

How to Prepare and Lead a Healing Funeral Service

By Rev. Keith D. Sundberg

The Lord is my shepherd,

Welcome

Peace to you and welcome to this study of

“How to Prepare and Lead a Healing Funeral Service.”

My name is Keith Sundberg. I am a retired Presbyterian pastor who also served as a funeral director for over eleven and a half years. Listening to several hundred services a year, during my tenure at the Burton Funeral Home in Erie, Pennsylvania, I had the unique opportunity to explore helpful and not so helpful funeral services. I also read, extensively, books about grief counseling. After reflecting on how the Bible handled death, I began to shape my understanding around these sources of insight.

The recurring theme in my studies was personal storytelling. As I met with families, I sensed they were asking for more than for me to simply echo what their loved one accomplished during their lifetime. They wanted to understand what their relative's life meant to them.

I found in the scriptures a model for accomplishing both. Biblical writers left us eulogies that preach. They did not simply list the lifetime accomplishments of each Old and New Testament character, they interpreted their lives and sought to share what God taught us through them.

These lessons are designed to help you prepare a “Homily/Eulogy” and a service that tells an interpreted story of the person you celebrate. They are designed to begin to heal those who loved the deceased and through whom God blessed their lives.

I hope in the years to come you will find leading funerals as much a personally enriching experience as I have. I remember with gratitude all the families who entrusted me to celebrate their loved one. I trust you will as well.

Keith Sundberg

I shall not want.

Table of Contents

Welcome

Preface: Researching the Funeral Service

Lessons

- Lesson 1: The Spider Web
- Lesson 2: King David
- Lesson 3: A Notebook
- Lesson 4: The Order of Worship
- Lesson 5: Writing the Service
- Lesson 6: Scripture and Homily/Eulogy
- Lesson 7: Committal

Examples and Personal Reflections

1. A Bulletin Template
2. Words of Welcome
3. Calls to Worship
4. Invocations
5. Examples of Scripture and Homilies/Eulogies
6. Statements of Faith
7. Pastoral Prayer and Lord's Prayer
8. Benedictions
9. Committal Service
10. A Reflection on Death
11. When to Say No
12. The Funeral Home Staff
13. A Funeral Service Planning Guide
14. Prayers at the Funeral Home
15. Children: A Personal Beginning Place
16. Children: Death of a Premature Baby
17. Children: A Letter to Jill and Matt's Miscarried Little One
18. Children: Death of a Child
19. Children: Memorial Service at Erie Homes for Children and Adults
20. Children: Guidance for Parents
21. Children: Books for Children
22. Children: A Service for Pets

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

Preface: Researching the Funeral Service

A funeral home that had over 400 services a year was the ideal place for me to research the dynamics of a healing funeral. Burton's served most every Christian denomination in Erie and the Jewish community as well. As a funeral director I was able to ask family members what they thought about their service and collect data for myself.

The Jewish service was a series of prayers and a glowing eulogy with superlative adjectives about the deceased. They were always (and I am not exaggerating) the best mother or father who ever lived. And to any given family there was no other mother or father. The rabbi did not offer a sermon per se; it was more of a verbal obituary.

The Jehovah Witness service was a half-hour lecture about the salvation story of Christ. There may be a prayer at the beginning and the end, but no music.

Catholic services followed the mass, of course. The homily was usually a standard one by the priest. Family members would offer a eulogy at the end of liturgy just before the commendation. In recent years, priests have included personal stories about the deceased as part of their homily.

Episcopal, Methodist, and Lutheran services followed a prescribed liturgy, with personal stories woven in as the pastor was inclined to do.

Presbyterian and Baptist services were more freeform in liturgical order. Both (broadly speaking) were apt to read a series of biblical passages concerning death, heaven, and resurrection. The pastor could be personal but their emphasis was on finding biblical references. Homilies were generally about grief and finding a way to comfort people.

The continuum was from only personal stories to no personal allusions, or a service with only scripture and theology. When asked, the family members' affirmations were about services that were personal. My question to myself was "Why?" The church's assumption and tradition has been that reassurances about salvation and heaven were most helpful, but are they?

So, I began my research into the nature of grief. What does healing have to do with stories about the deceased, and how can a funeral service help family and friends who experience loss?

There are seven short lessons followed by illustrations and examples for each part of the service.

I have also included reflections on a variety of subjects such as the death of young children; the death of premature babies; how to help parents deal with the grief of their children; how to do a pet service; what can be said at the funeral of someone with mental disabilities; and working with the funeral home staff. There is also a guide to offer to church members who wish to plan their own service.

If you were to ask me where to begin, I would say read "A Reflection on Death." Only when we understand what it is and what it isn't are we ready to speak about life.

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

Lesson 1: The Spider Web

As a funeral director I encountered church-attending families and non-church goers. Surprisingly, at least to me, was that the most frequently asked question was not “Is my loved one going to heaven?, but “What did their life mean?”

I found help as to why in the work of psychologist J. William Worden, Ph.D., In his book, Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner¹. He lists four tasks people needed to address to heal from grief. They are:

Task 1: To Accept the Reality of the Loss

Task 2: To Work Through to the Pain of Grief

Task 3: To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing

Task 4: To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on with Life

Task 1 deals with believing that someone has died. That may sound familiar if you have read the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Worden says that “traditional rituals such as the funeral help many bereaved people move toward acceptance.” (p. 13)

Task 2 addresses the emotional pain, noting that people may choose not to feel, or to cope by idealizing the deceased.

Task 3 is a search for what has been lost; what does their death mean? The future becomes foggy as they seek to understand how to live without this person they have loved.

Task 4 suggests that the goal is not to forget someone but to live on informed by their memories. He writes, “The counselor’s task then becomes not to help the bereaved give up their relationship with the deceased, but to help them find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional lives—a place that will enable them to go on living effectively in the world.” (p.17)

So, healing from grief means naming what has been lost when someone dies and weaving a story or eulogy of who they were. From that narrative a surviving loved one can draw memories and insights for their life in the years to come.

A picture, a metaphor of the process evolved in my imagination- that of a spider web.

Most definitions of grief will explore the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual implications of loss. I tend to think in pictures...imagine that our mind and soul is like a spider web with the main strands emanating from the center. They each represent one of the people we love most in the world.

The short interconnecting strands are all the daily and lifelong connections we have made with them. When the long strand is pulled, all the short strands are broken. Besides sadness, the feeling is one of confusion because we lose who we are.

The work of grief takes months and even years to identify what was lost and to make reconnections. For example, a widow may worry about all the chores her husband did to keep up the house. Part of her healing is to find someone else to do them. Her brain is re-woven one strand at a time.

In loss, the opposite of re-member is dis-member. Maybe a more helpful word for the latter would be dis-orient. Grief pulls apart the mind and heart of the bereaved. People feel lost and confused. Some liken their experience to that of a nervous breakdown. Not In all cases, but in some of the most significant losses.

The funeral attends to the more personal stories and memories of the deceased. These stories are just floating about in the family’s memories. That which was connected is now disconnected, and needs a new secure web to draw from in the years to come.

So, to re-member is to weave memories together into a meaningful story. From it we recall the wisdom, love, and knowledge that our loved one embodied. Their spiritual insight continues to inform our lives as long as we live. The funeral seeks to share those experiences and insights in a meaningful narrative. The homily/eulogy has qualities of both forms of expression at the same time. The pastor's hope is to offer one possible account of the life that has been lived and to help put people back together.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Choose the memories of someone you have lost: a family member or friend.

What do you miss most about them? _____

How have you kept those memories alive? _____

¹Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1991

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Lesson 2: King David

Scholars believe that initially the Old Testament stories were organized by five primary editors. They are known as J (Yahweh), E (Elohim), D (Deuteronomist), P (Priestly) and the Chronicle writers. If you haven't

already studied this theory, I would encourage you to do so. Suffice it to say they remembered the accounts of Israel's history in meaningful narratives, for example, the two different accounts of creation in Genesis one and Genesis two.

This explains why the Bible records a couple of versions of the same person. For our purposes here, it is beneficial to note that a deceased individual can be remembered in any number of ways. I suggest that the biblical editors' approach to gathering disconnected stories and weaving them together was in fact a form of eulogy.

With this in mind, we can recognize I Kings 2:10-11 as a death notice.

¹⁰ Then David lay down with his ancestors and was buried in David's City. ¹¹ He ruled over Israel forty years—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. I Kings 2

Announcing deaths to the community in the local paper has changed since I worked at the funeral home, but these two simple lines in Kings did the job thousands of years ago. It gave the name of the deceased, the town, and the length of time he ruled. Instead of a eulogy to *follow*, the Bible shared his life stories *before* the death notice. There are, to the historically informed reader, two story lines offered- one by the Jahwist editor and the other by the Elohist writer. Both interpret the life of David from their own theological assumptions.

That is not to say that even the death notice itself is not eulogy. The number "forty" implies that David ruled a full reign, a complete reign, a full life, a complete life. The author is interpreting David's life at its end. Here is a life worth understanding, reflecting on, and interpreting for our own life. This is a life story that preaches.

I would suggest that this model is a guide for sharing the life story of the person whose funeral you prepare. What did the deceased person's life mean to those who knew and loved *him*? What did God teach them through *her* choices, accomplishments, and experiences?

In preparing a funeral service, using the biblical approach, chose a passage that illustrates and interprets the deceased's life. Compose a homily/eulogy that weaves the family's disjointed memories into a story that shares the wisdom this person's life embodied. Let their choices and insights preach to all who are gathered.

For a remarkable female friend who changed our community even as she was dismissed by the men, I told the story of the Syrophenician woman. Both these women could have moved Jesus to change his mind.

For my father, I used Psalm 1, for by teaching us the right way to live, his five children lived meaningful lives.

My great aunt who buried two husbands and four children but remained faithful to God and the church, I compared to Ruth.

There are probably several biblical characters or stories that could have worked for them and might work for your funeral. (Remember the two accounts of David's life.) Grief is very personal, and loved ones and friends mean different things to each other. I think it wise to suggest, during the service, that in the years to come, folks might choose their own passage to remember the deceased. I remind them as time passes so insight will grow into what this individual's life meant to them.

PRACTICE: Brainstorm some passages, verses, or biblical characters to illustrate someone who was

- a. A teacher _____
- b. A doctor _____

c. A housewife _____

d. A loving parent _____

What biblical references would illustrate your life? _____

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

Lesson 3: A Notebook

I cringe when a pastor begins a service by saying, apologetically, “I didn’t know the deceased.” There is rarely a good reason to say that. It implies that the celebrant didn’t take the time to get to know the family and their loved one. Every funeral service preparation must begin with a time of sharing about the person who died.

My preference has always been to meet at the church rather than their home. It cuts down on interruptions from friends stopping in and allows the family to focus on the task at hand. I urge them to include anyone who wants to share, including grandchildren. Many folks have thanked me for the time that everyone gathered to tell stories. It begins the healing process.

In addition to a rough draft of a funeral bulletin, I bring with me just a small spiral ring notebook on which to take notes. In writing the service itself, I tear out the pages and arrange them on my desk like a paper quilt. (It is not unlike the way we once prepared to write a research paper with our index cards.) Each story told is another bullet point on a new line. Write on only one side of each page.

Questions concerning the bulletin and service:

- Are there family members or good friends who would like to speak at the service? If so, urge them to write a manuscript of their reflections so they don’t forget something important and are concise.
- Would you like to have an open mic for anyone to share a memory?
- Are there meaningful poems that someone would like to read?
- Did your loved one or you have favorite scripture passages you would like included?
- Did your loved one or you have favorite hymns?
- Would you like a soloist or instrumentalist for the service?
- Were there omissions or misspellings in the obituary that I should be aware of?
- Will there be a casket or an urn?
- Will we be going to the cemetery following the service? If so, will it include everyone or be private?
- Will there be a luncheon or meal for family and friends? Do you want it listed in the bulletin?
- Would you like pallbearers listed in the bulletin?
- Would you prefer a cross or a photograph on the cover?
- Will some flowers be left at the church following the service?
- Will the casket be open at the church, or will you say your goodbyes beforehand? (If asked I will offer that a closed casket during the service helps folks to worship better. Your church may have a directive to close the casket before the liturgy begins.)
- What time would you like to arrive at the church on the day of the service? (If the service is at the funeral home, the funeral director will work this out with the family.)

Questions concerning the life of the loved one:

- What stories and memories do you have to share with me? If they need to be prompted, then ask if there were favorite sayings or habits? What did your family do for vacations, holidays, mealtimes, and fun? There may be favorite recipes for a mother or hobbies for a father. Usually, a little push is all that is needed. Note who shared and clarify the details with questions.

Concluding questions and comments:

- May I have the email address for someone who can proofread the bulletin?
- May I join you at the funeral home for the family viewing time prior to calling hours?
- Would you like me to offer a prayer as we conclude our time of sharing? (Not everyone does but most will say yes.)

Thank them for sharing and for inviting you to preside. (It is after all a sacred trust.)

PERSONAL REFLECTION

If a family asks you to simply say a few words rather than make the service personal, what would you talk about? What do you believe people need to hear?

If you were to prepare a list about your own life for you family to use in your funeral, of what would you make note?

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

Lesson 4: The Order of Worship

For denominations such as Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans and Methodists, the funeral liturgy is prescribed. For those believers the familiar words of the prayers bring comfort and solace. There is, however, some freedom to personalize those services to speak about the deceased and to address the needs of family and friends.

For other churches I think it best for presiders to design their own service. I suggest following their Sunday service outline, or I recommend the Calvin order.

In the Reformed Tradition, John Calvin used the flow of liturgy in the Catholic mass to suggest a meaningful outline for protestant Sunday services. The mass was based on the Jewish Sabbath prayers. So, this flow is time tested.

The basic outline is in the box to the right. It is still flexible, allowing for special music, the reading of poems, showing a video of pictures, or the celebration of communion.

Order of Worship

Prelude
Words of Welcome
Call to Worship
Hymn and Processional
Invocation
Hebrew and Christian Scripture Readings
Homily/Eulogy and Remembrances
Affirmation of Faith
(Celebration of Communion)
Pastoral Prayer and Lord's Prayer
(Special Music)
Hymn
Prayers of Committal (if no cemetery service is to follow)
Benediction
Recessional
Postlude

This liturgical format moves from life to death to resurrection. It is not a clear-cut progression, for all three affirmations are present from beginning to end. There is simply an emphasis on life or death or resurrection in each of the three sections.

The Words of Welcome acknowledges the name of the loved one, the years of life and the gathered presence of family and friends. It affirms a life that was lived and the lives of those present.

The Call to Worship calls upon and acknowledges the God of life. The hymn may be a family favorite and may affirm faith in God. If the family suggests several, then the pastor needs to assign them to meaningful places in the service.

The Invocation is a transition calling upon God and asking for comfort, and healing in living beyond the physical presence of the deceased.

The scripture and homily/eulogy focus on the life lived. They both articulate and illustrate what this life meant to all who are present. And they affirm the lessons God taught through this individual.

The Affirmation of Faith is a transition in the service from death to new life. It is a step toward living one's faith with new understanding. Despite death, congregants will live on in the presence of God blessed by the memories of the loved one.

Communion may be celebrated at this point in the service if it is the tradition of the congregation.

The Pastoral Prayer is about strength and faith to live in the days ahead. Thanks is expressed to God for the deceased, healing is sought for those who grieve, and memory is invoked to retain the meaningful stories into the days ahead. God's shepherding is hoped for and affirmed.

The closing Hymn will often be a choice of the family and will reflect their understanding of faith, or that of the deceased.

Prayers, normally said at the cemetery, may be offered at the conclusion of the liturgy. This is needed if the family is not attending the burial, or if the cremated remains are being scattered, or if the burial has already taken place.

The Benediction may be traditional or include words of blessing.

This order of worship parallels the biblical refrain of life – death – resurrection.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What would I say to a family request for a soloist to sing "Ave Maria?"

Would I feel comfortable using the Catholic prayers of commendation at the end of the liturgy?

How do I feel about secular songs being part of the service?

Would I make an exception for a child's favorite song if the mother asked me?

Would I invite Catholic relatives and friends to sprinkle the casket with Holy Water at the cemetery?

I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -they comfort me.

Lesson 5: Writing the Service

As you prepare, I believe you will discover as I have that a funeral is not about death; it is about life. Equally true is that the service is not *for* the deceased but for the *living*. Death is not something we know anything about. It is the mystery. We have things we believe about death but that is all. What we know is life and even at a funeral that is all we can talk about with some certainty.

Most services I lead include the verses from Ecclesiastes 3. It is an inclusive affirmation of a life well lived. Psalm 1 reflects a life lived by God's law. I Corinthians 13 celebrates a life lived by love. The Beatitudes outline Jesus's new law for living. And the Golden Rule reflects the wisdom of the whole Bible. There are countless other verses to choose from.

I believe the most helpful service is the one that has been custom-made from beginning to end. That doesn't mean that I don't have old prayers I can plug in for the current service. But I do it with thought as to why it is helpful today. When I have time, and when the situation requires it, I write a new prayer-- actually, as often as possible.

If all deaths were the same, then the same calls to worships, the same prayers, the same scripture readings could be the same every time. But no deaths are the same. People die at different ages and under different circumstances...and for that matter no life is the same.

As you reflect on the stories shared by the family, you will get a feeling for how the service needs to go. Even if it is a tragic death from accident or illness, the search in the liturgy needs to be for life and what will live (be remembered) beyond this difficult day. A child's death is the most delicate to compose. But even then, there is life to celebrate and affirm.

Chose a call to worship that indicates the tenor/the focus of the service. Offer an invocation that speaks to grief and hope and thanksgiving. Place hymns thoughtfully in the service so that the lyrics reflect where the congregation is in worship. Give thought to every part of the liturgy so that the congregation is led gently forward in their grief and in their search for life and meaning.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Do you believe that someone who dies of cancer lost their battle?

How would you approach the death of an infant?

Is sadness appropriate for someone who dies at 100?

Friend, my hope is that you will write your own prayers and find a style of writing the homily/eulogy that is uniquely yours. With anything new, however, we need examples and a beginning place. To that end, in the Examples and Personal Reflections, I have included some of my words for you to consider. Feel free to use them as your own. In time and with practice I trust all your words will be your own source of insight. Keith

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Lesson 6: Scripture and Homily/Eulogy

In preparing to write, arrange the pages from your notebook on your desk so that they are side by side and all face up. Reread them and sit quietly with them for a while. Is there a theme? Is there an insight reflected in the stories? What did the family learn from their loved one? How do those ideas connect with a biblical story, wisdom, or character? What do you see that maybe they didn't?

Scripture for the service should be selected thoughtfully to reflect what you believe needs to be heard by the congregation. The better you choose, the more they will listen. Although passages about death and resurrection are meaningful, I don't believe they should be used exclusively. We can bear witness to our faith through the liturgy spoken and sung.

If there are family members to speak and share, I pause in the middle (or toward the end) of my reflection and allow them to offer their memories. Then I share my concluding remarks or story. Offering them together as family and pastor ties this part of the service as one voice.

All the family stories will not fit neatly into a well-outlined homily. At some point you will find yourself making sure you didn't leave anything out. The homily/eulogy is after all two forms of narration that have been woven together.

And contrary to the thoughts of some churches, this is not a time to "save" people. I believe a search for biblical passages needs to be focused on celebrating God's presence through the life of the deceased. This is the focus to frame your homily/eulogy around and through.

As you plan the service keep in mind a grieving person has a limited attention span. So, choose words sparingly. People will tune out a long series of readings or lengthy prayers.

The challenge of writing homilies/eulogies has pushed me to examine what I believe life is about. It has taken me down roads I probably never would have explored if I didn't have a funeral to deliver on a specific day, at a particular time. It has forced me to look below the surface of people's lives and understand them as God understands them. It has enabled me to grow in my affirmation of life in all its nuances and expressions by countless people.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What do you believe the funeral is for?

What personal understanding of life and faith do you hope to convey when you lead a service?

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

Lesson 7: Committal

The committal is itself a short worship service following a life, death and resurrection flow. The order that I have found meaningful is as follows:

Sentences of Scripture
The Goodbye
The Committal Prayer
The Declaration
The Benediction or Blessing
The Laying of Flowers on the Casket or around the Urn

The Sentences of Scripture can be a number of favorite verses spoken by Christ, or about resurrection and heaven.

The Goodbye: With everyone's hearts and minds focused on memories of their loved one, the presence of the deceased seems palpable. It feels right and good to address them and say goodbye. We have always said goodbye to them our whole lives and on this day of parting we say it one last time. Ironically, in the days ahead, we will say hello again to them over and over in our remembering and our prayers. Here we can wish them well; to be healed of their illness; to be reunited with those who have gone before them; and reception of all that they enjoyed most on earth that will make heaven, heaven for them. These wishes often solicit smiles in confirmation of everyone's memories. Make sure to turn and face the casket or urn as you speak.

The Committal Prayer commends the deceased to the earth and God's care.

The Declaration affirms our faith that the loved one is not here but with God, yet remains in our hearts.

The Benediction offers good words to all who are present.

The Laying of a Flower on the Casket or around the Urn is offered as a symbol of love from the giver to the deceased.

When there is no cemetery involved, then this outline can be adapted and offered at the conclusion of the funeral.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What scripture passages do you believe bring comfort to people at the time of a funeral?

_____	_____
_____	_____

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. (NRSV)

The Family of

FULL NAME

Father or Mother of

Grandfather or Grandmother of

Brother or Sister of

Preceded in Death by

Pallbearers

IN MEMORIAM

FULL NAME

Birthday – Death Day

Photo of deceased or cross or meaningful image

Location of Service

THE WORSHIP OF GOD
AND THE CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF

FULL NAME

Date _____ Time _____

PRELUDE _____ *Name of Musician*

WORDS OF WELCOME _____ *Name of one presiding*

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN (Page number or insert) _____ Tune

INVOCATION

POEM (if requested)

HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE READINGS
HOMILY/EULOGY AND REMEMBRANCES
(Names of individuals sharing stories)

*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH
PASTORAL PRAYER AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

SPECIAL MUSIC

COMMITTAL PRAYERS (if not going to cemetery)

HYMN (Page number or insert) _____ Tune

BENEDICTION OR BLESSING

RECESSIONAL

POSTLUDE

_____ will be interred at the _____ Cemetery
immediately following the service. (or privately)

*Friends and family are cordially invited to attend a
Luncheon at _____*

The Words of Welcome offer hospitality by taking care of questions that people bring to the service.

Welcome on behalf of the family

On behalf of (use first names of immediate family), welcome to this time of worship and thanksgiving for their (name of loved one). They are grateful for your prayers and kind support.

Introduce yourself if not at the church.

My name is _____. I am the pastor at _____ Church. (And share how you know the family).

Service notes (as needed)

During the time of remembrances, the family would like to invite you to share a brief story or some aspect about their loved one that you will always remember. You are invited to stand and a mic will be brought to you, or please come to the mic placed here in the aisle.

At the end of the Pastoral Prayer, we will offer together the Lord's Prayer, or familiar to many as the Our Father. The Presbyterian tradition is to use debts and debtors. If your tradition is to use trespasses, please do so. I just ask that the debtors slow down and let the trespassers catch up.

Following the service everyone is invited to a luncheon here at the church (or another location). Give permission to wait here if the family is going to the cemetery). This announcement is often made by the funeral director at the cemetery.

Reason of Service

We are here to mourn the death and celebrate the life of (full name). He/ she was born in (city and state) on (birthday) and died here (or other location) on (date). Between those important dates are all the important days, for they are the ones that he/she spent with us.

Expectations for the Service

In all fairness to (first name) we cannot say all that he meant to us in our time together. His life meant many things and had many layers of insight and blessing. Today we just begin to gather to ourselves who he was to us. He made sure he would never be forgotten by becoming part of our hearts and our souls.

Introduction of the Call to Worship if relevant.

For Psalm 121: A little boy once asked, "If God is in heaven, why do we look down when we pray?" His point was well taken. Grief makes us look down and into ourselves. If, however, we look up just slightly, we will see that we are not alone in our loss. We are surrounded by loving family and friends. If we look a little higher, just a little higher than the hills, then our hearts can be consoled by God who wept first when (our loved one) died and understands our need for comfort and reassurance. Let us look to our God as we call ourselves to worship reading responsively Psalm 121.

Greeting (to be inclusive. if some family members are Catholic): May the peace of Christ be with you all. **And also with you.** Let us begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (Make the sign of the cross if you are comfortable.)

Psalm 90: 1,2,3,4,12,17a

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

**Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you formed the earth and world,
from ever lasting to ever lasting you are God.**

You turn us back to dust, and say "Turn back, you mortals."

**For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in
the night.**

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

**Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love... Let the favor of the Lord our God
be upon us.**

Psalm 65: 5,7; Psalm 139: 7-10 (appropriate for those who love oceans and lakes)

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,

O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth

and of the farthest seas.

You silence the roaring of the seas,

the roaring of their waves,

the tumult of the peoples.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Psalm 46:1-7

Psalm 90: 1-4,12

Psalm 121: 1-8

Here are several examples to consider. In choosing, select the one the best fits the service.

Gracious and loving God, we have found many words to describe our living but few that touch the depth of grief with the loss of someone we love. Yet in your comforting presence we have felt your grace and peace that is far more profound than any words or any embrace. Be near to us now as we come in search of new life for ourselves and for one another. That in the moments we share in worship, we might remember ____'s life with thanksgiving and then leave this place with your gift of hope for her and for each of us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Gracious God in whom all heaven and earth depends, on days like this we come to realize that from our birth to our death we rely on you alone. To you we look for blessings upon our families even beyond our own lives. May your Spirit rest this day upon the family and friends of (full name). For as you care for her in heaven, so too we look for your comforting embrace here on earth. Be attentive to our needs as we gather today to remember and look with hope for the days ahead. Visit upon us your peace. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Holy Spirit, you are the one whom Jesus sent when he had to leave us. So this day we turn to you because you are the one who always comes when we need someone near, someone who understands, someone who knows if there are words to say or just a presence to abide with us. Each of us needs different care, each of us needs different assurances, each of us has different hopes for this day. So we wait in quiet contemplation for your unfailing ministry to us. Enable us to both celebrate and mourn, to sense the loss her absence means and anticipate the joy of your embrace of her in heaven. Come Holy Spirit, our tie between heaven and earth, between yesterday and tomorrow, between life and life eternal. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Come Holy Spirit, and be among us in these few minutes of worship together. We have come from near and far to honor a woman we have known and loved and to give thanks to you for the gift of her to us. Speak to us in words that are said and notes and hymns that are played (she was a church organist) so that we can hear your reassurance of heaven in life after life and in life now for each of us. This we pray through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Holy Spirit, (name) absence seems to create a gaping hole within us. He has always been here, and we must have thought that he always would. But now he is with you, and we are wondering if this sadness will be all that remains. As you care for him in heaven, care for us on earth. Heal him of his great age and make him new like the morning. Heal us and grant us memories of love and living. Fill our empty spaces with insight and understanding, knowing that though faith, hope, and love abide, it is love that sustains us all our days: his love for us and our love for him; your love for him and for each of us; and our love for you. Come, Holy Spirit, abide with us as we fill our emptiness with the joyful memories of a life of faith that was our husband, grandfather, great-grandfather, and friend. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

*Homily/Eulogy for Norm
Habakkuk 2: 18-20*

To know Norm was for me to gain insight into the lives of the prophets of the Old Testament. They were brusque men who said what they thought and lived what they believed. They tended not to mince words and had a knack for offending. Although we don't know their social life, their aggressiveness suggested that they weren't worried about making friends. They were self-confident and insecure at the same time and often railed even against God for the unfairness of life. As uncomfortable as they made others feel, people listened to them. They had clarity of thought and an expression of sheer emotion that people could relate to and they felt compelled to listen. Their words have endured through the centuries and still inform our lives today.

I read recently that prophets were not necessarily writers. Others wrote down what they said. Norm came to my office on March 21, 2001, and told me about himself in order to make sure that his thoughts about himself were expressed today. He said he was a high school dropout, and then he admitted that he was kicked out. He told me that he had many deficiencies in his education.

He said, "I can't spell. I can't read aloud. I skip words. So, when I read aloud, I can't understand what I am reading." He also shared that he had no math training. Yet he opened his own shop to build machines for small companies that couldn't afford the more expensive ones. All his technical knowledge was self-taught. He proudly told me he was a registered engineer in three states.

Prophets were dramatists, artistic in nature, and flamboyant in expression. They acted in dramatic pictures and symbolic gestures that illustrated their point. They relied on their creativity to communicate what they believed. Habakkuk attacked people who believed in idols, carvings that they worshiped: a little ironic to my way of thinking, since prophets understood the power of the symbol. Maybe that's why he yelled so much, knowing that he had much visible power to overcome to make his point.

I hope you are beginning to see why I chose Habakkuk to talk about Norm. Norm was one of those people to whom you had to listen past the tough talk and abrasiveness to hear what he was saying. His simple statements were more profound than they seemed. He understood some of the darker, more painful aspects of living. He also understood and saw some of its greatest beauty. His sculptures were a testament to the aging properties of wood, the design of creation; the ingenuity of bone and muscle, feathers and skin; the ability of the human mind to appreciate what it sees and experiences; the endless wondering about the ingenious Holy Mind that conceived this world.

They were idols in the best sense of the word. They were conduits of perceiving the mind of Norm. We were and are able to look through them and see his appreciation for God and for life. He was a master carver.

As talented and as brilliant as he was, he did not know how to tell his children that he loved them when they were young. He learned that as he grew older and they listened to him through his relationship with Jill. He told me five years ago that he was proud of what he had done for his family, for the two of you and Eleanor. He showed you his love though in the home he designed and built himself. He told you with the stern words and rules he set. He told you by coming home directly after work each night.

And you told him you loved him in the way he modeled for you, by the care you gave these last few weeks and the acceptance of his painful decision not to seek healing any more and to die. As much as he said he was a loner and his basement was his paradise, acceptance by his family was very

important to him, as were the ribbons he won in contests. Eleanor told him it was arrogance; I think he was simply looking for some approval.

I think to a certain extent Eleanor was an idol to him. She was his link to God and when she died, he lost his means of understanding the Almighty, so he decided it was time to go and confront God directly. God help God when they first talk! Norm told me the last time I saw him that I just keep getting fatter and fatter. Even from his death bed he found a way to confront one of his pastors with uncompromising truth.

He shared with me two philosophical statements when we met those many years ago. The first was, "Every person on earth has responsibilities." And the other was, "People want security—their security is their own responsibility." Those are interesting comments given that he served our country in World War II as a pilot of troop carriers. He was very proud of his service and continued to fly gliders after his military service was over. As for why he stopped coming to church, Eleanor politely said to me that it was because of his foot. I wondered if it was because he was a staunch Republican and Jim and I are Democrats. But my hunch is that he was practicing his philosophy of life and living as he believed.

Norm Jr. told me that his father often alluded to Joe the Gremlin who lived on his shoulder and brought him luck and kept him safe. My hunch is that God will look a bit like Joe to Norm when he meets God face to face. There will be in his conversations with the Almighty flashbacks to the design of your home, the carving of sculptures, the disarming statements of truth that he dispensed throughout his life, and the care that you gave him as a family: for God is love, and in the images of love in his life-- Norm will recognize the Holy Presence that has always been with him. May he rest in peace.

Homily/Eulogy for Esther
Proverbs31: selected verses

I have often wondered if the last chapter of Proverbs was written by a man or a woman. It seems quite idealistic and almost dreamy, sort of like what a man wished a woman would be. It's as if the writer is saying, "If I was going to have a perfect wife (and under his breath), which I don't, she would be like this."

It would have been interesting to have discussed this passage with Esther and asked her opinion of it. Although I didn't have the chance to do just that--- from listening to the stories of her family, I think I can imagine what she would have said. I don't think she would have had any problem with it and probably recognized herself in it and commended it to other women.

For the women present who have chosen this form of being a wife, you are to be commended; for those women who have chosen another definition of wife and mother, I also commend you. There are many ways to be a wife and a mother. What is important is that you choose who you will be and not see scripture or the definitions of others as definitive for you. All scripture is culturally specific, and not all ideas can be simply used as a blueprint for life in every century. But for Ester, for the time in which she was born, and the time in which she became a wife and mother, Proverbs provided an acceptable definition of what a good woman was to be.

She did everything precisely and well. Her table was set with all the correct appointments. Vegetables were served in bowls, never out of the pot off the stove; napkins were linen and not paper; the silverware was selected for the courses being served; flowers were just so; and I assume that proper etiquette was observed. She was an excellent cook and her coffee was to be savored but her breakfasts were unforgettable. Several family members mentioned them.

And yet she had a whimsical side to her as demonstrated by the bizarre gifts she chose for her grandchildren including a chicken mask for Brian. And other gifts the kids would have returned if they

had not been from grandma. She had hugs for them all, stories to tell, and she believed wholeheartedly in sugar. They were never without cookies and pasties of all kinds. She taught Cory how to cook and all her favorite recipes. That gift turned around into a blessing for her when Cory cared and cooked for her in recent years.

She was a generous woman, and holidays afforded her the best venue for pouring out her gifts to those she loved. She was all about bigger and better than last year, countless decorations, and reveling in the moment. Christmas was first in her book, but the Fourth of July was a close second. Christmas always included a hike in the woods to find the perfect tree and a car ride to admire the lights on neighbors' homes. She knew how to create family memories and events that helped define them as siblings and cousins.

She had varied interests. She loved to read. Architectural Digest was one example. She and Bill loved to go to antique stores and auctions. They both had an eye for beauty and for quality. She studied Political Science at the University of Michigan. And she served as the first president of PEO, Chapter X, and was active in the Junior League, Carrie T. Watson Garden Club, and Erie Homes for Children and Adults. She invested herself not only in her family but our community as well.

There is an old adage that a good measure of a life well lived is to be loved by animals. I personally may come up short on that assessment but not Esther. But what was not to love. She often took her dog Tiffany to McDonalds for a plain hamburger and then to Bruster's for ice cream. I have not done that with our pets. She gets the pet trophy.

(Maybe the best way to remember her personal life is by one who lived it with her. Let me invite her friend to share her remembrances with us.)

There are countless gifts that Esther left behind. I trust that as time passes the deeper meanings of her gifts will become clear. Her gifts were not in her perfection of execution of meals and holidays. Those were simply the surface of what she gave. The goal of life is not perfection, although that is what appeared to drive her. Love is the goal, and everything we do simply an expression of that emotion and that gift from God. In the poem she saved on the back of the bulletin there are three lines:

*But fill each waking hour in useful ways.
Reach out your hand in comfort and in cheer
And I in turn will comfort you and hold you near;*

If you ever missed what she was trying to say I think she wanted you to understand that she loved you and valued who you are. She was a woman of faith – the Christian faith and she covered her bases by being both Presbyterian and Methodist. There is the deeper meaning of her life, and there I hope you will continue to seek to understand who she was. She did not provide a blueprint for your lives. What was visible was simply the presentation of her interpretation of her faith in the God of love.

There are very few things in life that we can do perfectly. If we could then we would have no need of others or of God. There would be no reason for us to love one another because we wouldn't need anything. We would be self-sufficient. Love is not for perfection but for imperfection: faults, foibles, disasters, standing against those who are out for only themselves and your worst interests, illness, economic losses, and simple mistakes.

The challenges of living return us to the love of God, who gave us birth, saw us through the dangers of childhood, brought us together in families, and enabled us to see the Almighty in one another.

God is the source of love, and it is finally the love of God that we actually see in one another. It is not on one another that we rely but the love of God that creates family and friendships. For when we

are tired and spent from all our best efforts at living some goal, God will bless and keep us in God's care. In those moments we understand the blessings of enduring life's challenges and are able to look back and perceive the miracles God has rendered.

Listen to these lines from the front of our bulletin:

*And there shall come a day...in Spring
When death and winter
Lose their chill, white hold
Quite suddenly. A day of sunlit air
When winging birds return,
And earth her gentle bosoms bare
So that new, thirsty life
May nurture there.*

By the grace of God, the wisdom and faith of your mother and grandmother's life will return to you in flashes in the years to come as you seek to love God in your own unique ways. For in each of you are gifts to share of who God has made you to be. And in your sharing of love with others you will discover who you are and the gifts from Esther that you have to pass on to others. Thanks be to God for the life of Esther. May she rest in peace and be remembered with gratitude by us all. Amen.

PSALM 23

Words of Introduction: Thousands of years ago someone was sitting where you sit, feeling the sense of loss of someone they loved. In time the pain ebbed and they sensed a presence that surrounded and undergirded them: the presence of their God. The mourner wrote words that have lasted for millennia- words of hope and faith; of a sense of guidance and reassurance. Let us use them today as our statement of faith. Let us stand and say what we believe using Psalm 23.

STATEMENT OF FAITH From “Declaration of Faith (PCUSA)” (may be meaningful when someone dies tragically)

In the death of Jesus Christ, God’s way in the world seemed finally defeated. But death was no match for God. The resurrection of Jesus was God’s victory over death. Death often seems to prove that life is not worth living, that our best efforts and deepest affections go for nothing. We do not see the end of death. But Christ has been raised from the dead, transformed and yet the same person. In his resurrection is the promise of ours. We are convinced the life God wills for each of us is stronger than the death that destroys us. The glory of that life exceeds our imagination but we know we shall be with Christ. So we treat death as a power that is broken. Its ultimate defeat is certain. In the face of death, we grieve. Yet in hope we celebrate life. No life ends so tragically that its meaning and value are destroyed. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the life of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

STATEMENT OF FAITH (used in a service for a man with special needs)

We believe that all life is precious in the sight of God
 And that each person was created as a unique individual.
 We believe from our birth to our death God is our constant companion
 And that no one is ever completely alone.
 We believe that life in all its forms is worth living
 And that each moment of our life is a gift from our Creator.
 We believe that meaning in life is not derived from accomplishments
 But rather from love shared between one another.
 We believe that the Spirit enables us to connect with one another
 In ways too deep for words.
 We believe that, although it is better to give than to receive,
 The distinction between the two becomes blurred in love.
 We believe that the concept of family is not limited by blood line,
 But is expanded by God to include all for whom we care and share life.
 We believe that death does not end a relationship, it only changes it:
 For love never ends.

Anonymous

APOSTLE’S CREED (Whichever version is familiar to you and your congregation)

7-----*Pastoral Prayer and Lord's Prayer*

This prayer needs to be uniquely your own. It needs to address the concerns and emotions of the family and reflect your personal beliefs about God's care.

Holy Spirit, our formal farewells are coming to a close, but our informal goodbyes will never cease. For (name) is gone only from our sight. Her life has shaped ours and has given understanding and insight into who we are as her family and friends. May you ever be the arms that keep us together with your hand on her in heaven and your hand on us on earth. Your love binds all life and your love never ends.

For those mistakes she made, we trust in your forgiveness even as we seek to learn from the choices she made. For in good and bad she taught us about life, about you, O God, and about ourselves. Be gracious to her and be gracious to us.

For all who grieve, send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Teacher, to be present to us and go with us. Bless her children, grandchildren, and each of us. Help us to find a new way of living without her and in the journey of faith discover how much of her lives on in us.

So, to your care we commend her wellbeing and our own. Receive her to yourself, O God. May she take her place among the saints of heaven and there find rest and new life that is beyond our imagining. And strengthen us so that our lives may be a witness to your love which creates new life every day and reveals miraculous possibilities for ourselves and all whom we love.

As Jesus taught so we pray together with one voice saying: OUR FATHER....

Holy Spirit, we are filled with memories and emotions. We are filled with gratitude and admiration for a fine man. And we also feel the void of his absence. You have promised to be present in such a way as to never leave us alone, and so we enter into prayer to welcome your Spirit of love and comfort and communion.

You sent to us John and we are grateful for his good life. By him a marriage blessed this community for 50 years. By him a family came into being, and they were his pride and joy. So embrace his wife and daughter and grandchildren today and in all the days ahead. May his faithfulness and love live on in them until the day that their lives are united again by you, O God.

Until then bring forth life in all of us that our days may be a blessing to others as John's were to us. For we seek to live as Jesus taught. His prayer we offer as our own, his prayer that unites heaven and earth, saying together, OUR FATHER...

I am sure you have a benediction that is your favorite. That is the one your congregation hears each Sunday.

It may always be your concluding words throughout your ministry.

Just as you have carefully chosen all other words in this service, ask yourself if these are the best words for the funeral.

Would other words be helpful?

Do I offer the same benediction at the church and at the cemetery?

My grandfather's nickname for my grandmother was "Irish," so the Irish Blessing was right that day and made my mother and our family smile.

Write your own benediction. This is one of mine:

May the God who is still creating us, the Son who is still teaching us, and the Spirit who is still inspiring us, be with you and with me this day and forever more. Amen.

Sentences of Scripture (add to this list as you come across them in your studies)

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. (John 14:1,2)

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master. " (Matthew 25:21)

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8,9)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (I Peter 1:3)

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the living one; for I was dead and now I am alive forever more." (Rev.1:17b-18a)

He also said, "Because I live; you shall live also." (John 14:19b)

The Goodbye (turn and face casket or urn)

(First name), it is time to say goodbye for now. We hope for your health restored. May you have a joyous reunion with your spouse, your parents, your siblings (use names). May there be for you a reservation on the tennis courts, a swimming pool in which to exercise, and a place for you at the card table (this list should highlight favorite activities mentioned in the eulogy/homily and by relatives). Thank you for all your good gifts to us. May God bless and embrace you forever.

Prayer of Committal (Place your hand on the casket or urn)

O God, we commend to your care the earthly remains of this man/woman whom we have loved. Continue to embrace him/her in heaven and each of us in this place. Remind us that in services of farewell we say goodbye to only that which we can see. Love, faith, hope abide, even more closely than human touch. Reach down to (name) and resurrect him/her to heaven. Reach into us and comfort our sad hearts. Reach out to us and take us by the hand to lead us from this place with hope for all our days ahead. For we trust in the resurrection of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and believe that You will be between us until we all know what "heaven" means. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Declaration

(First name) is not here (gesture toward the remains and grave). She is here in our hearts (place your hand on your chest) and she is with God. May we each find ways to honor her life by caring for others. May others find their lives enriched by having known each of us. And as God urges us to do, may we be loving in all that we do.

OR (First name) is not here in this place. She is with God. However, she does remain in our hearts. May we each find ways to honor her life in the kindness we share with others. May our lives enable others to see God and life in ways they never have before...and to always be loving in all that we do.

The Benediction (one of your choosing)

(First name) would have wished you well in this parting and offer you "good words," which is what benediction means. So, let us borrow from the Irish, who know how to turn a phrase, and make others smile as he/she did.

May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back,
The sun shine warm upon your face,
The rain fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand. Amen

Military Honors (traditionally held here)

The funeral director will normally introduce the service by letting folks know that there will be a volley of rifles, the playing of taps, the folding of the flag and the presentation to the spouse, oldest son, or person designated by family to receive it.

It is customary for the family to stand. Say, "Please stand," if the funeral director does not.

Luncheon

Funeral director or pastor may remind people of the luncheon and where it will be held.

Laying of Flowers

The funeral director may or may not invite the family and all those gathered to choose a flower from the arrangements to lay on the casket or by the urn. If the family has agreed to this ritual beforehand, you can introduce it by saying, "Over the centuries flowers have been a symbol of love. It is the custom of some families to choose a flower to lay with their loved one forever as an expression of their love for them. If you would like to participate in this expression of farewell, you are invited to do so. It is traditional for the family to lead us. Please follow them."

My understanding of life, death, and faith has grown with each funeral service at which I presided. No death is just like another. No healing takes place in the same way. Grief is unique to each person and each death. It is worthy of thoughtful consideration with each service we offer. Following are some assumptions that focus my thoughts.

Death is a reality we all face. An old rabbinic saying contends that “the moment a child is born they are old enough to die.” How we cope is a challenge as we live, but when someone dies, dealing with it liturgically is a completely different thing. For the deceased death no longer looms-- it is a reality. For them it was simply a moment in time when they passed from life to death.

In the funeral service death is best treated as that—just a moment in time that we mark with a date, an hour and a minute. Now is the time to talk about all the days between their dates of their birth and death. Now is the time to celebrate life.

We tend to refer to *life and death* as inseparably together but in reality, they are two separate things. Life is not death and death is not life. In fact, dying is not death; dying is living. This may seem a silly distinction until you start to listen to the way people talk about the two in obituaries and in funeral services.

Great novels, plays, poems, and essays have been written around the subject of death...as if it is something in and of itself. Our culture has actually imaginatively personified it as the Grim Reaper or the Angel of Death. Hollywood plays on our fears and has created all kinds of creatures who cannot be alive. They take advantage of those who have not taken sufficient time to examine their thoughts on the subject. No matter the cause of death, death is always right and good: to live beyond the body's capacity to live would be a horror. Death is the good end to a life.

Coroners, doctors, nurses, hospice staff, and family members name it precisely for what it is. They write down a person's time of death as a day, an hour, and a minute. Death is simply the moment that a body ceases to be alive.

I make this point because I have attended funerals that emphasized the death. It does of course need to be acknowledged but it is not the focus of the gathering. Life is what calls us together on such an occasion: life before and life after the death. There may be good reason to remember an extended illness that was faced with courage by the deceased and with compassion by the family and caretakers. But again, even dying is living.

“They lost their battle with death” is meaningless. Death is not something that wins or loses. The emphasis of a eulogy needs to be about all the moments before that last moment. Death does not define a life. Life defines a life. This does not mean the age and cause of death don't color the tone of the service.

Peter F. Marty, the editor of the magazine “The Christian Century”, referred to the death of one of his church members at the age of 95 as someone who lived “a completed life.”¹ He didn't suggest there was no reason to grieve. Age should not minimize loss. It is just that we need to talk about the life lived differently. The family is also grieving the loss of consistency, for this woman had been with them their entire life.

Every service is to celebrate a life even the death of children, challenging as that may be. Nearly one in every three conceptions fails to thrive. Sadly, in one of my years as a funeral director I buried nine children. Death of children in our culture and this century is less common. Children still continue to die

daily around the world under terrible conditions. Are they simply numbers or incomplete lives? I would contend that the life of child is also a completed life and worthy of celebration for their days among us.

My wife and I attended the funeral of our friends' three-year-old grandson. The pastor pulled out all the notes he had ever read about the nature of grief and loss for his homily. I could tell he was overwhelmed by the task of bringing comfort because he was grieving himself. The little boy's father, our friend's son-in-law, then stood up and took care of us. He recounted his son's life, story by story, everything he could remember about the little guy's three years. He filled us with the life of his son. He did what the pastor did not: celebrate a life.

There was a place for the pastor's words. That sanctuary was filled with grief, and coupled with the father's words, it was a helpful service. There was also the gift of the Lutheran liturgy and hymns for those who were members of that denomination.

From beginning to end there is much to consider to move broken hearts toward healing and new life in a funeral, including our own.

¹ "Christian Century" March 25, 2020 p. 3

The request to preside at a funeral service will come from a variety of people, not just your church members. At first, I thought to entitle this, "When to say 'yes' or 'no'." But the "yeses" are not the problem. They are self-evident, and there are less guilt feelings afterwards.

The internal struggle is when to say "no." To be honest, I really can't answer this for you in all cases. I simply wanted you to know it is a struggle for us all.

One request I don't have trouble with is when asked to do a secular service. I tried once while working at the funeral home and it left me feeling so empty, I resolved to never do that again.

When my youngest sister died, I probably would have considered saying no if the funeral had been held immediately rather than several weeks later. Even with time to grieve, it was the most emotionally taxing service I have ever done. And I was glad I was able to keep my promise to her.

It is a little easier to say no to non-church members but not much. It helped if my week was so busy there wasn't time to prepare services for my congregation. I often thought I might be courting new church members if I said yes, but that never happened. The funeral remained a generous gift to the family.

On occasion you might be asked to preside for someone who did you harm or someone with whom you are at odds. I think it best that you decline and find someone who can better care for the family and friends.

Even when I wanted to say "no" initially, I was glad when I said "yes." It was helpful to learn how much I could do in a given week. Still, take care of yourself and accept what you can do and what you can't.

The funeral staff is the pastor's partner in care. Before we are called to preside at a funeral, there have been conversations between the family and the home staff. The offering of compassion has already begun. How the family works through the grief of the first few days is determined in part by these initial encounters.

Some of the most pastoral people I have met are funeral home directors and funeral home staff. They are faithful people who see their work as ministry. And I agree that it is. I watched with admiration, even the young men who transported the body, speak with gentle kindness to the bereaved family members. They had a sense that they were doing something sacred in the moment as they lifted the deceased from their bed to the gurney. They would pause at the door and ask the family if they needed to say goodbye or give the deceased a kiss.

Pastors have much to learn from these professional caretakers. They talk to people who are at their worst, gently helping them to make decisions they don't want to make. Their patience and insight into the swirling storm of emotional grief is remarkable. The staff uses good pastoral skills by remaining calm and present to all who need them, including the children.

They are not as stoic as they seem. I was often moved to tears with families I had just met. And I was not alone among the staff. I simply lost my fear of being sad and sharing the pain of others. We often cried.

When you move to a new town, make a point of visiting the funeral homes and meeting the directors. Prepare for the introduction by taking with you a letter listing the church costs for services. Share your contact numbers and explain how you approach funerals. They will want to know if you can be called to preside for non-church members.

Just a word about your stipend. The home will ask what you consider fair remuneration. I have one range for members and a higher range for non-members. Money is how our society expresses its appreciation. The directors can help families understand that when they meet. Invariably the families follow the director's suggestion.

As for the cost of funerals, most of the expense is in human service hours. The home is open 24/7, 365 days a year. A traditional funeral with casket and burial usually requires over 100 staff hours. Even though the trend is toward cremation, all service costs include a percentage of the expenses to maintain: the buildings, the cars, the equipment as well as the staff. Each community needs these businesses as a guard against the spread of disease and to share in the cost of maintaining their ongoing work.

Look to your funeral homes as partners in ministry seeking to bring the best care and support of all your families and your church.

13----- *A Funeral Service Planning Guide*

This template has been made without all the needed extra spaces for the questions asked. Add lines for names of children and grandchildren and other places where there is more information than can be listed on one line. Make it readily available at the church, such as a magazine rack or on a table in the lobby.

Obituary Information

Date completed this form and successive updates:

___/___/___, ___/___/___, ___/___/___, ___/___/___

Your full name (including maiden name) _____

How you want your name to appear in the paper _____

Current residence _____

Previous address _____

Are you a veteran? ___ yes ___ no / Where are the discharge papers? _____

Are you a widow of a veteran? ___ yes ___ no/ Where are the discharge papers? _____

Spouse's full name (include maiden name) _____

Date of death of spouse if applicable _____

Your Birthplace _____

Your Birth date _____

Father's full name _____ Deceased ___ yes ___ no

Mother's full name including maiden name _____ Deceased ___ yes ___ no

Cities and states in which you have lived _____

Occupation(s) _____ (include titles held, years served, date of retirement)

Your Social Security Number _____

Spouse's Social Security Number _____

Names of children and their spouses and city and state of residence _____

Names of grandchildren and their spouses _____

Names of great grandchildren _____

Living siblings and spouses _____

Deceased siblings _____

Other living relatives you would like to have listed _____

Options: ___ several nieces and nephews; ___ in-laws: ___ a dear friend; ___ a beloved pet

Church membership and address _____

Positions or roles held in the church _____

Organizations and clubs to which you belonged and positions of leadership held: _____

Education (school, degrees, year graduated) _____

Honors received as student or adult _____

FUNERAL PREPARATIONS:

Clothing for service: describe _____

Jewelry, pins, medals _____

Shoes _____

Hairdresser _____

Photo for paper (attach)

SERVICE PREPARATIONS

___ At church ___ At funeral home ___ other location ___ No service

___ Calling hours ___ At funeral home ___ At church

Military service ___ yes ___ no ___ NA

Clergy to Preside _____

Favorite Hymns _____

Favorite Scripture _____

Special poems or solos or participants (i.e., for eulogy) _____

Florist Preference _____

Disposition of Remains ___ Full casket burial at _____ Cemetery

Cremation with ___ scattering at ___ or ___ burial at _____ Cemetery

Memorials to: _____ or ___ choice of donor

Luncheon or reception to follow service at _____

Other newspapers (out of town) where obituary should be run _____

List and location of all financial and real estate papers _____

Attorney name and address _____

This form should be filed

- at home
- with spouse and or children
- with your attorney
- with your funeral director
- with your pastor
- *Do not put the only copy in a safety deposit box*

Other choices to consider

- prearrangement choices at the funeral home
- will and testament with your attorney
- Living Will

My last call was to my own home church. One of my first funerals was to preside at the service of one of my Sunday School teachers. Her four sons came to church on occasion but most Sundays they attended the Catholic Church where their father belonged. When their mother died, they asked me to offer prayers at the funeral home — a Catholic tradition -prior to the service at church. I wrote a simple service which included the reflective piece below. I found many occasions to use it over the years.

This morning ends our seeing but not our understanding.

This morning ends our touching but not our feeling.

This morning ends our speaking but not our hearing.

This morning ends our giving but not our receiving.

This morning ends only that which we are accustomed to doing but not our loving.

Love lives on in our understanding of who she was to us.

Love lives on in our feelings for her and hers for us.

Love lives on in hearing her words of wisdom that have shaped our hearts and minds.

(We can still hear her intonation without much trouble.)

Love lives on in what we received from her life in our midst.

We will not be able to see or touch or speak or give to (name). That now is for God to do. But by God's grace we will become accustomed to her absence and in our remembering discover how much of her lives on in us. On this difficult day of parting let us remember that love never ends.

When asked to include something from another denomination, be honest about what you can and can't do. I have found very little that I can't include as a Reformed pastor. The "Hail Mary" is one example. But other prayers, including making the sign of the cross, I am glad to share in. Below is the beginning of the Commendation in the Catholic mass which is very meaningful for them and offers closure as the service concludes.

SONG OF FAREWELL (Can be spoken or sung)

Saints of God, come to his (her) aid! Hasten to meet him (her) angels of the Lord.

Receive his (her) soul and present him (her) to God the most high.

May Christ, who called you, take him (her) to himself; may angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham.

Receive his (her) soul and present him (her) to God the most high.

Eternal rest grant unto him (her), O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him (her).

Receive his (her) soul and present him (her) to God the most high.¹

My hope always is to find a way to care for the whole family. The Reformed Tradition allows for creativity and inclusivity.

¹Order of Christian Funerals, Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, 2018, p, 390

15-----A Personal Beginning Place

I wrote this reflection to be the preface in my first attempt at this project many years ago. I called my friend Todd Hooven the night I wrote it and read it to him over the phone. I wanted him to know how much he had helped me in our years together at the funeral home. At the time he was the longest living survivor of cancer in Erie County. He had in fact survived it twice. The chemo took away his academic abilities (or at least he felt so) and so he never completed college. Yet his faith and compassion and courage in the face of all things frightening and painful made him one of the most helpful funeral staff members I have ever known. He died of a heart attack in his early 40s, but he lives on in the hearts of so many of us who called him friend.

My first week as an employee at the funeral home was as painful as it could be. I watched silently as my new mentor, Todd Hooven, lifted the body of the eight-month-old boy from the blue and white lace basinet in which he had been laid out for calling. The child had been left on the steps of the hospital. Whether he had died from exposure in the January cold of Erie, Pennsylvania, or if he had simply turned away from life and died, Todd and I didn't know.

As the family waited in the hallway behind closed doors, Todd lowered the beautiful little guy into the awaiting casket pillow and mattress. The infant was dressed in a white shirt and a blue bow tie, with shorts and booties, and a little jacket. The make-up was pale with a touch of rouge. We tucked a small teddy bear, given by his mother, under his arm. Then we pulled the blanket up to his chin and folded the sides into the mattress, as though warmth was our concern.

Tears began to stream down my face. I was overwhelmed with grief for a child I had not known. I wondered if I could do this job at all. I looked at Todd for some indication of strength and support and saw his tears fall in spots upon the blanket. With words of sympathy and apology, to one whose life was so short, we carefully placed the lid upon the casket.

I experienced a sense of awe at the task. We had been entrusted to be the last humans to look upon this little face; to be the last to offer gentleness and caring; and the last to afford him a measure of respect and dignity. Todd, a devout Methodist, and I offered a prayer that God was holding this little guy now. I was very aware of my own limitations. I was grateful that I was not the pastor that day. I did not yet have words to celebrate so short a life. I did not have a sense of what I could say that would be helpful to his parents, let alone to myself. His death was tragic and seemingly meaningless. I had no words of comfort.

He was the first of many children I would help bury, and each of their deaths confronted me, as did the deaths of countless teens and adults. Neither my mortuary training nor my seminary education gave me words to fulfill the role of grief counselor.

I began to listen carefully to the questions of families. The "why" of their loved one's death was not about the moment but of life. What did life before and after mean? In other words, who was this person to us? Who are we now without them?

Most were worried, not about heaven, but of meaninglessness. They had only clichés for describing what life and life after death meant. In the weeks that followed, they asked me what I thought. I stumbled through my first few years as a director.

So, with the question of "meaningfulness" ever before me, I began my personal journey. It began with negation. Funeral liturgy in most, if not all Christian traditions, does not answer the question of life's meaning. The prayers of the churches answer the question, "Where do we go after death?" The scripture and sermon usually defend the theology of the particular denomination. I knew I would have to look beneath the Christian tradition, beneath our definitions, and beneath the surface of the scriptures. The meaning of life, I would discover, is there, but it was going to take prayerful struggles.

There is an old rabbinic saying that as soon as a baby is born, they are old enough to die. Sadly, we know that is even true before they are born. The thought of a fetal or premature death is so frightening to us that families are often not afforded the comfort of others gathered round. Little ones who reach a 26-week gestation must be buried or cremated by law. Disposition of the body is usually done privately and quickly. As pastors, I believe we need to encourage parents to take the time to celebrate this expected life and to share that expression of grief with others who care.

The difficulty is that we are so struck by the death that we fail to affirm that there was a life, no matter how brief. And there was life for the little one and for his or her family. This funeral must also affirm living rather than death. Death must be acknowledged but life is the focus. But it is life without easy affirmations of accomplishments and experiences.

The image of the spider web is helpful tool here for the pastor. What threads had been gladly woven and sadly broken by this child?

Woven was the gift of "hope." Hope for an addition to the family, for a mom to be a mom again and a dad, a dad; siblings to have a younger sister or brother; grandparents to be grandparents; and on and on throughout the family. Hope transforms our way of thinking. We are not the same once we have grasped it. Hope tells us there are possibilities for our lives we did not know were possible. That insight can be applied in other aspects of our lives and its challenges.

Woven was a larger "family." Even while the little one is in its mother's womb; it has increased the number of family members. The family redefines itself, for a while, as three or four or more.

Woven was a sense of "love." Conceived in love and surrounded by its mother's love, the little one is a sign of love to family and friends. There are outward signs of love as well as mother and father and children pat mom's stomach and listen with ears pressed close. Voices and music can be heard in utero reassuring the little one of the presence of others and love beyond its dark home.

Woven was "imagination." The prospects of an addition to the family makes everyone re-imagine who they are and what their life will be with a new child or sibling. It makes us wonder how we will be as we begin to take care of a new life. We imagine feeding, playing, hugging, reading, teaching someone new. Our self-perception changes.

When the little one dies, broken is the fruition of what has been woven. But the memories remain. We are not the same persons nor will we be. This life has changed us. And re-woven is insight into life and death. The rabbinic saying about birth and death becomes a new reality and insight. Our time is limited and we had best get about living. Hopefully this loss leads to new appreciation for each other and our own life.

Death of little ones and children can lead to a spiritual crisis for many. Like Job we protest the reality of life to the one who created us. And like Job there is no good answer from God other than this is the way it is. There is also the assurance that God is with us and with every little one who is conceived.

In Jeremiah 1:5 God says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." If God knows how long we will live is unclear to me, but I believe that God wills life as long as life can be sustained in a body. And when life cannot be sustained then God receives that life to God's self. Life that continues when there should be death is a horror and a source of plots in Hollywood movies. Even death can be an act of grace and a healing. Even here an infant's life and death has much to teach us.

17-----*A Letter to Jill and Matt's Little One*

When my wife and I lost our second pregnancy, I had no words for my grief. When our youngest daughter and her husband lost their little one, I sat down and wrote this letter. I hope you find words here to help grieving parents.

Thursday, December 7, 2017

Dear Little One,

Thank you for being part of our family for a while. Although only your parents knew most of the time, when they were with us, so were you. That included several Mondays and Fridays, Grandma Great's birthday party, Thanksgiving, Sundays at church, picking out a Christmas tree, and other days when we got together for a meal.

Your short life has filled our hearts and minds with thoughts we might not have otherwise had.

You sparked our imagination.

We realized we had room to love even one more.

We were able to imagine a family growing with another child.

Your mother and father being parents for a third time.

Your sisters having a little sibling and Ellie being a middle child.

Grammy and Granddad being grandparents of eight.

Your cousins with another playmate.

Your aunts and uncles helping to take care of one more and shuttle hand-me-downs.

Through our imagination you stretched how we think about ourselves. That is no small task and gift to help us wonder about who we are and may become.

We are sad that those things will not come to pass with you. But we will remember the gift of your life because of those insights. We are reminded that life is strong and fragile. That all life is a gift from God.

May God hold you in ways we cannot. For it is to God we commend you, from whom you came, and blessed us during the season of Advent. You will be remembered by us all as long as we live.

Love, Granddad

My most painful year as a funeral director was the one when I buried nine children over twelve months. I came home each of those times and hugged my sleeping children late at night. The grief of parents is not like other grief. The spider web breaks are too many to count and take years to name. The disorientation / reorientation from grief takes much longer than the average eighteen months to three years. The loss becomes an experience they cope with the rest of their lives.

The funeral service can be of some help to them and to others gathered if the focus is on the life lived. This is the day that as many words of thanksgiving and affirmation can be heaped on the memory of the child. There is a sense of gathering to collect as many as possible.

The father of one of our friends eulogized his two-year-old son, listing his favorite foods, songs, TV shows, antics, expressions, games, hugs, stuffed animals, and challenges to his parents. We could have listened to him for hours if that was what the dad needed.

I felt he had saved the service and made it a celebration. The pastor had empathically tried to speak to our grief and offer some hope of healing. The affirmations of a life lived was our only comfort.

One mother, among the nine I buried, lamented privately to me that the pastor would not allow her three-year-old daughter's favorite song to be sung during the service. It was a secular song, "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" She told me as she had told the pastor that her grandmother had taught it to her mother and her mother had taught it to her and she had taught it to her daughter. More than a song of tradition, it was a sacred song. Through those words and notes there was a sharing of love in the family. The language of a child's funeral must be different and reflective of the age.

Our traditional litanies, scripture readings, and hymns don't work. A newly composed Call to Worship is needed; a newly worded invocation is needed. Favorite songs must be sung one last time in the child's presence and for the child. This cannot be an adult funeral with a child's name.

There is, of course, room for traditional hymns if requested by the parents. The service is, after all, for the family and friends. But it is about the life of a child and what their life encompassed. The language must be age appropriate if it is to speak to aching hearts.

19 -----Memorial Service for Erie Homes for Children and Adults

There will be exceptional invitations to lead a worship service. Each one is a gift to you to see life in a new way. The director of EHCA, Paul Carpenedo, was a member of my church and asked me to memorialize eight of his residents in 2008. Each of them had extensive limitations, or so it seemed to me at first.

Homily/Eulogy

My sympathies to all of you, family, and staff, for your loss of relatives and friends this year. I am honored to be here this evening and humbled by the invitation. I may have met some of these men and women over the years when I brought youth from our church for a cookie bake or craft activity but I did not know them as you have known them. So, I cannot speak meaningfully about who they were to you.

What I can do is speak to our common experience of the silence their lives now echo. It is a silence that is deafening to your hearts and minds. A silence that comes uninvited whenever someone we love dies. For most of us it is a frightening void, for we are not a people prone to even being quiet for any length of time. TVs, radios, CD players, and conversation fill our ears, and iPods make sure we can take sound with us in places we never could before. We are not used to stillness and the absence of life's sounds.

But death is a silence that trumps any country music song, any aria, any rock band selection, or even a deafening rap. We cannot turn up the volume on some mechanical device loud enough to fill the wordless stillness, the unending silence of our loved one and friend's breathless absence. We are surrounded by it, engulfed by it, and there is no direction we can wander to escape our soundproof cloud.

Some might wonder (those who did not know these eight friends) why they are missed so much. They were not Olympic athletes, winning medals for their country, and drawing for us cheers and shouts. They were not great professors of universities with thoughtful reflections for our consideration. Some may have danced but not in a ballet on the Warner stage. No one made a CD from songs they had written. Their contributions to the sounds of life were limited to garbled words or to grunts and sighs and creative sounds of their own invention or sometimes a mechanical device that they had mastered to communicate for them.

Yet they were clear about what they wanted. They were clear about who they were and what their likes and dislikes were. They found ways with limited movement to reach into our minds and hearts with their eyes and their mouths and their body language so no one was mistaken as to what was our will and what was theirs.

In the limited resources available to them they shared with us appreciation, anger, disappointment, pleasure, and love. They communicated the essence of life in the moments that were life with them. It took a listening ear, not always to the sounds but to the void between the syllables. They taught a good silent listener how to interpret what was not said and what was not heard. They taught how to live in the silence of life and of death.

The Old Testament prophet Elijah discovered more in silence than he did in sound. From First Kings 19

¹¹ (The Angel of the Lord) said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire,

but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

In the silence was the voice of God, the presence of God, the sustaining love of God; for in God is all of life and all of death. This silence we share is not to be feared but to be embraced. For it is the silence we learned to interpret from those we loved and now miss; and it is the vehicle of God's coming to us. The meaning of life is not in accolades or medals or names on a marquee but in sharing of life's silence with God and one another.

Thanks be to God for these eight blessed saints who whispered the Divine silence and blessed us, not just as staff, but as family and friends. May they rest in peace. Amen.

Parents will ask if they should bring their children to the calling hours and the service. The answer is a qualified yes for children three years of age and older. The children need to be prepared with careful explanation about what they will see and what it will be like. They need to have the option of saying no and taking their time to enter the room where the body lies in the casket.

They should not be expected to stay too long at the funeral home. After a family time of viewing, it helps to have a friend or relative take care of them. The kids' nervous energy will burst into playground-like activity to help them deal with all the feelings. This need not embarrass the family. Some funeral homes offer a playroom which allows the children access to their parents throughout the calling hours.

The children will need permission to touch the hand of the deceased if they want to. They can express their own sadness with the giving of handmade cards or flowers they selected with their parents at the florist.

Caution them about saying that "Grandpa looks like he is sleeping." Many children become afraid to go to sleep. There needs to be a distinction between sleeping and dying. When we die we do not dream and we do not speak or move ever again. It is not the same as sleeping.

All their questions deserve an immediate answer. Parents need to listen carefully and only answer what is asked. Usually, it is more about facts than theology. This is why I urge the parents to be the primary teachers of the children rather than the pastor. There will be many questions in the weeks and years ahead when only the parents are available to the children.

They will not be afraid unless that has been modeled by the adults around them. Fear is learned. Acceptance is also learned. The children will take their cues from their parents. At five years old, I was not allowed to see my grandfather when he died, and so I developed a childhood and adolescent fear of death. Parents have a unique opportunity to help their children understand how their family deals with death.

My hope would be that all children attend the worship service, burial, and family luncheon. They will learn more in those hours about life and faith and family than on most occasions.

Even with all your guidance, parents will make their own choices. It is best to let them, even if you disagree.

Other suggestions:

Incorporate into your Christian Education Curriculum opportunities for children and youth to learn about death and dying. I took the elementary school children to the cemetery at least once during their club years. We did gravestone rubbings and looked for unique epitaphs. The youth group visited a funeral home, including the embalming room, once every four years. Holy Week lends itself to addressing life, death, and resurrection in worship and Sunday School.

Provide for parents a guide for burying a family pet. See Example 11.

See Example 12 for books your church can provide for families.

Parents may ask your guidance on talking about death with their children. It helps to have good books in hand. Ask your Christian Education Committee, Deacons, or Session to purchase ones you can give to parents. Some will return them to you, but many keep them. So, it is advisable to have a couple in store.

I have listed below some of my favorites over the years. But books go out of print and new ones are always available for purchase. Choose the ones that you like and feel will be helpful.

The reason I am suggesting books is that I encourage parents, rather than me, to be the ones to talk with the children. Children grieve in brief snatches of time. Days or weeks or even years later a new question occurs to them and only the parents are available to answer them. I tell parents they can always call me for suggestions and support.

For the Loss of a Pet Dog: I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm, Random House Children's Books, 2015

For the Loss of a Cat: The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by Judith Viorst, Simon & Schuster, 1987

For the Loss of a Grandparent: Badger's Parting Gifts, by Susan Varley, Andersen Press, 1987

For any Death: Lifetimes: the Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Robert Ingpen and Bryan Mellonie, Bantam Books, NY, 1983.

A family may ask you for a service for a beloved pet. This is designed for you to lead yourself or give it to a parent to lead for their children. First prepare the pet for burial. Include the adult owners and children in the preparations. Then gather around the grave.

Call to Worship

Psalm 36

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

Prayer

O God, You have made us and all the animals of the earth. It was your hope that we would live in peace and harmony. Through our friend _____ you have taught us what that life might be like; how we need each other; he/she to be fed and enjoyed; and how we the need to care for him/her and to be entertained. Life is a precious gift, and now today we understand that it is fleeting. Comfort us in our loss of our pet and fill us with memories that we can keep. May this little life, shared with us, be a lesson in living for all the days ahead. Amen.

SHARE YOUR FAVORITE THINGS/TRICKS/ HABITS OF YOUR PET

Genesis 8: 1 Knowing that "God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark" ...we place _____ here to be his/her burial place.

PLACE YOUR PET IN THE GROUND

Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them." God cares for all God's creatures. This place on earth is God's place, _____ was God's creature; we belong to God as well. In life and in death we are God's.

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for sending us _____. He/she was a delightful gift from you to us. Into your hands we commend his/her care but his/her memory we will keep for ourselves. Comfort us in our loss and keep us mindful of the blessings of life and our need to love all whom you have created. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

FAREWELL

Encourage children to say goodbye and that they love him/her. Let them choose a flower or biscuit/treat or favorite toy to place in the grave.

FILL IN THE HOLE and mark with stones or the planting of something.

BOOKS TO READ AFTERWARDS

For the Loss of a Pet Dog: I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm, Random House Children's Books, 2015

For the Loss of a Cat: The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by Judith Viorst, Simon & Schuster, 1987

Concluding Notes

- Biblical verses are from NRSV and the Common English Bible.
- A word of thanks to my friend Paul DeSante who has proofread all my versions of this project over many years. I am grateful for his gift of the English language, his spiritual insight, and for encouraging me to persevere.
- Thanks also to the Presbytery of Lake Erie, including Rev. Anita Bernhardt, Presbytery Executive, and Melinda Wingenbach, for sharing these materials; Rev. Chuck Cammarata, Rev. Jim Haas and Rev. Dr. James Bernhardt, with whom I served, and from whom I borrowed ideas.
- Thanks also to my wife and family for their encouragement, including my aunt, Linda Lorah; and to the Burton Funeral Home family and staff for the education and experience.
- I am a retired PCUSA pastor. My wife Barb and I live near our three children and their families in Fairview PA. I am a graduate of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and Grove City College. In retirement I continue to lead worship services in our presbytery, and I teach an introductory course in the Bible at Gannon University.