



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What are columbaria and memorial gardens?

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.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

A **columbarium** is brick or stone structure (indoors or outside) with niches in which the urn containing ashes from a deceased person are inurned. Columbaria can take various forms. They can be in an interior wall of a church building (usually in the worship space). They can be constructed in the churchyard, in various shapes and sizes. In some the niche is permanently sealed; in others the face front panel is unlocked. The name of the deceased is usually inscribed into the face.

A **memorial garden** is usually a church garden with a set-apart section in which the cremated ashes are poured directly into the ground, and covered by grass or a ground-cover vine; these ashes are commingled with other ashes and with soil, in a tangible symbol of the communion of saints. In memorial gardens, there is usually a plaque somewhere nearby on which the names and dates can be inscribed. It is common to install a fountain in the memorial garden, which symbolizes our Baptism in living water and is often comforting to the bereaved. It is also common to have some benches, so people can sit and meditate.



A product of Homecoming, Inc. at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Dublin Ohio

In Genesis 3:19, the Lord God said to the man: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken: you are dust, and to dust you shall return." On Ash Wednesday, ashes are imposed in the form of a cross on our foreheads as the pastor says: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And as a coffin or ashes is inurned in a columbarium niche or in the earth, the presiding minister prays: "...we commit *his/her* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...." Earth, ashes, dust: our end is the same whether we are buried or cremated.

All of this provides the context of meaning of a columbarium or memorial garden. As the number of cremations rises, more and more churches are considering the installation of columbaria or memorial gardens. In 1970 there were only 88,096 cremations in the United States, while in 2007 there were 832,340 cremations. It is projected that by 2025, there will be well over a million cremations each year. (Information courtesy of the [Cremation Association of North America](#).)

It is usually best to enlist the help of a columbarium firm to help design, place, and build the columbarium. There are several major firms in the United States whose work may be found all over the country. Eickhof Columbaria can be reached at 1-800-253-0457 or through their website. Armento Liturgical Arts can be reached at 1-866-276-3686 or through their website. Homecoming, Inc can be reached at 1-800-866-8343 or through their website.

Churches usually impose a fee to be inurned in a columbarium or interred in the memorial garden. This covers the cost of the niche or garden, inscribing the name and birth and death dates, and maintenance and upkeep. This fee is usually less than the cost of a coffin and of a cemetery space. Sometimes, before installing a columbarium or memorial garden, a non-binding statement of intent is circulated in the congregation, to give the planning committee an idea of how many niches will be needed. It is best to build more niches than that number, to plan for the future.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ What are the marks of a Christian funeral?
- ↻ How do Lutherans regard organ donation and cremation?

Other Resources

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|  Cremation Association of North America | www.cremationassociation.org |
|  Eickhof Columbaria | www.EickhofColumbaria.com |
|  Armento Liturgical Arts | www.amento-columbarium.com |
|  Homecoming, Inc. | www.homecominginc.com |

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