the church.

13. Refreshments served before or after the service need to be appropriate for a church building. No alcohol may be served in the church building or on the church property.
14. The funeral rite may not be altered without the express permission of the pastor.
15. The selection of Scripture verses for the ceremony should be mutually agreed upon by the deceased prior to death, the family and the pastor.
16. We recommend the following schedule for honoraria:
 - \$50 for janitorial cleanup after the service;
 - \$100 minimum for the musician, and \$50 for each additional instrumentalist or soloist;
 - \$150 minimum for the pastor.
 - (In the event of financial hardship, all fees may be considered optional.)



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