



Guidance for Funeral Practices: Ministering to the Bereaved During a Public Health Crisis

Updated: March 18, 2020

There is perhaps no time in the Christian life when the ministry of the church and the consolation of the gospel is more needed than at the time of death. When we are confronted with our mortality and have to say goodbye to someone we love, whether a family member or a member of our congregation, we deeply long to be in community, to hear the proclamation of God's victory over death in Jesus Christ, and to commend the deceased to the love and mercy of God. We long to mark the end of a human life, to give thanks for that person and, perhaps, also for the end of an extended illness or period of suffering. The funeral liturgy is a primary place where these spiritual and emotional needs are met.

How does the Christian community respond to these needs when public gatherings for worship are limited or suspended because of a health crisis such as COVID-19? How do we provide pastoral care to the grieving while also acting out of love for those most at risk in our communities by practicing social distancing?

The funeral is a worship service

This may go without saying theologically, but it deserves emphasis practically: The same guidelines or restrictions that your congregation has adopted for Sunday worship – or that have been imposed by state or local government – also apply to funerals. While this is heartbreaking to admit, the spread of disease and the risk to vulnerable populations are not mitigated by the reason for the gathering. This risk is likely greater at funerals because of the age of those who may be attending, the increased spread of bodily fluids through the shedding of tears and blowing of the nose, and instinctual physical expressions of love such as hugs.

At the time of death

Great care will need to be exercised to make sure that those who are dying experience the ministry of the church even if it must be expressed in different ways. If it is not possible for the pastor or deacon to be physically present at the time of death because of infection or prohibitions on visitation, rites from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Pastoral Care*, such as the “Commendation of the Dying,” may be employed by a hospital chaplain, a family member or another individual who is able to be in close contact. (A PDF of these end-of-life rites is available [here](#)). The resource *Peace at the Last*, available from Augsburg Fortress, may also be of comfort to families who are gathered together at the time of death in the absence of a pastor or deacon. It may also be of some comfort for the pastor or deacon to administer these rites via telephone or video call.

The church's rites

In cases where the deceased has been cremated, the family may consider postponing a memorial service until such time as it becomes safe for normal worship practices to resume. In cases where the body of the deceased is to be buried, it may be possible, depending on local circumstances, to hold an outdoor service of burial for immediate family or those closest to the person who has died, while maintaining a safe distance between people. Then, once normal worship practices resume, a public memorial service could be scheduled.

It is important to note that a memorial service is an equally honorable and faithful service of leave-taking as a funeral where the body or cremated remains are present. The same prayers and order of service are employed and the community both celebrates the life and mourns the loss of the deceased. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life* states: “The funeral service might be either a service where the body is present or a memorial service, which takes place after cremation or burial. The complexity of bringing people together from great distances” – here we could add a public health

emergency – “has resulted in memorial services becoming more common.” A memorial service should not be thought of in any way “less than” a funeral service.

According to local conditions and public health guidance, it may be possible in some circumstances to hold a funeral service at the church where only immediate family are present, and for this service to be livestreamed to others via the means outlined at [ELCA.org/PublicHealth](https://www.elca.org/PublicHealth). For the safety of the family and the church’s ministers, all precautions outlined should be observed.

This year in particular, a congregation may consider a special service on All Saints Day (Nov. 1), collectively remembering those whose funeral rites had to be delayed because of the public health crisis.

Working with funeral homes

Some funeral homes will be eager to continue offering their services during this time. In other contexts, such gatherings have been prohibited by municipal/state government. It is essential that rostered ministers exercise a public ministry in their communities that reflects sound judgment and care for the most vulnerable. Leaders must consider the witness they are making by participating in a gathering that has been strongly discouraged or prohibited by public health officials. Leaders can also use their public role to model what love of neighbor looks like at this time by giving credence to sound medical advice and taking seriously the gravity of the present situation. If a service occurs at a funeral home, such environments tend to foster even closer physical proximity than most worship spaces. Great precaution should be taken to minimize physical contact.

Prayers of commendation

At the time of death, at the funeral service and at other occasions in the church’s life, such as All Saints Day, our tradition gives thanks to God for a person’s life, asks God to comfort those who mourn with the hope of the resurrection, and commends the person who has died into God’s eternal care. These prayers, while naming the dead, are for the living. They are a way for us to ritually release the person we love into God’s everlasting arms. We do not believe that our prayers, or the funeral rite itself, are needed to assist a person’s passage into their heavenly rest. We trust that at the moment of death, God receives those who have died and welcomes them home. Our prayers for the faithful departed are a way for us to ritually mark this transition and assure ourselves of this promise. While we can be understandably sad and disappointed not to gather communally after a death has occurred, we do not need to be afraid that a postponed funeral or memorial service in any way hampers the joy and release from suffering that the person who has died is experiencing in God’s presence.

Caring for one another virtually

In an already anxious time, the added stress and grief of losing a loved one can be overwhelming. Those who are in mourning will need the support of their congregation, even if it comes in unfamiliar ways. Technologies like those listed at [ELCA.org/PublicHealth](https://www.elca.org/PublicHealth) provide a means for sharing stories or memories virtually that would likely happen at a public wake. Many funeral homes already have websites where friends and family can post remembrances and make donations in honor of the deceased.

In life and death, we belong to God

Each Sunday we profess our faith in “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” One thing that can never be canceled is our baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection and our hope of eternal life in God. While funeral rites are a great comfort to those who mourn because they hold before us the promise of the gospel, we know that at all times and places the words of the apostle Paul are trustworthy and true: “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

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