



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do Lutherans regard organ donation and cremation?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires 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.

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 confessions affirm 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" or ashes, should be accorded the same dignity given to a body. When cremated remains instead of the body are present for the Funeral service, they should be treated in the same manner as a body.
- Cremated remains are usually placed in an urn made of metal or pottery or another small receptacle. Just as a white pall is placed over a coffin as a baptismal symbol in the hope of the resurrection, a smaller white pall can be made to cover

the urn or receptacle. As would a coffin, 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 in addition to 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 ([see also, "What are columbaria and memorial gardens?"](#)) a small niche in the wall of the church or churchyard 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.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ What are columbaria and memorial gardens?
- ↻ What are the marks of a Christian funeral?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 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.

[Other Resources](#)

- 🖨️ Organ Donation in the United States: <http://www.organdonor.gov/index.html>

Revised January 2013

Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.