

Liturgies for the end of life

Medical technologies have sometimes made it necessary for the dying and their families to face stark decisions about medical care that might prolong a painful existence. We can be grateful to the hospice movement and to medical professionals who have made serious inquiries into ethical matters for creating a climate in which those hard choices can be made with compassion and knowledge, using tools such as living wills that stipulate a person's medical desires and end-of-life priorities.

Offered here are resources for gathering around the bed of the one who is dying so that family and friends may keep vigil together, commemorate with prayer a particular moment during a long process of dying, or come together in prayer when life-support systems are disconnected. Whenever possible, the service is intended to include the participation of the one whose life-sustaining treatment will be ended. The circumstances will require adapting the service to the needs of those present. A simple order might consist of the opening sentence and prayer, the Lord's Prayer, and the concluding prayer and blessing.

After the prayers, options include an order for confession and forgiveness or parts of other services such as Holy Communion in special circumstances (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care*, pp. 93–103) or laying on of hands (and anointing), concluding with the sending.

A litany is provided as one form for the prayers. If participants do not have the service before them, the leader may cue the response as part of the invitation to prayer. For other prayers that may be used in place of, or in addition to, the litany, see "Readings and prayers related to ministry in sickness and health" (pp. 218–232) and "Readings and prayers related to ministry at the time of death" (*ELW Occasional Services for the Assembly*, pp. 349–353).

✧ When life-sustaining care is ended ✧

GATHERING

The leader greets those present with one or both of the following sentences or in similar words.

We are gathered in the name in which we are baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the ✧ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

OR

We are gathered to entrust *name* to the care of God, who alone is our life, whose steadfast love endures forever.

The leader continues with one or more of the following or another appropriate prayer.
Let us pray.

This order is intended for use when a person gathers with others (family, friends, caregivers) to mark a transition from life-sustaining care to palliative care, when a life-support system is to be withheld or discontinued, or during a time of discernment about such decisions. When death is expected immediately following the withholding or discontinuing of treatment, commendation of the dying may be used, and resources from this rite may be incorporated within it.

God of compassion and love, you have breathed into us the breath of life and have given us the exercise of our minds and wills. In our frailty, we place our lives into your hands, trusting in your never-failing promises; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

OR

O God our creator and sustainer, receive our prayers for *name*. We thank you for the gifts of love and companionship shared with *her/him*. Give us grace now to accept our limitations as we commend *name* to your merciful care. Strengthen us in this time of trial, and help us to continue to serve and care for one another; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

WORD

One or more of the following or other appropriate passages of scripture may be read.

Isaiah 43:1-3

Psalms 31:1-3, 5

Romans 8:35, 37-39

John 10:27-28

Silence for reflection may follow the readings.

A hymn may be sung.

Prayer

The following litany or other appropriate prayers may be prayed.

With the faithful of every time and place,
let us place ourselves in God's hands [*saying, "We put our trust in you."*].

With Sarah and Abraham, who set out from home for a land unknown:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With Moses, who prayed for his people before going up the mountain to die:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With Ruth, who pledged faithfulness until death to her mother-in-law, Naomi:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With the disciples, who left their nets to follow Jesus:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the women who watched at the cross:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With our Lord Jesus, who commended himself into your hands when he breathed
his last:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

With *name*, whom we now place into your strong arms, confident of your grace
and mercy:
God of the promise,
we put our trust in you.

Other prayers may be added.

The prayers conclude with these or similar words.

God our wisdom, we commend to you the decisions we have made in hope, in sor-
row, and in love, that as we place our whole trust in you, our choices and our actions
may be encompassed by your grace; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

OR

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the end-
ing, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out
with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

*The Lord's Prayer is prayed by all. The leader may introduce the prayer with these or
similar words.*

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

OR

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.**

SENDING

A hymn may be sung.

The following prayer may be said.

Let us pray.

Faithful God, give comfort and strength to *name* as *she/he* follows Christ in the path that is now set before *her/him*. Give wisdom and faithfulness to all of us who are companions along this way, that we may journey beside our loved one, watch and wait with *her/him*, and with your help, bear witness by our presence and prayers to the love of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

The leader concludes the service with these or similar words.

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory to God from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever.

Amen.

Those present may greet one another with a sign of Christ's peace and may say "Peace be with you," or similar words.

After this, life-sustaining treatment may be ended in accordance with the circumstances.

Commendation of the dying may follow at a time when death is imminent.

NOTES ON THE RITE

When someone is apparently near death, the pastor should be notified so that the ministry of the church may be provided. A person approaching death may be offered the opportunity for confession and forgiveness. When the pastor is not available, another person may lead this rite, adapting the service as needed. The family, loved ones, and pastor may gather at the bedside for a liturgy of prayer, acknowledging and giving thanks for God's presence. That such liturgies are called rites of healing is an important theological statement for the church to make. In death, baptism comes to completion.

The rite opens in the name of the triune God, includes a prayer, a reading from one of the psalms, a litany of prayer for the one who is dying, the Lord's Prayer, and possibly Holy Communion. Other gestures may be added, such as laying on of hands and anointing with oil, confession and forgiveness, singing a hymn, and time for remembrances by individuals at the bedside. The rubrics invite family members to touch the head of the dying person during the commendation. A simpler order might consist of the opening sentence and prayer, the Lord's Prayer, and appropriate elements from the commendation.

This liturgy could be relatively short or used over a longer period of time, filled with silences for prayer and meditation depending on the circumstances. Because it is often the case that the time spent with a dying person unfolds over many hours or days, the prayers may be interspersed with silence, scripture and other readings, singing and other music, conversation, the sharing of stories, and the like. Some of the elements, including the commendation, may be repeated as desired. For other optional prayers and prayer forms, see “Readings and prayers related to ministry in sickness and health” (pp. 218–232).

This service, unlike many others that have a relatively predictable duration, may be best understood as a vigil, a time of waiting and watching with the one who is dying, punctuated with resources from the Christian tradition as well as simple human presence and communication.

When the pastor arrives after the person has died, the rite begins with the commendation.

✿ Commendation of the dying ✿

SCRIPTURE READINGS

One or more of the following or other suitable brief texts may be said with the dying person. Each may be repeated several times.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (Ps. 27:1)

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. (Ps. 31:5)

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. (Ps. 42:2)

“The king will say . . . , ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (Matt. 25:34)

[Jesus] replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

[Jesus said,] “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” (John 6:40)

[Jesus said,] “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” (John 14:2)

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (Acts 7:59)

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:35)

Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. (Rom. 14:8)

We know that . . . we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2 Cor. 5:1)

We will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess. 4:17)

Other scripture readings, especially if a longer selection is desired, may be included.

GREETING AND PRAYER

At an appropriate time, the leader greets those present with one or both of the following sentences or in similar words.

We are gathered in the name in which we are baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

OR

We are gathered for prayer to commend name to God, who is faithful and compassionate.

The leader continues with one or more of the following or another appropriate prayer.
Let us pray.

Almighty God, look on name, whom you made your child in baptism. Comfort *her/him* with the promise of life with all your saints, the promise made sure by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

OR

Holy God, whose peace surpasses all understanding, we pray that you will free name from all earthly cares, pardon *her/his* sins, release *her/him* from pain, and grant that *she/he* may come to dwell with all your saints in everlasting glory, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

OR *(for a child who is dying)*

God our creator, you called into being this fragile life, which had seemed to us so full of promise. Give to name, whom we commit to your care, abundant life in your presence, and to us who grieve, courage to bear our loss; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Litany

The following litany or other appropriate prayers may be prayed.

Let us pray for name [saying, "Deliver your servant."].

Holy God, creator of heaven and earth,

deliver your servant.

Holy and Mighty, redeemer of the world,

deliver your servant.

Holy and Immortal, sanctifier of the faithful,

deliver your servant.

Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, one God,

deliver your servant.

By your holy incarnation,

deliver your servant.

By your cross and passion,

deliver your servant.

By your precious death and burial,

deliver your servant.

By your glorious resurrection and ascension,

deliver your servant.

By the coming of the Holy Spirit,

deliver your servant.

From all evil, all sin, and all tribulation,

deliver your servant.

From eternal death,

deliver your servant.

By the forgiveness of all *her/his* sins,

deliver your servant.

Into a place of refreshment at your heavenly banquet,

deliver your servant.

Into joy and gladness with your saints in light,

deliver your servant.

Jesus, Lamb of God,

deliver your servant.

Jesus, bearer of our sins,

deliver your servant.

Jesus, redeemer of the world,

deliver your servant.

The leader may say:

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

The Lord's Prayer is prayed by all. The leader may introduce the prayer with these or similar words.

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

OR

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.**

COMMENDATION

The leader continues.

Let us commend our *sister/brother* name to the mercy of God.

The leader and others who are present may lay a hand on the head of the dying person as the leader says one or more of the following. The leader may also trace a cross on the person's forehead as a reminder of the gift of baptism.

Name, child of God, go forth in the name of God the Father Almighty who created you; in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who redeemed you; in the name of the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon you. May you rest in peace and dwell forever in the paradise of God.

Amen.

OR

Name, our *sister/brother* in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May you return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. Surrounded by the angels and triumphant saints, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life.

Christ, the Lord of glory, who was crucified for you, bring you freedom and peace.

Christ, the High Priest, who has forgiven all your sins, keep you among his people.

Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, show you the glories of his eternal kingdom.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, enfold you with his tender care. May you see your redeemer face-to-face and rejoice in God's presence forever.

Amen.

OR

Name, our companion in faith and *sister/brother* in Christ, we entrust you to God. Go forth from this world in the love of God who created you; in the mercy of Jesus Christ who died for you; in the power of the Holy Spirit who strengthens you, at one with all the faithful, living and departed. May you rest in peace and rise in the glory of your eternal home, where grief and misery are banished, and light and joy abide.

Amen.

When death seems near, the leader continues.

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant *name*. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *her/him* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

Amen.

The following may be sung or spoken.

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace:

your word has been fulfilled.

My own eyes have seen the salvation

which you have prepared in the sight of every people:

a light to reveal you to the nations

and the glory of your people Israel.

After death, the leader may say:

Lord Jesus Christ, through water and the Spirit you brought *name* into your family; receive *her/him* and present *her/him* to God Most High.

Amen.

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Prayers may be included for the family and other bereaved. Those present may be invited to offer prayers.

Blessing

The leader says one or both of the following.

May *name* and all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Amen.

OR

Almighty God, Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us now and forever.

Amen.

OTHER SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THE SERVICE

Psalm 23 *The LORD is my shepherd*

Psalm 61:1-5 *Hear my cry, O God*

Psalm 103:8-13 *LORD, you are full of compassion*

Psalm 130 *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD*

Psalm 139:1-12 *You have searched me out and known me*

Isaiah 49:13b-16a *God will not forget you*

Isaiah 65:17-20 *A new heaven and a new earth*

Matthew 11:28-30 *I will give you rest*

John 14:1-3 *I prepare a place for you*

Romans 6:3-4, 8-11 *Death no longer has dominion*

Hymns may include the following.

In some circumstances, singing or other music may be an important element of this time of prayer. Several places are suggested in the service for the singing of a hymn, either by all gathered, or by one or several from among those present.

629 Abide with Me

565 All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night

781 Children of the Heavenly Father

790 Day by Day

618 Guide Me Ever, Great Redeemer

619 I Know That My Redeemer Lives!

621 Jesus Lives, My Sure Defense

765 Lord of All Hopefulness

767 Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me

750 Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart

627 O Day Full of Grace

773 Precious Lord, Take My Hand

623 Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

776 What God Ordains Is Good Indeed