



Funeral Planning

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

Introduction

Funeral planning is often a difficult task for a variety of reasons. One is grief—decisions can be especially challenging when one is weighed down by the nearness of death. Another is that the variety of funeral services practiced within society may lead to confusion as to how a funeral should be conducted. This brief booklet is provided to explain and assist in the preparation of a funeral service.

Theology of Death and Funerals

A theology of funerals can be summed up in a couple of Scripture texts. One is Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The other is Romans 3:23-24: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Both of these texts are clear: because of sin, each of us faces and deserves eternal death of body and soul, and none of us can do anything to earn salvation. However, Jesus Christ has suffered that eternal death for sin already on the cross; and risen again from the dead, He freely gives forgiveness and eternal life by means of His Word and Sacraments.

“Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life,” says John 3:16: salvation is solely the work of Jesus and His gift to us.

A Christian funeral reflects this Law and Gospel. We speak fondly and respectfully of the one who has died, though at the same time we acknowledge his sinfulness and need for Christ’s forgiveness. This is hardly speaking ill: it is the same confession that the deceased has made by his church membership. (Thus, except for very rare and extraordinary circumstances, funerals at Good Shepherd are reserved for church members in good standing, or non-members who have received pastoral care before their demise from a pastor serving the congregation.) All the more, we proclaim that Christ has died for the sins of the deceased, and Christ is risen to give him eternal life. This hope-filled proclamation is carried out by both pastor and congregation in a beautiful service that includes chanted psalms, hymns, Scripture readings, responses, the Creed and prayers. In speaking and singing, those in attendance put Christ’s life-giving Word into each others’ ears.

Two Families

In planning a funeral service, it is helpful to keep in mind that the deceased is a member of two families: his household and his church family. The Christian funeral service reflects the faith and practice of his church family, as much as a family reception would reflect the faith and practice of his household. (Hopefully, the faith of both families overlaps significantly, though this is not always the case.) In preparing the funeral service, the pastor welcomes the conversation and assistance of the household in determining significant Scripture readings and appropriate hymns; and appreciates that family’s deference to faith and practice of the congregation.

Planning a Funeral

Various Events of a Funeral

Funeral services normally consist of four different events: viewing, funeral, committal and reception.

The viewing is normally held at the funeral home, usually the night before the funeral. It serves as a time for family and friends to view the body of the deceased in a composed and peaceful state. It also provides time for informal visiting with one another. Along with the viewing at the funeral home, the casket is normally open in the narthex prior to the funeral service for those who wish to pay their respects.

The funeral service is a formal and hope-filled proclamation of Christ's victory over death, specifically for the one who has died. The funeral service of a church member is normally held at the church. When the remains are not present at the service, it is called a memorial service.

The committal service takes place at the cemetery. The grave (or other resting place) is blessed and the remains of the deceased are committed to God's care until the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Like the funeral service, this is a formal, dignified rite. It is also brief, usually lasting no more than ten minutes.

A reception or luncheon is often a part of the day's events. A meal together signifies both life and fellowship in the midst of grief, and provides time for conversation and story-telling. If individuals wish to say a few words about the deceased, this is the setting in which this takes place. The reception is usually held in the parish fellowship hall, although it sometimes takes place at a private residence or other accommodation.

The Order of Events

The funeral, committal and reception can take place in several different orders.

1. Funeral/Committal/Reception: The traditional order of events begins with the funeral, followed by the committal and then the reception. This is a dignified order with much to commend to it, as evidenced by its long tradition and continued popularity. Some have chosen a different order, however, because this sequence can mean significant travel time to the cemetery for committal, and then back to the fellowship hall for the reception.

2. Committal/Memorial Service/Reception: In this order, people first meet at the cemetery for the committal service, then return to the church for a memorial service and reception. This reduces travel time, as well as effort for those who are elderly or infirm.

3. Funeral/Reception/Committal: The third sequence places the reception between the funeral service and the committal. This honors the traditional sequence of funeral/committal, but reduces travel time.

When services involve military honors, these normally take place in conjunction with the committal. It is the standard practice of the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery to conduct military honors just prior to the committal service.

Other arrangements: For various reasons, it might be preferable or necessary to make arrangements that differ from all three of the above. Please consult with the pastor to discuss other arrangements.

Planning the Funeral Service Proper

The funeral service may be found on pages 278-281 of our hymnal, the *Lutheran Service Book*. It is a beautiful service in which pastor and worshipers both take part in proclaiming Christ's victory over death in their respective callings. This established order also makes service planning quite simple.

A typical funeral service will feature 2-3 congregational hymns: while silence or wailing denotes grief in Scripture, singing indicates rejoicing and hope. Hymns may be selected from the hymnals used by the congregation (the deceased's church family), either *Lutheran Service Book* or *The Lutheran Hymnal*. If the family would like a solo, these two hymnals serve as the resource for special music as well.

The funeral service is also rich in the proclamation of salvation and eternal life from the Word of God. To demonstrate that this joyous news runs throughout the Bible, there are normally four different Scripture readings: a psalm for the procession, an Old Testament lesson, an epistle and a reading from one of the Gospels. The family is invited to share favorite hymns and Scripture texts when meeting with the pastor: the deceased's confirmation verse is often very fitting for a funeral sermon. The pastor is also happy to provide hymns and texts.

Where eulogies and other tributes to the deceased are desired, they are reserved for the reception.

Planning the Reception

The fellowship committee is happy to provide a luncheon or reception in memory of a church member who has died, whether the reception takes place in the fellowship hall or a private residence. Should the family desire photographic displays, video tributes or favorite music of the deceased, this is the appropriate setting. Some audio-visual equipment is available onsite: please check with the pastor.

Advance Planning

Given the stresses upon survivors at the time of death, planning one's funeral in advance can be a blessing to one's family. Members of Good Shepherd are welcome to fill out the enclosed form: two copies are included so that a form can be kept on file both in the church office and one's personal records at home.

My Funeral Plan

As a member in good standing of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, these are my wishes for my Christian funeral services:

Sequence of Events: I would like services to take place in the following order (check one):

- Funeral, Committal, Reception
- Committal, Memorial Service, Reception
- Funeral, Reception, Committal
- Other, provided my request can be accommodated (please specify):

I would like the following Scripture readings:

I would like the following hymns from *The Lutheran Hymnal* or *Lutheran Service Book* to be sung:

Signed:

Date:

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