

APPOINTED ONCE TO DIE

A statement offering ideas to stimulate thinking and promote discussion toward helping the Christian to face honestly and openly, in the light of God's Law and His Gospel, the fact that—

- sooner or later he must leave this earthly life;
- his life and relationships ought always to be in order, ready when death comes;
- his funeral service should glorify God and speak to the needs of the mourners;
- members of the Body of Christ owe the bereaved the help and the strength of their fellowship.

Submitted by
Commission on Research
and Social Action
The American Lutheran Church
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A leaflet of observations, comment, and suggestions offered by the Commission on Research and Social Action, with the concurrence of the Commission on Worship and Church Music, to families and individual members of The American Lutheran Church through the pastor and church council of their congregation.

LIFE AND DEATH

Life and death are inseparable. The values a person holds in life will affect his attitudes toward death. What he is willing to die for tells much about what a person thinks it important to live for. Though death may come at any moment, man dare not let the fear of death paralyze his life.

Formed in the womb, and sooner or later laid away in the tomb, man will rise again, either to serve with the saints or to despair with the damned. Birth and death are but personal milestones on the paths of eternity. Life is from God. Death is the prelude to the resurrection.

During his days on earth the Christian lives and moves and has his being in Christ. He commits himself to his Lord's cause. He purposes to express his saving faith in a ministry of service to persons (Eph. 2:8-10). He knows that whether he lives or dies, he is the Lord's. The end of his earthly existence gives to the Christian the crown of victory.

Men who do not know Christ may find life as empty as Job 3 and Ecclesiastes 3 describe it. Psalms 37, 90, and 130 sing of victory over injustice and oppression in this life. The Christian's trust that death is conquered comes from God's Word in such chapters as John 11, Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Corinthians 4, Hebrews 11, and Revelation 5 and 7.

READY TO DIE

So assured, the Christian embraces the joy of life even while prepared to leave this earthly sphere whenever death comes. He keeps himself close to the saving presence of the Good Shepherd, walking in His way to Life. He is at peace with God and man, repenting and forgiving, trusting and loving.

His earthly affairs ought always to be in order. He should have his will current, in proper legal form to permit handling of his estate according to his Christian convictions. His financial status should be known to his spouse and next of kin. His insurance, pension, social security, veterans service, citizenship, and other records should be up-to-date, readily at hand in an agreed-upon place, which normally—depending on the laws which govern—would

not be a bank safe deposit box. The dates of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and other biographical information should be recorded. His wishes for his own funeral ordinarily should be discussed with those who are expected to arrange his burial.

Most Christians are given earth burial, in keeping with ancient customs of the church. To others, a reverent cremation seems consistent with the process of "dust to dust and ashes to ashes." Some who die at sea of necessity are committed to the deep. What matters is the promise that in the resurrection the Lord will raise up all who die in the faith in new imperishable spiritual bodies bearing the image of the man of heaven (1 Cor. 15:42-50).

Perhaps the Christian will wish that at death his eyes or other organs be removed and given to strengthen another person. He may even desire to offer his body for medical research or training. Such proposed acts, intended in charity to fellow man, he should discuss prayerfully with his family, pastor, and doctor. Should he decide to take one or the other of these steps he should fill out the proper forms to authorize such action.

It is wise to anticipate the possibility that the circumstances associated with his death may require or urge an autopsy. If competent medical counsel so requests, the survivors readily should give approval. Thereby they may advance medical knowledge and the care and treatment of the sick and suffering in this world.

Provided that the family is likely to remain in the community rather than to join the ranks of mobile Americans, a careful pre-need choice of burial plot may be a wise family decision. Advance discussions with a funeral director about legal requirements to be met and costs and services involved in funerals should prove enlightening. Contracts and financial commitments for burial services, however, generally should be avoided until the need arises for these services.

When a serious illness or accident strikes a parishioner, the pastor should be notified. As a minister of the healing Savior he can speak the timeless Christian message to the needs of the moment.

WHEN DEATH COMES

Notify the pastor immediately when a member of the congregation dies. No matter what the hour, the pastor wants to share the sorrow of his people and to comfort and strengthen them through the Gospel.

Enlist the experience and counsel of the pastor in making burial arrangements. He should be the first to aid the family in planning a Christian funeral. Final plans for the funeral should not be made until the pastor has been consulted.

Engage a funeral home whose personnel understand the spirit of a Christian funeral to call for the body, to conduct the arrangements worked out in consultation with the pastor, to complete needed legal papers, and to publish the obituary notices.

Notify employer or employees, executor of the will, insurance companies, banks, attorney, governmental offices, social security administration, retirement board or pension group, etc., of the death, requesting forms for filing claims or closing accounts. The funeral director, on request, will help in this task.

Plan a funeral which reflects the choices and values, standards of living, and sense of proprieties of the family. Good taste, Christian consideration, and respect for the deceased should rule the decisions made.

Respect the honesty and dignity of death in preparing the body for burial. There is no need to erase the lines of toil or the marks of age. What is necessary is to bear witness to the reality of the fact that the deceased has departed this earthly life.

Arrange opportunity for friends of the deceased to visit the survivors, expressing their sympathy, love, regard, and concern. Prior to the funeral service the casket may be open, the body lying in state for mourners to view the earthly remains.

Suggest ways in which those closely associated with the departed can express appreciation for what he meant to them. Flowers symbolize such beauty of association. Contributions made to church, charitable, educational, medical, or civic causes dear to the departed also express tangibly the esteem in which he was held.

Request the pastor to conduct a brief, private, devotional service for the family and friends, perhaps during the visitation period on the evening before the funeral, perhaps shortly before the funeral service, or as the specific circumstances suggest.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The funeral service for a Christian who dies in the faith normally should be held in the church, under the direction of the congregation and the leadership of its pastor. This is so because:

The Order for the Burial of the Dead, prescribed by the church, is a Christian service speaking the faith, joy, and assurance of the church, rather than a eulogy on the life or a display of the bodily remains of the deceased;

The funeral is a public expression of Christian solidarity when death comes to a member of the Christian community. As an act of congrega-

tional worship the funeral service provides opportunity for prayer and praise, readings and responses, hymn singing, a sermon speaking to the living the way of salvation found only in Jesus Christ, and a public confession of victorious, triumphant faith;

The music, placement and closing of the casket, number and arrangement of flowers, and all other elements of the funeral service can be controlled so as to reflect the teachings and practices of the church;

The church edifice with its baptismal font, altar, communion rail, cross or crucifix, lectern, pulpit, and visual symbols, so meaningful to the deceased in life is the proper place for the service from which his earthly remains are laid to rest;

The Christian funeral conducted in the church edifice is a powerful Christian witness to neighborhood and community of God's Word of hope and resurrection.

The funeral service should be conducted by the pastor of the congregation of which the deceased was a member. If the service is held in a church not served by this pastor, arrangements to this end should be made with the pastor of that congregation. Any other pastor may participate in the service only after prior consultation with and by agreement of the pastor who is in charge of the service.

The hymns sung by the congregation and all other music in the funeral service should proclaim the resurrection faith of Christian people. Neither songs of mere sentiment nor secular music have a place in the Christian funeral. The pastor's counsel on appropriate hymns and music should be followed.

In making arrangements for the time of service, consideration should be given to a morning hour, even though in many communities an afternoon funeral is more typical. Members of the congregation should be encouraged to attend the funeral of a fellow member, thus demonstrating the reality of the Communion of Saints.

At times, of course, good and compelling reasons require that the service be conducted in the family home or in a funeral home. God's clear and powerful Word of comfort and hope can give strength and assurance to the mourners in this setting as truly as when it is spoken in the sanctuary. Even in this setting the Order for the Burial of the Dead should be used for one who dies in the faith. A brief form of the Order, available from Augsburg Publishing House as a leaflet *I am the Resurrection and the Life*, may be distributed so that all who are present can participate in the service.

The casket shall remain closed during the service. The rubric of the *Service Book and Hymnal* (page 253) directs that the casket be placed lengthwise

(vertical) to the altar. This reflects the church's tradition that the altar symbolizes the east and that resurrection will come from the east. Unless practical requirements dictate otherwise, this placement of the casket should be the normal procedure. Flowers should be discreetly located so as not to obstruct the view of the altar, pulpit, etc. Where practicable, only the flowers of the immediate family should be placed in the chancel of the church.

The casket may be covered with a funeral pall furnished by the congregation. The pall symbolizes a blanket of blessing bestowed by the church as well as the shutting out of earthly things. For a member of the armed forces the flag may replace the pall.

The committal service is an integral portion of the Order for the Burial of the Dead. In no case shall this Order be interrupted by the symbols, rituals, or exercises of secular organizations. Neither should flags be carried into the church as a part of the funeral procession.

Both during the hours of visitation and in the hours around the funeral service members of the congregation should offer their help to the bereaved in the many seemingly small but exceedingly meaningful things that Christian love finds to do. Perhaps the congregation may arrange to serve refreshments or a meal, either before or after the service. Every such symbol of Christian solidarity gives opportunity to friends and relatives of the deceased to share in the supporting warmth and strength of Christian fellowship.

THE LONELINESS OF GRIEF

Grief at the passing of a loved one is both natural and normal. Even Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). Death brings loneliness and emptiness. One with whom so much was shared no longer is sharing with us. Ties and relationships, even for the unmarried, have been broken. Until new ties have been made and alternate relationships established, grief and loneliness will be strong.

Guilt, bitterness, and hostility often overpower the survivors, especially in sudden or accidental death. Mean questions nag them: Could I have caused him to die? Did I do all I could to prevent it? Was he still resenting my cruel remarks or actions? How can I make amends for my misdeeds to him? Why did he desert us now? What kind of a God would let this happen? When such feelings torment the survivors they need the help and counsel of their pastor.

The bereaved also need the help of Christian friends in overcoming grief. Their need continues not just for hours, but for days, weeks, even months. They need understanding persons with whom they can share the burdens of their hearts and minds. They need someone with whom to relive the joys

and the sorrows, the hopes and the realities, the doubts and the certainties of the relationship now ended. The support and strength which good Christian friends bring to the grieving can turn their sorrow into a healing, restoring experience.

Thus unburdened the bereaved will be able to build new ties, establish new relationships, and once again take a meaningful place in the life of the congregation and community. For them the intercessory petitions in the Prayer of the Church, "Bring consolation to those in sorrow or mourning," and "We remember with thanksgiving those who have loved and served thee in thy Church on earth, who now rest from their labors," as well as the church's confident testimony of All Saints Day take on an ever-new depth.

Every Christian has the duty and the joy so to aid his bereaved brothers and sisters in the Lord to overcome their feelings of grief and guilt with the power of the Holy Spirit. His message of confident trust and total victory through Jesus Christ sustains and comforts the Christian. Those who die in the faith know that they will join all of God's saints in the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

INFORMATION FOR SURVIVORS

(Information of this type, revised as circumstances change, should be made a part of one's personal papers, filed in an agreed-upon place. This printed page itself is not to be filled out and filed.)

Key Persons to Be Notified

1. Pastor _____ Phone Number _____
2. Doctor _____ Phone Number _____
3. Funeral Home _____ Phone Number _____
4. Executor of Will _____ Phone Number _____

Relatives and Friends to Be Notified

Names, addresses, phone numbers

Insurance Policies

Company	Policy Number	Amount	Agent
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Veterans Records:

Identification Number _____ VA Office to Notify _____

_____ Location of Discharge Papers _____

Social Security number: _____

Pension Benefits from employer—who should be notified: _____

Location of Will: _____

Location of Safe Deposit Box: _____

Attorney: Name, address, phone number _____

Bank Accounts: Name of bank, type of account

Outstanding Loans and Credit Obligations

Cemetery: Name, location, lot and deed numbers

My Personal Preferences

Autopsy: Yes _____ No _____

Funeral service from the church: Yes _____ No _____

Burial _____ Mausoleum _____ Cremation _____ Other _____

Memorial gifts should be encouraged for:

Special Requests: _____

Biographical Information

Born (place and date of birth) _____

Name of father _____

Maiden name of mother _____

Date Baptized _____ Date Confirmed _____

For married persons: place and date of marriage: _____

My signature _____ Date _____

Address _____

"You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19, 20).