**The Christian Funeral**

**A Witness to the Resurrection**

Death challenges the Christian community to declare its faith in the face of the "last enemy" (*I Cor. 15:20*). The Christian funeral is an act of worship offered to God by the people of God. The situation of those who mourn, their grief, loneliness, despair and doubt are real reminders of the brevity of life and the finality with which death is experienced.

In recent years, the church has recovered an appreciation for the funeral as the completion of the life of faith whose beginning is symbolized in baptism and is sustained in the Lord's Supper. There is a growing convergence among contemporary liturgies which give more authentic witness to the Easter hope.

Not all who come for this ministry will come with a lively Christian faith. But the human race of every tribe and religion, have sought for a ritual way of confronting death and the separation it requires. Our task is to deal with all who mourn with tenderness and to minister to them in word and deed from within the context of our faith in God's renewing love for them. The church is called to minister to the bereaved with the compassion of Christ.

**Ministry at the Time of Death**

When present at the time a death occurs, or if summoned to come shortly afterwards, a minister can help the family with the first act of leave-taking. A very brief act of worship may include a commendation from the funeral liturgy, followed by prayers for the bereaved and the blessing.

Words can be few and simple. A handclasp or embrace may convey more effectively personal concern for the family in their distress. The minister will often have to sense the expectations of the people.

Before leaving, the minister should make certain that, if necessary, there are friends to assist the bereaved in making funeral arrangements. Some congregations have recruited and trained a small team of volunteers who can give assistance to families in such practical matters as making contact with an undertaker, selecting a coffin at reasonable cost, notifying friends, relatives and the home congregation, organizing a place and refreshments so that the mourners may meet with friends before or after the funeral. In these and other ways, the Christian community can share in the ministry to the bereaved at the time of death.

**Planning the Funeral**

It is imperative for the minister to arrange a time to meet with the family before the funeral. The minister's first concern should be to convey sincerity of sympathy. The family should be given the opportunity to talk about how the death occurred and the life of the deceased before details of the service are discussed. The visit may be brief but it should not be hurried.

In planning the service, a brief synopsis of the funeral rite may be given, especially if family members are not familiar with the structure of the church's worship.

The location of the funeral and time are the first matters to be decided. Church members should be encouraged to use the church building for a funeral or memorial service.

The purpose of the Christian funeral as an offering of prayer and praise to God should be interpreted briefly. The address in the service is a biblical message and not a eulogy, although some personal references to the deceased may be included. If a tribute is requested, it could be contributed by a friend or family member, preferably at the beginning of the service. The family can be invited to suggest hymns and readings. In some cases, a family member might be asked to take part as a reader. Young people might find such an opportunity to participate helpful in taking leave of a parent or grandparent.

The minister will give attention in the interview to those qualities and gifts in the deceased for which the family gives thanks. These can be incorporated into the prayer of thanksgiving.

**The Visitation and Vigil**

In the interval between the death and the funeral it is customary for friends to gather with the bereaved family to express their sorrow and to offer their companionship. On occasion it may be fitting to hold a brief act of worship in the presence of family and friends, and for this purpose a resource is included among the liturgies.

**Conducting the Funeral Service**

**Location** It is most appropriate to hold the funeral of a Christian in the church. In this or a similar place, the deceased was baptized, attended worship, and served.

**The Minister**

The minister, or ministers, as representatives of the church, are responsible for the content and orderly conduct of the funeral service. Variations in the suggested order are often introduced to meet the needs of the mourners but the minister will judge their acceptability. The rites of fraternal organizations and guilds should be held at another time. Military funerals may include the Last Post and Reveille at the committal. Establishing a cordial relationship with local funeral directors is an important part of the minister's responsibility.

**A Viewing**

If the family request a viewing of the body at the funeral, it should be arranged at a time and place before the coffin is brought into the church. It is assumed that the coffin will be closed before the Service of Worship begins.

**Printed Order of Service**

It is not always feasible or necessary but a printed bulletin may greatly facilitate a funeral. As people are gathered who do not normally worship together, the bulletin can provide an outline of the service with congregational responses, the names of participants and pallbearers, a biography of the deceased, instruction concerning the procedures following the service.

**Pall and Procession**

Local customs vary but long tradition suggests that the most effective and reverent way to bring the body into the church is in a procession after the congregation has assembled. The minister(s) lead the procession, then the pallbearers with the coffin, followed by the mourners.

Some congregations provide a pall for use at a funeral in the church. Once a solemn black, the preference now is for a white pall of good design as a sign of the resurrection faith. Covering the coffin, it serves to remind us that, in death, all people are the same. It avoids calling attention to the coffin, whether simple or ornate.

A pall should be placed over the coffin at the door of the church. The text suggests that the minister, meeting the coffin at the door, receives it with appropriate words of Scripture, before leading the procession. As the procession moves forward, the congregation stand and may sing a psalm or hymn or may remain in silence.

**Position of Coffin**

If space permits, the coffin should be placed in a position that is perpendicular to the communion table. If an urn of ashes is present, it may be carried in the procession by a pall bearer and placed on a stand in front of the table and in full view of the congregation.

**Music**

The music should be selected with as much care as the Scripture. Although the requests of mourners may at times prevail, the rule should be to provide hymns that express praise to God and faith in the divine love.

**Prayers, Scripture, Sermon**

Most important is that in reading and preaching, the gospel is proclaimed in a manner that speaks to those in need. Sensitivity to the bereaved and the judgment of the minister will determine the extent to which the service varies from the usual patterns.

**Creeds**

It is always appropriate for the sermon to be followed by an affirmation of Christian faith. Because the people who gather for a funeral may include Christians of several traditions as well as people who profess no faith, the minister should choose the affirmation of faith with care.

The Apostles' Creed is the obvious preference for Christians for it relates their baptism to dying with Christ in order to live with Christ. It points to the resurrection and to the communion of saints. It is ecumenical and known to most Christians. Its images and associations speak powerfully to Christians who are rooted in the faith of the church. When a large proportion of a congregation includes people of other religious faiths or of no faith, it is suggested that the affirmation be printed in the order of service. It is not expected that people should say the creed with the congregation if they do not believe it, but rather that they may see and hear what is being professed.

The affirmation may be selected from a source that states our understanding of life and death in terms that are readily understood. The selection from *Living Faith*, chapter 10, is provided as one such alternative. The quotation from *Romans* *8* is another. At times, a hymn may be said or sung as an expression of faith.

**Holy Communion**

On occasion, a request may be made for the celebration of Holy Communion at a funeral. There is no reason to refuse such a request from a Christian family. If people attending the funeral are from several traditions, it may be better to celebrate the Eucharist on the following Sunday within the community of believers, making mention of the deceased and the mourners in the prayer after the communion.

**The Dismissal**

Very often, many people who attend the funeral will not be present at the committal service. The dismissal provides for a sense of completion, including a prayer, a brief committal and a blessing of the people.

**The Procession**

The procession forms, led by the minister, pallbearers carrying the coffin or the ashes, followed by the mourners. The congregation remains standing. The *Nunc Dimittis* may be recited by the minister or sung by the congregation. It is an appropriate way for a congregation to separate from a beloved member.

**The Committal**

The committal service may be held before or after the funeral. It should be brief and simple. If a long period of time elapses between the funeral and committal, it may be necessary to extend the service with a few extra prayers and readings.

**After the Funeral**

Bereaved persons receive considerable attention at the time of death which soon gives way to inattention as friends and family return to the duties of every day. The mourner is often left to experience silence and loneliness. The pastor should be diligent in visiting the bereaved soon after the funeral to determine how the grief process is being handled. The pastor can then determine what other support or counselling might be helpful. Members of the congregation or an elder may be alerted to specific needs for which they can give assistance in the name of the church.