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A Pastoral Guide for Funerals

Written and compiled by
Leonard J. Vander Zee

CRC Publications
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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**What is your only comfort
in life and in death?**

That I am not my own,
but belong—
 body and soul,
 in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

—*Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 1*

Key to Sources of Prayers and Readings

- ASB: *The Alternative Service Book 1980*
BCP: *The Book of Common Prayer*
BS: *The Book of Services*
CGP: *Canticles and Gathering Prayers*
KJV: *Holy Bible: King James Version*
LBW: *Lutheran Book of Worship*
NIV: *Holy Bible: New International Version*
OCF: *Order of Christian Funerals*
OS: *Occasional Services*
PDC: *Prayers for the Domestic Church*
PsH: *Psalter Hymnal*
SMT: *Proposed Services of Memorial and Thanksgiving*
TF: *The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection*
UCA: *Uniting Church Worship Services: Funeral*

Further information on these sources is available in the Acknowledgments section on page 219. All prayers not credited were written by Leonard J. Vander Zee.

Contents

Foreword	9
Preface	11
Introduction	
Funerals in the Christian and Reformed Tradition.....	15
Pastoral Care at the Time of Death	21
Prayers and Readings	
With Those near Death	35
When Death Occurs	51
On the Occasion of a Miscarriage, Stillborn Child, or Early Death	63
The Funeral Service	
Service I	73
Service II	103
Service III.....	121
Committal Service	129
Additional Resources	
Scripture Readings	141
Confessions and Liturgical Texts.....	187
Prayers for Special Circumstances.....	194
Music for the Funeral	205
The Ministry of the Congregation	213
 Acknowledgments	 219

Foreword

In the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), funeral services have been “uncharted territory” until now. Never before has the denomination developed any resources for use by those who are called to plan and conduct funerals. *In Life and in Death* began with a 1986 mandate from the CRC Publications Board to the denominational Liturgical Committee (now, CRC Worship Committee) to “develop a model (or models) for funeral services.”

As committee members began their study, they became convinced that the churches needed more than service models. A whole complex of pastoring needs surround a funeral, such as praying with one who is near death or comforting the family of one who has just died. So in 1988 the CRC Publications Board approved an expanded proposal—the seed from which this manual grew. In addition to the services, pastoral advice and many prayers and readings are offered here for those who seek to minister to persons who are near death as well as to families and friends who gather together at the time of a funeral.

Leonard J. Vander Zee, member of the CRC Worship Committee and pastor of the South Bend (Indiana) Christian Reformed Church, is the primary author and compiler of these resources. The historical introduction was written by Melvin D. Huguen, professor of pastoral care at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. The chapter on pastoral care includes guidelines which were first developed by James R. Kok, Director of Pastoral Care at the Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, California. The chapter on music was written by LeRoy G. Christoffels, pastor of the Preakness Christian Reformed

Church, Wayne, New Jersey, and also a member of the Worship Committee.

We hope that these resources will be helpful to pastors and others who are called upon to comfort the mourning and to conduct the kinds of services that give testimony to the hope of the resurrection and the love of the Christian community.

The CRC Worship Committee (1991)

Jo Alberda	David Diephouse	Leonard Vander Zee
Wayne Brouwer	Linda Male	Emily Brink, <i>Editor</i>
LeRoy Christoffels	Bert Polman	
Dale Cooper	Tony Van Zanten	

Preface

A few years ago I stood with my wife and her family at the bedside of her dying father in a nursing home. He had suffered a massive stroke and was now slowly sinking toward death. While his labored breathing grew shallower and more infrequent, we waited, mostly silent, for death to come. As is usually the case in such situations, death arrived on silent feet, with no fanfare. One moment there was a barely alive person, the next, a lifeless body. The moment was no less awesome for its near imperceptibility.

After a few moments of silence, tears and hugs, and a prayer, we notified the nurse and began to make some preliminary preparations. We were informed that the funeral director would not arrive for an hour or two. As we waited, my brother-in-law, who is Russian Orthodox, suggested that we follow his tradition, which prescribes that at the moment of death a continuous reading of the Psalms commence. So someone picked up Dad's tattered old Bible and began to read Psalm 1. And we continued to read one psalm after another, passing the Bible around the group.

At first I assumed that this was merely a pious way of passing time. But very soon we were all powerfully drawn into the words of the psalms as they began to reflect Dad's life, his faith, his struggles, his destiny. It was almost uncanny how each new psalm led us through the memories and emotions that we needed to explore as we began that long process of grieving. I think we made it to Psalm 40 or so by the time the funeral director finally arrived, and we left off the reading with some reluctance.

It was that experience that led me to begin reflecting on and evaluating our practices surrounding death within the Christian Reformed community. The truth is that we offer little in the way of guidance for ministering to dying people or to

the bereaved. Because our Church Order specifically excludes death and funerals from ecclesiastical concern, we have walled off dying and death from the rest of church life. We have labeled funerals as family matters—which indeed they are. But without some guidance, families and church communities may flounder at these important moments and may miss profound experiences of comfort and grace.

When someone close to us dies, we tend to fall into habitual actions and patterns that may or may not fit our needs. We look for words and gestures that will express the tangled feelings that fill our minds and hearts. Unfortunately, these practices may more often be dictated by expedience and local funeral customs than by the thoughtful guidance of the Christian community.

The more I struggled with these thoughts and experiences, the more convinced I became of the need for our own community of faith to fill this void. So when the CRC Worship Committee, of which I am a member, began to plan for a funeral manual, I expressed an interest in writing and compiling material for it.

This manual is written with the hope that pastors, elders, church musicians, and all the people of our communities of faith may learn to minister to dying and grieving people more effectively. I am grateful to Melvin Hugen and LeRoy Christoffels for the sections they wrote; to the CRC Worship Committee and Emily Brink for giving me this opportunity and for their patience, encouragement, and thoughtful suggestions. I also thank my wife, Judith, our children, Renee, Marie, Lenore, and Anton, and Judith's mother, Thressa Vroon, for their patience and encouragement, and especially for the opportunity to spend a month at Desert House of Prayer in Tucson, Arizona, working on this project.

And to all of you—when that inevitable moment arrives, may you sense with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that this is “not the end, but the beginning of life.”

Leonard J. Vander Zee
Epiphany, 1991

INTRODUCTION

Funerals in the Christian and Reformed Tradition

Melvin D. Hugen

We all have pictures in our minds of what should and should not occur at a funeral. We acknowledge that most of our practices have been shaped by tradition or experience (we were comforted by one type of ceremony and found another jarring or unsettling). Some of our customs have been shaped by the world around us; others have deep roots in the history of Christ's church.

Early Church

Unlike many of their pagan contemporaries, the early Christians did not regard a funeral as simply, or even primarily, an occasion of mourning. They saw it rather as an opportunity to bear witness to the hope of the resurrection—to celebrate the fact that “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). For the believer in Christ, “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54). The prevailing tone of these early funerals, therefore, was one of joyful thanksgiving. White was the dominant color, symbolizing the robes of purity worn by the multitude of the redeemed in heaven (Rev. 7:9-17).

These first Christian funerals were probably very simple affairs. Over time, however, a common structure emerged, consisting of three basic elements. First came prayers at the home of the deceased as the body was being prepared for burial. Next, the body was carried in procession to the place of worship for a service of praise, prayer, and Scripture, culminating in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which signified the communion of the saints “at all times and in all places.” The event was concluded with the interment, often followed by a fellowship meal.

Though these three elements were altered and elaborated on during the Middle Ages, largely due to monastic influences, this basic structure survived into the Reformation era. However, the *tone* of the services changed dramatically. The original sense of celebration, the joy of triumph over death, was replaced by a new emphasis on human mortality, the terrors of divine judgment, and the sinner's need for priestly absolution. Songs of praise and thanksgiving gave way to the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"); burial rites became the capstone of a vast penitential edifice, associated with extreme unction, purgatory, and propitiatory masses for the dead.

The Reformed Tradition

To the Protestant reformers these funeral practices seemed to typify the worst of the Roman church's theological abuses. And their antipathy to such "superstition" helps explain much of the subsequent history of funerals in the Reformed tradition. Rather than attempting to reform the existing ceremonies and practices—as Luther did, for example—John Calvin and his followers made no provision for funeral services of any kind. The rule of the churches of Geneva (1541) stated simply:

The dead are to be buried decently in the place appointed. The attendance and company are left to each man's discretion. It will be good that the carriers be warned by us to discourage all superstitions contrary to the Word of God

Variations of this rule were adopted by Calvinists in England (Puritans), Scotland (Presbyterians), Ireland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

These provisions, however, were not rigidly followed, even by the reformers themselves. In a letter to Farel, Calvin approved giving an appropriate sermon in the churchyard after the burial. And as early as 1533, the first synod of Strassburg protested the custom of no services at the grave and

asked that at least a pastor be present for the burial. Later synods, recognizing the practices of the patriarchs of the Old Testament and of the New Testament churches, adopted orders of service appropriate for burial. These simple orders recommended the use of Scripture readings, an exhortation, silent or free prayer, and the giving of alms.

But such concessions were not universally accepted. The Church Order of Dort (1618-1619), adopted for the Reformed churches of Scotland and the continent, stated:

Funeral sermons (or services) shall not be introduced. In those places where they have already been introduced, diligent efforts must be made to abolish them in the most appropriate manner.

The Westminster Directory of the Church of Scotland (1644) was even more explicit:

When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of burial, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for public burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony. And because the customs of kneeling down, and praying by, or towards the dead corpse, and other such usages, in the place where it lies, before it be carried to burial are superstitious; and for that, praying, reading, both going to and at the grave, have been grossly abused, are in no way beneficial to the dead, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living, therefore let all such things be laid aside.

Such rulings didn't succeed in eliminating funerals. Rather, they ensured that the practices or ceremonies used at the burial of Reformed Christians were shaped not by the church but by local custom and family tradition. Services, particularly in France and the Netherlands, were held at the grave and sometimes also in the church. But they were viewed as family ceremonies, similar to weddings, rather than as ecclesiastical services.

Interestingly, although the Reformed churches did little or nothing with the development of funeral rites and services, in some areas they had a strong tradition of preparation for and contemplation of death. For example, in many of their books on piety, the English Puritans included meditations on “holy dying”: “When thou seest the bed, let it put thee in mind of the grave which is now the bed of Christ” (Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 1632). Perhaps this sort of meditation is the source of “If I should die before I wake,” a phrase from a familiar child’s prayer. The Reformed churches of the Netherlands (Hervormed) also provided a listing of readings and prayers entitled *Die Ziekentroost* (for the comfort of the sick), which included Scripture passages linked by comments intended to be read by or to the mortally ill and Scriptures to be read as prayers at the hour of death, the final one being, “Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Since funerals, unlike the sacraments, are not commanded by the Holy Scripture, Reformed churches have generally permitted a large degree of freedom in this area. Individual churches were expected to make sure that funeral practices clearly communicated the gospel of salvation by grace, the sure hope of the resurrection, and the consolation of God, but no further prescriptions were made. In fact, no developed liturgies of prayers, readings, or committal ceremonies are found in the Reformed tradition until the nineteenth century, three hundred years after the Reformation.

The Reformed tradition for the burial of the dead, therefore, can be summarized as follows:

- A. freedom in the practices or ceremonies to be used;
- B. a deep concern that all practices be faithful to the gospel and that they avoid all superstition;
- C. an emerging consensus that funerals are religious practices of families rather than official ecclesiastical services;
- D. a conviction that the purpose of funerals is the consolation and edification of the living, not the honoring of the dead.

Funerals in the CRC

Until 1940 the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church read, “Funeral sermons or funeral services shall not be introduced.” However, the church’s practice was quite different. Funeral services *were* held, at first in the home of the deceased or in the church, and later in funeral chapels. The services were simple: Scripture, meditation, and prayers. The singing of psalms or hymns, although an important part of worship services, was uncommon in funerals until late in the twentieth century. The committal service usually included scriptural sentences, the committal, and a prayer.

In 1940 the Church Order was changed to read, “Funerals are not ecclesiastical, but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly.” This change recognized what had long been the practice of the church: pastors usually consulted with the family, and together they planned the service. Even when funerals were no longer held in the home, the family often had a short service together before taking the casket from the home to the church or chapel for the funeral.

Today, although the funeral service is significant for the grieving family, equally important are the visits of consolation and comfort by friends, neighbors, and extended family. People come to the home of the deceased bearing food, flowers, and compassion. These visits bracket the service and cast the whole occasion as an event of the believing family and the family of God.

In this respect, current customs show a striking resemblance to those of the early church, despite obvious differences in liturgical detail (notably the elimination of the Lord’s Supper). The evidence of continuity is interesting from a purely historical standpoint; it should be of equal interest in reflecting on our practices in the future.

Pastoral Care at the Time of Death

A death in the congregation, while never a welcome event in our lives or schedules as pastors and elders, offers important opportunities for ministry. Death pierces through the veil of everyday life and places people face to face with its awesome and inescapable reality. Normal living stops in its tracks for a few days. Families are drawn together, sometimes in ways they have never been together before. Memories are stimulated—some beautiful, some painful. The foundational truths of the Christian faith are talked about, proclaimed, and sometimes even called into question by people who have been rubbed raw by grief.

Such vulnerability creates an atmosphere in which people powerfully experience the care or the callousness of the Christian community. Seldom does the church's pastoral care have as deep an impact on people's lives as at the time of a death. We need to remember this because, especially in larger churches, we may fall into set patterns of ministry, forgetting the unique importance of each death to the family and the individuals involved.

When someone dies, we often unthinkingly follow certain patterns and traditions for funerals and pastoral care without examining *what* we do and *why*. Part of the problem is that few church councils discuss funeral practices and ways of ministering to grieving people—or encourage their congregations to do so. So, often by default rather than by choice, the funeral director who knows the traditions of the church or community guides the family along in their planning.

According to the CRC Church Order, funerals are not ecclesiastical responsibilities; nevertheless, the church's pastoral care and advice is often deeply needed and welcomed at the time of death. The church—not just pastors, but councils and church members as well—should have a well-thought-out framework for what they will do when a death occurs in the church community.

Actually, the need for care often begins before the time of death. More and more frequently today, we face situations in which individuals may linger for days, weeks, or even months at the brink of death. This is a very stressful time for the family, a time in which they desperately need the ministry of the church. As death slowly engulfs the loved one, the awareness of death and the grieving also envelopes the family. Visits during this time are important and fruitful, both for the dying individual and for the family. It is good to visit the dying person alone, to provide opportunity for very personal expressions of faith and doubt, and to offer the consolation of Scripture, prayer, and, perhaps, sacrament. It is also good to visit with the family present in order to listen and participate in their sharing as life ebbs.

After death has occurred, the pastor and other caregivers (such as the elders), need to be notified as soon as possible so that their ministry can surround the grieving. Congregations, too, should be made aware of ways in which they can offer help and support to the bereaved family. (The council or consistory may want to prepare some simple guidelines; see p. 213.)

The most important thing for all caregivers to remember is that in our ministry to grieving people, we represent Christ. Through us, Christ comes to comfort, to listen, to bear burdens, to weep, and to speak of hope. When we minister to grieving people with a deep awareness that we personally represent Christ and depend on him, we will be far more effective.

The following guidelines may help ministers and other comforters to fit their ministry to the realities of grief.

1. Make early, frequent, and brief contacts.

It is important to call on the bereaved as soon as possible after a death has occurred as an immediate sign of the care and love of Christ and his church. The initial visit should probably take no more than half an hour, because the bereaved persons often have much to do and consider, and they sometimes need time alone. Subsequent visits should be made daily, if possible, and should be shorter yet—about fifteen minutes is appropriate. Even a phone contact may be helpful if a visit is not possible or welcomed.

Before making a visit, call ahead and make sure that the family welcomes your presence. If you encounter resistance, you obviously need to honor the family's wishes; we cannot impose our care on people. But keep in mind that such obstinacy may be an important signal of difficulty in the family system, in the family's relationship to the church, or in their coming to terms with grief. In the face of this resistance, however subtle, a listening ear is all the more important.

2. Encourage the grieving to talk about what happened.

We have an almost universal need at the time a loved one dies to talk about exactly what happened. Often people will go into great detail about what they were doing when the phone rang, how they discovered the body, what things looked like and smelled like, and other sometimes grisly details of how death came. This reliving of the details of death is an important step in making the death more real. It's a step that may have to be repeated a number of times, and the need for such recounting may linger for years. In such a situation, the task of the caregiver is to lend an ear.

3. *Encourage talking about the deceased person.*

The days and weeks immediately after death has occurred are times in which the family needs to frame a verbal picture of the deceased person. There will be many wonderful memories, stories, anecdotes, and tributes from the unique perspective of family members and close friends. Usually there will also be painful memories of wrongs committed and of the hurt caused by troubled relationships. These also need to be shared. If the memories are slanted toward the troubling ones, the family will likely need help in coming to terms with their grief. Sometimes the intervention of a trained therapist may be important a few months down the road.

4. *Remember the children.*

It is regrettably common to ignore the children in the bereaved family. Grief and its attendant traditions, such as visiting at the funeral home, are often assumed to be adult activities. Children may help us come to that unwarranted conclusion by seeming to be uninvolved or even resistant.

The fact is that children need to grieve and to face the reality of death just as adults do, so it's important that they share in the rituals of grief. For better or for worse, adults model grief for children. They are quick to pick up even unintended spiritualization of grief ("he or she is happier now"), or the denial of grief (never seeing adults "break down" with grief). Witnessing these responses in adults, children quickly assume that this is the way one *ought* to deal with grief. So in trying to "spare" our children, we may actually be leaving them alone and rudderless in a raging sea of grief.

Younger children will have many direct and honest questions about death. They are often curious about the more physical aspects of death and about the body of the deceased person. They may want to touch the body or even kiss the loved one. Adults should be prepared to interpret the feelings, thoughts, and sensations of death (the urge to weep, the cold skin of the deceased, etc.) to children so they can more easily

incorporate these things into their childlike world. Families may need to be gently reminded about the needs of children and grandchildren and should be encouraged to answer their questions and respond to their needs simply and honestly. There is no reason not to.

Fear is an additional burden that children face as a result of death. Younger children may be coming to terms with death's reality for the first time. Older children and young people may face fears about who will now care for them or provide for their needs. Fear oppresses children (and adults, for that matter!) a little less when they know that someone understands what they are going through. So adult caregivers should try to help children and young people talk about their fears. We may not have all the answers to their fears, but we can at least ease their anxiety by sharing these concerns.

Older children and teenagers will often be less direct and more covert in their feelings. Pastors and other adult caregivers need to take the time just to listen to what they are feeling and thinking. Teens should also be encouraged to spend time with their peers during these difficult days. Young people value the presence and sympathy of their peers and, even in their grief, teenagers often need to be assured that they are still part of the group.

5. Encourage the release of feelings.

Grief is pain—deep, cutting, emotional pain. Often the pain is increased by other factors, such as anger, doubt, fear, and loneliness. There is no way to avoid the pain. It must simply be embraced and accepted.

As simple as that sounds, many of us have not learned to do it. We secretly believe we can avoid pain if we keep it at arm's length. Sooner or later, however, the energy it takes to keep the pain away exacts more from us than the pain of grief itself. The task of the caregiver is not to encourage stoicism and a stiff upper lip, nor even to stimulate faith and hope, but rather to facilitate the release of painful feelings of grief. It is good for

grieving people to cry. It is normal for them to feel angry or abandoned or fearful. They need to be encouraged to simply feel whatever is there.

We may help a person grieve through careful listening and through helping them identify and articulate their feelings: “In your circumstances many people feel . . .” or “It helps some people to cry or get angry . . .” or “It seems to me that you must feel the need to . . .” or “You must be feeling . . .” Never should we say, “I know just how you feel,” a statement that is more likely to cause anger than bring comfort.

We also encourage grief by modeling it ourselves—by not being afraid to weep or be angry. It is important to note in this context that we should never encourage the use of chemical sedation during the period of grieving unless it appears absolutely necessary. Sedatives only delay the grief, which may, in fact, be more difficult to deal with later.

6. Allow for strategic withdrawal and denial.

There are times when nudging a person to grieve is inappropriate. Each person’s psyche has its own timetable for coping with grief, and some people need to withdraw for awhile before dealing openly with the trauma. Denial can, in some cases, be a perfectly healthy way of *gradually* coming to terms with an overwhelming event, such as a sudden or tragic death. The caregiver must learn to read both verbal and nonverbal clues to determine when to intervene and when it might be better to step aside for a time.

7. Offer the ministry of touch.

We must never forget that many of Jesus’ healing miracles were accompanied by touch. Touch is essential to healing of any sort, including grief. Don’t be afraid to hug the bereaved, to put your arms around them, to hold their hands. Words can be cheap, and never more so than in the face of death or tragedy. Touch speaks in a way that often breaks through to the heart better than our words. The closer our ministry is to

the death itself, the more true this is. That initial visit may better begin with mostly hugs and tears rather than lots of words, although certainly the ministry of words should follow the ministry of touch.

Keep in mind, though, that not everyone is equally receptive to touch. Some of those to whom we minister may not know us well enough to welcome touch, or may simply not be comfortable with physical contact. Such hesitancy is usually easy to discern, especially nonverbally, and should be honored. Sometimes the reluctance is signaled by the caregiver him/herself. If we are not comfortable with touch, the bereaved will almost certainly pick up our feelings, and they will not welcome physical contact from us—no matter how much they may need it.

8. Seek to listen to and understand the feelings of the bereaved.

Our first task as comforters is not to speak but to listen—not to provide understanding in the face of death, but to understand the wounds of death’s blows in the life of the bereaved. Only by attentive listening and profound understanding do we earn the right to speak the words of comfort and faith.

This listening and understanding may be difficult for two reasons. The bereaved, first of all, may signal us in all sorts of ways to talk rather than to listen. They themselves may mouth pieties and clichés in our presence (“This is the pastor or elder, and this is how I’m supposed to feel”). Most of the time these pieties are a denial or cover-up of real feelings of which the person may be ashamed. But a good listener will not be put off track. Comments such as, “I knew someone in your circumstance who . . .” or even, “When that happened to me, I . . .” may help to open up the channels of communication.

The other difficulty in listening may lie in ourselves. To listen, really *listen*, is to be willing to hear and to try to understand terrible pain, deep heartache, grave doubt, and blazing anger. We may not be ready to bear all this—especially

if we have never embraced those feelings ourselves. That's why listening requires much more of us than any amount of talking. Comforting and soothing words, spoken too soon, may actually be our way of reassuring *ourselves* that everything will be all right. It takes great discipline and care to offer a truly listening ear and heart.

9. Encourage the bereaved to face the physical reality of death.

We sometimes encounter the attitude among Christians that the real person is the spiritual soul that has gone to heaven. "The body is just dust," they say, "so get the body out of sight and out of mind as soon as possible." That's a mistake. While everyone who views a body can plainly see that it is no longer a person, it is still the body we associate with the person who died.

In death, Christians honor the body because we honor God's good creation. Viewing of the body should be encouraged, unless certain circumstances make it absolutely impossible. Bereaved people, reluctant as they may sometimes be, need to face death in its cold and stark reality. It is, after all, the last enemy. For the same reason, family and friends of the deceased should be encouraged to go to the graveside for the committal, and even to see the casket lowered into the ground.

Cremation is increasingly common, especially in those areas where land is scarce and costly. Christians need not be hesitant about choosing cremation, since there are no biblical or theological grounds to hinder the practice. Since cremation need not happen immediately upon death, family and friends can still have time to view the body and visit together.

Another factor that sometimes influences decisions we make about funerals and related issues is the donation of body parts to medicine. In such cases there is usually a delay, depending on the body parts involved, but the family is still able to view the body. However, if the entire body is donated, it is moved directly to a medical facility and cannot be viewed. Before choosing this alternative, families should be aware that

it may be difficult for at least some family members to come to terms with the reality of the death if they are denied a chance to view the body.

10. Encourage involvement in planning.

It is important that those who are grieving have things to do. The phone calls, the visit to the funeral director, and other necessary details can often function benevolently by allowing a time of activity during which the reality of death slowly seeps into the consciousness. Since death leaves us feeling that we have so little control over our environment, these duties and decisions also give the bereaved some semblance, at least, of control over events.

For that reason it is unwise for the caregiver to take over the plans and make contacts on behalf of the bereaved too readily. However, if you sense that the bereaved person is overwhelmed with the preparations and plans or needs guidance on what steps are to be taken, you can certainly offer some help and advice—without taking over full responsibility.

The pastor should play an important role in working with the family to plan the funeral service. If the pastor is going to effectively minister to the family and friends gathered for the funeral, it is absolutely crucial to spend time with the family, listening to stories and sensing feelings. At the funeral, the liturgist or pastor must give public expression to these thoughts and feelings (with a view, of course, to privacy and confidentiality).

Sometimes much advanced planning has already taken place. In fact, funeral directors have, as of late, found a marked increase in preplanning. There may be times when the deceased has preplanned the funeral in a manner that is not helpful to the bereaved. Pastors need to remember that the funeral is for the living, and if there are aspects of the preplanning that they simply cannot accept, they should feel free to change them.

Some families may be ready and willing to plan the funeral themselves. The pastor or elder may not agree with everything that they choose to include, but such planning is their right, and it is also a very helpful way of dealing with their grief. In many cases, however, the family will need some guidance. It is helpful if the pastor comes to the family with at least a basic outline of the service and the various options the family can consider in planning the service.

The pastor and the council also need to be sensitive to matters of cost. Families may experience subtle pressures to “honor the deceased” by purchasing the most expensive casket or by planning the most elaborate funeral when the money could be far more wisely spent in other ways. Councils can greatly help their congregations by discussing these sensitive issues and by giving some general guidelines regarding stewardship in relation to funerals.

Certainly if the family chooses to include anything that is not traditionally done at funerals in the area, the pastor will need to thoroughly discuss it with them. The funeral, like the wedding, is one of the rituals people are very reluctant to change, and important traditions need to be honored. Changes in funeral practices do not usually come quickly, and care needs to be taken not to offend community sensibilities for the sake of liturgical innovation or correctness. The focus of attention must always be the pastoral care of the grieving family and friends. This focus allows for new ideas and suggestions, but it also cautions against applying too much pressure for change. If change is to be made, it is wise to involve the council and the congregation in the process by open discussion of policies and practices.

11. Mobilize the church to offer help for legitimate needs.

When death occurs in a family, there are often so many matters to attend to, so many visitors to greet, and so much grief to work through, that help in peripheral matters can be greatly appreciated. One of the helps the church can best

provide is meals for the bereaved family. It is usually best not to ask *whether* meals are needed but rather *when* is the best time to bring them over and for how many people. Other immediate needs the church family can attend to include child care, financial or legal aid, travel arrangements, and a post-funeral luncheon or other get-together. The pastor and council should prepare for these opportunities through proper planning and mobilization of resources.

12. Remember that grieving takes time.

The few days leading up to the funeral are only the very first steps in a rather long journey of grief. Surprisingly to some, these are often the easiest steps. Usually the darkest moments, the greatest loneliness, the deepest stabs of pain come months and even years later. While a sense of loss never ends, the healing process for grief usually takes two or three years. It is helpful for bereaved people to know that, especially so they can resist the often-implied suggestion that they “ought to be over it by now.”

The bereaved may also need to be encouraged to continue to explore their feelings in the weeks, months, and years to come. Gentle but probing questions may help this process: “There must be many moments when you still miss _____” or “I’ve been thinking about _____; maybe we could share some memories.” Unfortunately, while caregivers may understand the length of this process intellectually, it is difficult to maintain significant contact with bereaved persons over such a long stretch. It is important, therefore, that a church council work out practical ways in which their ministry to the bereaved can continue after the funeral. Certainly regular visits need to be made, and cards or calls on the anniversary of a death are also appreciated.

13. Establish a careful, loving, and informed ministry.

While actual practice may differ from community to community, there is always some form of visitation for the

bereaved family. Because these hours may seem overwhelming to the family, they sometimes seek to cut down on the time for visitation or avoid it altogether. Pastors and caregivers should help such families understand that although times of visitation are demanding and tiring, this process is important in working through their grief. Through the ritual of visitation, family and friends share their grief in a personal way, relive the death, remember the deceased loved one, comfort one another, and tell those important family stories again and again. Yes, the wounds are reopened over and over, but this is precisely what is necessary in order to grieve in a way that leads back to life.

An often overlooked final step in the funeral is the gathering of family and friends for a meal. This too is a ritual act, affirming that life goes on after death. It functions as a bridge between the highly charged emotions and special activities of the preceding few days and the everyday life to which they must all return. The pastor should not overlook this opportunity to continue in ministry to grieving family and friends.

The ministry to the bereaved cannot only be borne by the officebearers of the church. It is a congregational ministry. Therefore it is very important that the entire congregation be aware of the reality and importance of grief in its many stages and forms. This awareness can be nurtured in a number of ways, from sermon illustrations to a series of adult education classes on grief. In communities that have a Hospice program, any members who have gone through that training and have worked with dying people may be an invaluable resource.

A careful, loving, and informed ministry to bereaved people is certainly one of the most important ministries in the life of the church. It can be carried out properly and consistently only when the entire congregation—not only the leaders but also the members—plan for it, understand its dynamics, and carry it out with loving care.

PRAYERS AND
READINGS

Prayers and Readings with Those near Death

The prayers and readings on these pages may be useful for pastors and others who make regular visits to the bedside of a dying person. They are appropriate for a variety of circumstances and situations, and can be used either individually or as part of a structured service. While this ministry should not be done in a liturgically formal manner, it is appropriate and often appreciated that the time before death be marked by a solemnization of the moment. The purpose is to build the faith of the dying person and the family, if they are present, and to prepare them for death.

A structured service of prayer and readings for use when death is near is probably unfamiliar to most people in the modern Reformed tradition, though it is used in many others. The Puritans of the sixteenth century and the *Hervormed Kerken* (Reformed Churches) of the Netherlands, for example, had several such forms for common use. Such a service can be a valuable resource of faith and strength for the dying person and his or her family. But, since it may be unfamiliar, the pastor or other representative of the church should talk with the family beforehand about its use and appropriateness.

Each death, from the gentle passing away of an aged person after a long decline or illness, to the emergency call after an accident or sudden illness, includes its own set of circumstances. So the setting for this service may be a home, a hospital, or even the scene of an accident. The pastor will need to be sensitive to the needs and limitations of the moment. In some cases, the service here may be used directly from the book. In other cases, it may be more appropriate that the

prayers be memorized or their themes expressed in one's own words.

The condition of the dying person may also be an important consideration. These prayers and readings are appropriate whether the dying person is conscious or unconscious, and whether or not family or friends are present. Experts and our own experience tell us that we can never be sure how much of our words actually penetrate into the consciousness of a comatose person. So we should always assume that the dying are conscious, appearances to the contrary. One could properly offer these readings and prayers at the bedside of a comatose individual with no one else present.

Physical contact is often very important to the sick and dying. Holding the hand of the dying person, for example, can be a very meaningful gesture of support and human solidarity.

The Service

When these readings and prayers are used as a structured service, the biblical *greeting* alerts all present that the service is beginning. These familiar words, often heard at the beginning of worship, also serve to remind the dying person of his or her place in the body of Christ.

The *opening prayer* focuses attention on baptism, which should function as a handle of faith for the dying person. The Lord's Prayer, so familiar from throughout the life of a believer, can also serve to bolster faith and bring the dying person actively into the prayers, if possible.

The *readings* should be short (use no more than two). This is not a time to wander into unfamiliar texts of Scripture. These are moments when Christians want and need to hear the familiar old words that are easy to spiritually digest and that bring comfort. Perhaps the dying person will request a certain passage.

The *prayers* at this point in the service are of two different types. The earlier prayers are more general petitions for the

grace of God in death. The later ones specifically commend the dying person to God's loving and saving care.

Also included in this service is a *commendation*, with the laying of hands upon the head of the dying person. This is not a prayer, but a gesture of farewell and loving commendation on the part of the pastor and all others present. It functions in the same way that a laying on of hands may function in a healing service. Not only the pastor but also family members may lay hands on the head of the dying person, or they may hold hands together around the room. Through this act we are commending the dying person to God for ultimate healing grace.

Attention is then directed again to God with a final *prayer of commendation*. You will notice that this prayer is the same one recommended as the commendation for the funeral service. There is no problem with using the same prayer meaningfully in both cases.

It may be helpful if the *family and friends* present are invited to briefly offer their own words of prayer and commendation. They should be made aware of this opportunity before the service begins. This may be a wonderful opportunity for the loved ones to give expression to their love, their grief, and their faith. However, in the interests of the dying person, the officiant should remain in control of the service lest it wander away from its intent or become too long.

The service is then closed with a *blessing*, accompanied by an appropriate gesture.

If death has already occurred before the pastor arrives, the prayers may begin with the commendation on page 46, and follow with prayers for the bereaved, concluding with the blessing.

The Greeting

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God the Father,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with all of you.

AMEN.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, look upon _____,
whom you claimed as your own in baptism.
Comfort and strengthen him/her with the promise of
eternal life,
made sure through the resurrection of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

Let us pray together the prayer that our Lord taught us:

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

—KJV

[or]

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.
 For yours is the kingdom and the power
 and the glory forever. Amen.
 —NIV

Scripture Reading

[One or two passages from Scripture are read. The reading or readings should be kept very brief.]

I have set the LORD always before me.
 Because he is at my right hand,
 I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my tongue rejoices;
 my body also will rest secure,
 because you will not abandon me to the grave,
 nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
 You have made known to me the path of life;
 you will fill me with joy in your presence,
 with eternal pleasures at your right hand.
 —Psalm 16:8-11

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
 he leads me beside quiet waters,
 he restores my soul.
 He guides me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
 Even though I walk
 through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil,
 for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life;
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

—*Psalm 23*

[Note: For pastoral reasons, reading an older translation of Psalm 23 may be appropriate.]

Praise the LORD, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children.

—*Psalm 103:1, 8, 10-14, 17*

When they came to the place called the Skull,
 there they crucified him, along with the criminals—
 one on his right, the other on his left.
 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him:
 “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”
 But the other criminal rebuked him.
 “Don’t you fear God,” he said,
 “since you are under the same sentence?
 We are punished justly,
 for we are getting what our deeds deserve.
 But this man has done nothing wrong.”
 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come
 into your kingdom.”
 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth,
 today you will be with me in paradise.”

—*Luke 23:33, 39-43*

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.
 He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;
 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.
 Do you believe this?”
 “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ,
 the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

—*John 11:25-27*

Do not let your hearts be troubled.
 Trust in God; trust also in me.
 In my Father’s house are many rooms;
 if it were not so, I would have told you.
 I am going there to prepare a place for you.
 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back
 and take you to be with me
 that you also may be where I am.

—*John 14:1-3*

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
 Shall trouble or hardship or persecution,
 or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?
 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
 through him who loved us.
 For I am convinced that neither death nor life
 neither angels nor demons,
 neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,
 neither height nor depth,
 nor anything else in all creation,
 will be able to separate us from the love of God
 that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—*Romans 8:35, 37-39*

I declare to you, brothers,
 that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.
 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable,
 and the mortal with immortality.
 When the perishable has been clothed with the
 imperishable
 and the mortal with immortality,
 then the saying that is written will come true:
 “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”
 “Where, O death, is your victory
 Where, O death, is your sting?”
 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory
 through our Lord Jesus Christ.

—*1 Corinthians 15:50, 53-57*

Therefore we do not lose heart.
 Though outwardly we are wasting away,
 yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
 For our light and momentary troubles
 are achieving for us an eternal glory
 that far outweighs them all.

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen,
 but on what is unseen.
 For what is seen is temporary,
 but what is unseen is eternal.
 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,
 we have a building from God,
 an eternal house in heaven, not built with human hands.

—2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,
 for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,
 and there was no longer any sea.
 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem,
 coming down out of heaven from God,
 prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.
 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
 “Now the dwelling of God is with men,
 and he will live with them.
 They will be his people
 and God himself will be with them and be their God.
 He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,
 for the old order of things has passed away.”

—Revelation 21:1-4

Prayers

[One of the following prayers is said.]

Gracious God and Father,
 you are nearer than our hands and feet,
 closer than breathing.
 Sustain with your presence our brother/sister _____.
 Help him/her now to trust your goodness
 and claim your promise of life everlasting.
 Cleanse him/her of all sin
 and remove all burdens.

Grant him/her the sure joy of your salvation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—TF

[or]

Heavenly Father,
we bring before you our brother/sister _____.
In baptism you enfolded him/her with your people;
now bring him/her into your presence
with all the angels and saints in glory.
Even as strength of body ebbs,
may the power of eternal life and peace flood his/her soul.
For we place him/her in your arms, loving Father,
in the faith and hope of ultimate victory,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

[or]

Almighty God,
by your power Jesus Christ was raised from death.
Watch over our brother/sister _____.
Fill his/her eyes with your light
to see, beyond human sight, a home within your love
where pain is gone
and frail flesh turns to glory.
Banish fear.
Brush tears away.
Let death be gentle as nightfall,
promising a day when songs of joy
shall make us glad to be together with Jesus Christ
who lives in triumph,
the Lord of life eternal.

AMEN.

—TF

[or]

Creator God, you made us for yourself;
now take your baptized child, _____, into your loving
arms.

Gentle and loving Savior,
you gave up your life on the cross
that we might be redeemed from all our sin;
you rose in victory from the dead
that we might have the promise of eternal life.

Receive into heaven _____, the one you bought with
a price.

Holy Comforter,
you are the life of God within us,
drawing us into the circle of heavenly love;
fill _____'s heart with peace and joy
even at the hour of death.

Living God, to whom we belong in life and death,
we commend our brother/sister _____ to your care
in the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

AMEN.

*[The following prayer may be used when life-support systems are
withdrawn.]*

God of compassion and love,
you have breathed into us the breath of life
and have given us the exercise of our minds and wills.
In our frailty we surrender all life to you from whom it came,
trusting in your gracious promises;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—OS

Commendation

[Then the minister will lay a hand on the head of the dying person, giving other loved ones the opportunity to do the same. The minister will then say:]

Depart in peace, _____, O brother/sister;
 In the name of God the Father who created you;
 in the name of Christ who redeemed you;
 In the name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you.
 May you rest in peace,
 and dwell forever with the Lord.

AMEN.

—BCP

[or]

_____, our brother/sister in faith,
 we entrust you to the God who created you;
 may you return to the one who formed you
 out of the dust of the earth.
 We entrust you to Christ who redeemed you;
 may that Good Shepherd enfold you in his arms.
 We entrust you to the Spirit who sanctified you;
 may you shine with all the saints in glory.
 May you see your God, face to face,
 and enjoy the light of his grace forever.
 AMEN.

Prayer of Commendation

Into your hands, O merciful Savior,
 we commend your servant _____.
 Acknowledge, we humbly pray,
 a sheep of your own fold,
 a lamb of your own flock,
 a sinner of your own redeeming.

Receive him/her into the arms of your mercy,
 into the blessed rest of everlasting peace,
 and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

AMEN.

—BCP

[or]

O Lord, support us all the days
 of this troubled life,
 until the shadows lengthen,
 and the evening comes,
 and the busy world is hushed,
 and the fever of life is over,
 and our work is done.

Then in your mercy grant us
 a safe lodging and a holy rest,
 and peace at last;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—*traditional*

Additional Prayers

[One of the following prayers may be said for the family and friends of the dying. Those who are present may also be invited to offer their own prayers.]

Lord God,
 look kindly upon us in our sorrow
 for this life being taken from us,
 and gather our pain into your peace.
 Heal our memories,
 be present in our grieving,
 and overcome all our doubts.
 Awaken our gratitude for your gifts of love and tenderness.

As we are able to receive them,
 teach us the lessons of life that can be learned in death.
 We pray through Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—TF

[or]

Heavenly Father,
 even as we commend _____, our beloved, to your care,
 we already feel the grief of his/her absence.
 We know that he/she will be with you always,
 but our sorrow is that he/she will not be with us.
 May we find, O Lord, your healing for that pain.
 May we come to know that whoever is in you
 is always one with us in the body of Christ,
 though death may separate us for a time.
 Create in us a deeper hope and constant expectation
 of that day when we shall all be one again
 in the glory of your kingdom, forever.

AMEN.

[or]

Lord Jesus,
 our saddened hearts wait for your comfort and peace.
 We do not accept death easily,
 and we are reluctant to surrender this loved one and friend
 to the place you have prepared for him/her.
 You know our sorrow, O Lord,
 you understand our tears;
 for you also wept at the death of a friend.
 Let the Holy Spirit, the Comforter you promise,
 testify in our hearts to your loving presence.

Be our constant companion, Lord,
 as we live through the painful days ahead,
 so that, even as we mourn,
 we may give witness to our living faith in you.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—UCA

Blessing

[The words of blessing may be offered as a prayer by changing the pronouns to first person plural (i.e.: “The Lord bless us . . .”).]

The LORD bless you and keep you;
 the LORD make his face shine upon you
 and be gracious to you;
 the LORD turn his face toward you
 and give you peace.

AMEN.

—Numbers 6:24-26

[or]

Go in peace, brother/sister,
 and may the blessing of Almighty God,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 be with you now, and in the hour of your death.

AMEN.

Prayers and Readings When Death Occurs

These prayers and readings can be adapted and used for a number of different circumstances after death has occurred and before the funeral service. They may be used informally among a gathering of family and friends in a home. They may also be used when the family first comes to view the body at the funeral home or at an appropriate time during visitation by family and friends of the deceased (such as the vigil, or “wake,” a tradition common among Catholic and African-American communities). If the occasion is more formal, a printed order may be used, incorporating some of the prayers and readings from the funeral services or the Additional Resources in this manual.

The Service

When the service takes place in a more formal setting, the biblical words of *greeting* may be used, clearly marking the beginning of the service for all present. Speaking these familiar words, so often used to begin congregational worship, serves to bring the people into a setting of worship.

The use of a *hymn or song* will involve consultation with the family and friends beforehand. Many songs and hymns are familiar enough to the average churchgoing Christian that at least a verse or two can be sung from memory. Hymns such as “Amazing Grace,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” or “Beautiful Savior” easily come to mind. Of course, the pastor should have the words clearly in mind and arrange with someone ahead of time to start the song on the correct pitch. In the case of a more formal setting, a hymnbook or printed copies of a hymn or song can be made available.

The *sentences from Scripture* and *call to prayer* offer scriptural permission to grieve before God and call the assembled people to prayer.

Choose the *opening prayer* that best expresses the circumstances of the grieving people you are ministering to. Remember that it is important that the feelings of the bereaved be given expression by the one leading the prayers. Some prayers express a faithful serenity one might imagine at the death of an elderly saint; some express shock and grief at an untimely or tragic death. Again, the prayers are not intended necessarily to be read, though it is not wrong to do so. But they must serve as a *personal* expression that represents the thoughts and feelings of those present. It is therefore important to use the names of the mourners and the one who is being mourned, and to be ready to express what you know of their feelings at this time. If suitable, it can be very meaningful to join hands during the prayer. (Other prayers may be found in the funeral services themselves or in Additional Resources on p. 194ff.) The prayer may be concluded with the Lord's Prayer, for its familiar and ever-meaningful words will bring all those present directly into the spirit of prayer.

A *psalm and other Scripture* may be read. You might use the psalm to give expression to the feelings of grief and loss experienced by the bereaved and the other Scripture to point to the hope we have through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This may be a good opportunity for a few brief *remarks from the pastor*, expressing the grief and hope appropriate to the situation, but also calling to mind the life of the deceased person. It can also be very meaningful to invite the *family and friends* gathered together to offer their own *remembrances* and words of faith and hope.

The *prayers* not only express the sadness and hope of the bereaved, but also offer an opportunity to give thanksgiving for the specific gifts and graces that were given by God through the life of the deceased loved one. The specificity of these

words may be difficult for the pastor or officiant, but such remembrances in prayer are extremely important for the mourners. Some consultation with the family will greatly help in filling out a verbal portrait of the loved one.

A *commendation* may be included, especially if it has not been used with the family at an earlier time, such as before the death. (See section on prayers for the dead in the commentary on Funeral Service I, p. 78.) In a more formal setting, when a printed order is used, all present may say the words of commendation.

The service will close with a *blessing*, accompanied by an appropriate gesture. The pastor should not leave immediately after prayer; the thoughts and feelings elicited in the prayers may demand the minister's presence a little longer.

Greeting

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

[or]

The grace and peace of God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

[or]

The grace and peace of God our Father
who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead,
be with you all.

[or]

May the Father of mercies
and the God of all consolation be with you.

[or]

In this moment of sorrow
the Lord is in our midst
and consoles us with his word:
“Blessed are those who mourn;
for they will be comforted.”

—*Matthew 5:4*

[or]

The eternal God is your refuge,
and underneath are the everlasting arms.

—*Deuteronomy 33:27*

Hymn or Song

[If a hymnal is not available, select a hymn that is familiar to most people present. The hymn text may be read rather than sung. (See pp. 210-212 for a listing of appropriate hymns.)]

Sentences from Scripture

[One or more of the following verses may be used.]

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

—*Psalms 46:1*

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

—*Matthew 5:4*

When Jesus saw her weeping,
and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping,
he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

“Where have you laid him?” he asked.

—*John 11:33-34*

Call to Prayer

My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of family, friendship and affection which knit us together throughout our lives do not unravel in death. Confident of God's love even in the face of death, let us pray.

—OCF

Opening Prayer

[One or more of the following prayers may be said.]

Our Lord and our God,
 the death of our brother/sister _____
 reminds us of our frail human condition
 and the brevity of our lives on the earth.
 Yet for those who are in the embrace of your love
 in Jesus Christ our Lord,
 death is not the end,
 nor can it destroy the bonds
 that bind us to you and to each other.
 Help us to share that faith together
 even through our tears and sadness.
 Bring the light of Christ's resurrection
 to shine on this time of grief and pain,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

—OCF

Faithful God, in your wisdom
 you have called your servant _____
 out of this world.
 Though our hearts are heavy with grief,
 we willingly place him/her in your loving arms.
 Released from the bonds of sin and death,
 the old order is passed.

May he/she now receive a glorious welcome
 into your heavenly kingdom
 where there is no sorrow, no weeping, no pain.
 We surrender him/her to your arms
 where there is fullness of eternal joy and peace
 with your Son, and with the Holy Spirit,
 and with all the saints in glory, forever and ever.
 AMEN.

Loving God, faithful friend,
 our minds and hearts have hardly grasped
 what reality demands we accept.
 Our dear brother/sister/friend (*etc.*)
 is gone from us.
 Send us your grace and comfort, O God,
 even through the shock and pain.
 Assure us again that in your love,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 not one of your children is ever lost,
 but all of us, in life and in death,
 are members of your family.
 In the darkness and sorrow of this hour
 may hope begin to dawn—
 hope that points the way to eternal life
 beyond the agony of death;
 hope that is firm and sure
 in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, your Son,
 in whose name we pray.
 AMEN.

Psalm or Other Scripture

[A Psalm may be sung or read, along with a reading of another brief passage(s) of Scripture. Psalms 16, 23, 27, 46, 91, 103, 121, and 146 may be suitable, either read from Scripture (see pp. 141ff) or as versified in the Psalter Hymnal.]

The minister may wish to comment briefly on the passage(s) read and on the life of the deceased. Informal conversation with the family may follow, and those present may be invited to offer their remembrances.]

Prayer

[One or more of the following prayers may be said. (Other prayers may be found on pp. 194ff.)]

Gracious and eternal God,
 Lord of life and death,
 you made us in your image
 and hold us in your care.
 We thank you for your servant, _____,
 and for the gift of his/her life among us.
 We thank you especially for . . .

[Here some of the gifts, work, and qualities of the life of the deceased may be expressed.]

But most of all we thank you for your love in Jesus Christ,
 who died and rose again from the grave,
 giving us eternal life.
 Loving God, when our time on earth is ended,
 may we too be united with all the saints
 in the joys of your eternal home,
 through and with Jesus Christ our Lord.
 AMEN.

—TF

Father of mercies and God of all consolation,
 you are our refuge in times of trouble,
 our light in the darkness,
 and our only hope in the valley of the shadow of death.
 Comfort your family in their loss and sorrow.
 Lift us from the depths of grief
 into the peace and light of your presence.

Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
 by dying has destroyed our death,
 and by rising, restored our life.
 Enable us now to press on toward him,
 so that, after our earthly course is run,
 you may reunite us with those we love,
 when every tear is wiped away.
 We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 AMEN.

—*OCF*

Lord God,
 you are attentive to the voice of our pleading.
 Let us find in your Son
 comfort in our sadness,
 certainty in our doubt,
 and courage to live through this hour.
 Make our faith strong,
 through Christ our Lord.
 AMEN.

—*OCF*

Lord Jesus, our saddened hearts wait for your comfort and
 peace.
 We do not accept death easily,
 and we are reluctant to surrender this loved one and friend
 to what seems the cold hand of death.
 Gently teach our grieving minds and hearts
 that we surrender him/her into your arms.
 You know our sorrow, Lord,
 and you understand our tears;
 for you also wept at the death of your friend.
 Let the Holy Spirit, the Comforter you promise,
 testify in our hearts of your loving presence.

Be our constant companion, Lord,
 as we live through the difficult days ahead,
 so that, even as we mourn,
 we may give witness to our living faith in you.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 AMEN.

—UCA

[At the death of a child]

Loving God,
 your beloved Son took children into his arms and blessed
 them.
 Give us grace, we pray,
 that we may entrust _____ to your never-failing care
 and love,
 and bring us all to your heavenly kingdom;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 AMEN.

—LBW

Commendation

*[One or more of the following commendations may be included if not prayed
 with the family at an earlier time.]*

We commend _____, your servant
 (or, our brother/sister/friend/parent, etc.)
 to you, O Lord who gave him/her life.
 May he/she hear your words of welcome,
 “Come you blessed of my Father”
 and receive the unfading crown of glory.
 May the angels surround him/her
 and the saints welcome him/her in peace.

[The minister and/or all assembled may say:]

Into your hands, O Lord,
 we commend our brother/sister _____.
 Gracious God,
 in whose presence live all who die in the Lord,
 receive our brother/sister _____,
 into your merciful arms
 and into the joys of your eternal home
 with all the departed who rest in your peace.
 AMEN.

—TF

[These prayers may be concluded with the Lord's Prayer in unison.]

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

—KJV

[or]

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.
 For yours is the kingdom and the power
 and the glory forever. Amen.

—NIV

The Blessing

[The leader closes with one or more of the following blessings. (The words of blessing may be offered as a prayer by changing the pronouns to first person plural: “The Lord bless us”)]

The Lord bless you
 and defend you from all evil
 and bring you to everlasting life.
 AMEN.

—TF

May our almighty and merciful God
 bless you and comfort you
 and gently wipe away your tears:
 in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the
 Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

May the peace of God
 which is beyond understanding,
 keep your hearts and minds
 in the knowledge and love of God
 and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

—*Philippians 4:7*

Service of Prayer on the Occasion of a Miscarriage, Stillborn Child, or Early Death

A miscarriage or stillborn child is an occasion of deep and painful grief for the family, a grief that can sometimes be overlooked by others and by the church. In such situations, when a funeral service does not seem appropriate, it may be very helpful for the grieving family, along with close relatives and friends, to gather for a brief service of prayer and mutual comfort. Since most families grieve privately in these situations, it may be necessary for the church to make the congregation aware of the availability of this ministry. Certainly, it will be appropriate for the pastor to suggest this service when learning of such a situation in the congregation.

Since this type of service will probably be a new experience for the family, the pastor should explain the intent and the structure of the service beforehand. Probably the most suitable place for the service will be at the graveside, when the baby is interred, or in the intimate setting of the home.

The Service

The pastor or other representative of the church may begin with opening *words of Scripture* and/or *words of invitation*. These words of Scripture and invitation explain the purpose and meaning of this service for the participants. It is important especially to include the words of invitation beginning with “Friends, we have gathered”

The suggested *prayers* are very direct and honest. Part of the purpose of this service is to give expression to the real feelings of family and friends. It is important to speak to them beforehand to gauge the range and intensity of their feelings. No two situations or families are ever quite alike.

The pastor may wish to give a brief meditation based on Scripture that is evocative of the realities of the situation. Again, it is very important to take seriously the reality of the grief that people feel in these situations and not to look forward too easily to the possibility of another child. *This child* was expected, already loved, and is now gone.

The pastor may, in addition to or in place of the meditation, invite those present to share their feelings along with their hope and faith. This may also be a time for *words of mutual encouragement* offered with appropriate gestures of love and support. Those gathered should be aware of this opportunity before the service begins.

The service closes with a *prayer* and a *benediction*.

Opening Words of Scripture

As a father has compassion on his children,
 so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
 for he knows how we are formed,
 he remembers that we are dust.
 But from everlasting to everlasting
 the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
 and his righteousness with their children's children.

—*Psalm 103:13, 14, 17*

[or]

This is what the LORD says:
 "A voice is heard in Ramah,
 mourning and great weeping.
 Rachel weeping for her children,
 and refusing to be comforted,
 because her children are no more."

—*Jeremiah 31:15*

Words of Invitation

Friends, we have gathered here to worship God
and witness to our faith
even as we mourn the death of this infant,
the child of _____ and _____.
We come together in grief, acknowledging our human loss.
May God search our hearts,
that in our pain, we may find comfort;
in our sorrow, we may find hope;
and in death, the promise of the resurrection.

[or]

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me,
and do not hinder them;
for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

—*Mark 10:14*

[or]

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,
who comforts us in all our troubles,
so that we can comfort those in any trouble
with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

—*2 Corinthians 1:3-4*

Prayer

All-knowing and ever-loving God,
who remembers even the sparrow when it falls;
though no one else may fully understand
or share our grief at this loss,
you share all our griefs and sorrows;
you know all our broken dreams.
You call us to cast our burdens on you
and in your presence to find comfort.

In this uncertain world, where our dreams fail
 and our mortal flesh turns to dust,
 grant us grace to taste your eternal love;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

[or]

Lord, we do not understand why this little one
 which we had hoped to bring into the world
 has died before birth

(or, has died so shortly after birth).

We only know that where once was sweet expectation,
 now there is bitter disappointment;
 where once there was hope and excitement,
 now there is a feeling of failure and loss.

Nothing can replace this life, this child,
 whom we have loved before seeing,
 before feeling it stir in the womb.

In our pain we look to you, Lord,
 to whom no life is meaningless,
 no matter how brief or small.

Though our understanding may be limited,
 may it not confine our faith.

Draw us close to you and to each other in our grief.

Heal our wounds and comfort our sorrows,
 and raise us all from death to life;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

[or]

Mysterious Lord of life and death,
 a very part of these parents has died
 in the death of their child.

Our souls are weighed down with sorrow
 and bear a wound whose scar will never leave
 all through this life.

Send your Spirit of consolation,
 for the pain is heavy and deep.
 Come to our aid, Lord of mercy
 and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 for you saw your Son die on the cross,
 and surely you know our pain
 at the loss of _____, our beloved child.

Do not take our tears and sorrow as a sign of unbelief,
 for we do believe that all of your children who have died
 are resurrected to eternal life in you.
 Rather, see our tears as a sign of the deep love we felt
 for _____,
 who is now gone from us.
 As we held him/her in the embrace of our love,
 O divine Father, hold him/her close to your heart forever.
 Help us, Lord, for we do not seek to understand the why
 of this mystery of death so young
 as much as we desire to accept it in a holy way,
 and to be healed and once again be made whole.
 Support us, our Lord and God,
 wrap us in your gentle love
 as we attempt to carry this bitter burden.
 Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 AMEN.

—PDC

Scripture Readings

[One or two passages of Scripture may be read. Particularly appropriate passages include Isaiah 65:17-25, Zechariah 8:1-8, Matthew 18:1-5 and 10, and Mark 10:13-16 (see pp. 164ff).]

Meditation

[A meditation may be given at this point. If so, it should be quite brief and informal, addressing very personally the needs and feelings of those present.]

Mutual Witness and Comfort

[In place of or in addition to the meditation, family and friends may be invited to briefly voice their feelings and their Christian witness. Signs of faith, hope, and love may be exchanged. Also, a hymn may be sung, such as “Children of the Heavenly Father” (Psalter Hymnal 440).]

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,
 as your Son, Jesus, took children in his arms
 and blessed them,
 so we commit this child to your loving arms.
 May we now continue our earthly journey
 in grace and hope,
 assured that you care for all, small and great, and
 looking to that day when we will gather with all your people
 in the unending joy of your kingdom;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who taught us to pray,

[the Lord's Prayer follows]

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

—KJV

[or]

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.
 For yours is the kingdom and the power
 and the glory forever. Amen.

—NIV

Benediction

[One of the following blessings may be used.]

The peace of God,
 which transcends all understanding,
 guard your hearts and your minds
 in Christ Jesus.

AMEN.

[or]

And the blessing of Almighty God,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 stay with you, now and forever.

AMEN.