



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do the rituals of non-church societies and organizations relate to Lutheran funeral practice?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries 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.

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Some members of ELCA congregations also hold membership in social or fraternal societies or clubs. Such memberships in secular organizations raise interesting questions at the time of a person's death. What ceremonies do nonchurch organizations hold at the time of death? How do these relate to a Christian Funeral?

First, we need to be clear about the elements and purpose of a Christian funeral ([see also, "What are the marks of a Christian funeral?"](#)). This service is the completion of the Christian's baptism and proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in word and sacrament. It is a service of the church, defined by the Augsburg Confession as "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession, article 7).

Many social and fraternal organizations and societies may include within their charters and membership rituals elements of religious belief and practice that may have Christian overtones. However, such groups are distinct from the mission of the church. The separation of the church's worship life from the rituals and tributes of social and fraternal societies does not invoke judgment (either negative or positive) upon the purposes, character, or social value of such organizations, or upon congregants who may hold membership in them. It simply says that the aims of the two organizations are different.

Because of this distinction, it is best that the rituals and tributes of social and fraternal societies and organizations be carried out separately from the Christian Funeral or burial. The presiding minister at a funeral will have to make pastoral decisions about how to recognize such nonchurch memberships yet keep them distinct from the church's ministry. This also pertains to deceased members who were active members of the military or veterans.

To keep the rituals of nonchurch societies distinct from the Christian assembly's proclamation of the gospel, it is best that symbols of the society are not displayed in the worship space. This principle applies only to freestanding decorative symbols (not those

worn by persons) that are intended to adorn the sanctuary in some manner. This does not prohibit members of the society or fraternity from attending the funeral or burial, nor does it prohibit the wearing of societal or fraternal symbols by societal or fraternal members in attendance.

The church has always needed to evaluate the current cultural practices. This includes those of secular organizations. This is acknowledged in *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life*:

The church will use some practices as they are found. The church will adapt others. The church will reject still others. The question before those who plan funerals is how will we draw upon the customs, narratives and images of our time to proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection while recognizing that these tools may also have the power to undermine and reshape the countercultural message of the gospel...Planners creatively incorporate still other cultural symbols and actions, which may not support but do not undermine the gospel, into the service because they comfort the mourners. In so doing, they are careful to insure that these cultural expressions do not overshadow the service's proclamation of the gospel and witness to the resurrection (pp. 154-155).

Careful discernment and pastoral sensitivity must be brought to bear here and in related situations, being mindful that the witness of the church is primary at the time of death but that other elements of the deceased's life be treated with respect. When the church differs strongly on the values held by nonchurch organizations, the church will also have to consider whether such organizations can use church facilities, especially if such usage is considered an unspoken approval of the organization's purposes and beliefs.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ What are the Marks of a Christian Funeral?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.

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