

Funerals

Perhaps second only to weddings, the subject of funerals is sure to stimulate a lively discussion among pastors. When I began working on this issue, I asked numerous groups of pastors and seminarians to assist me in identifying significant concerns arising from our ministry at the time of death and to the bereaved. The people I spoke with were a great help, and they told me amazing stories.

One good friend recounted the first funeral he did. As the casket of a young wife and mother was lowered into the ground, her hysterical husband threw himself into the grave. While trying to look calm and in control, my friend's inner voice screamed in panic—"What do I do? They never covered this in seminary!"

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Funerals are times of intense emotion, both for the family and friends of the person who has died, but also for those who are asked to minister to the family and lead the funeral. Some deaths bring a profound sense of completion and release, while other deaths are fraught with questions, bitterness, and anger. What is important is that each death is unique and confronts those involved with the deepest issues of faith.

Seminary classes can explore the theological questions of death and eternal life. Worship classes may spend an hour or two on planning funerals and the legal dimensions involved. Preaching classes discuss preaching at funerals, and classes in pastoral care may explore comfort and counseling at the time of death. But until that death has a human face, until the abstract becomes concrete, the lessons learned may not "sink in."

In this time of Lent, as you reflect on your own mortality, remembering that "dust you are, and to dust you shall return," we bring you a number of pastors who have reflected upon this significant dimension of their ministry. Our goal is to add to and deepen the lessons that were covered in your seminary training, and perhaps begin to explore some of the questions that have arisen when you stood looking into the grave of a departed parishioner.

"May God grant us grace, that in pain we may find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection."

Lucy Hogan
Guest Editor