

OPEN FORUM

In every funeral service that I have ever been to someone inevitably says, and oftentimes it is the preacher, something to the effect that now the "departed" is with God. Their immortal souls are now happily walking the streets of Gold. It's like the heresy of the early church that said Jesus didn't really die on the cross. His body was merely a cloak that he cast off.

But where is the Resurrection? How is this world going to become "the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" if we give away the only trump card we have? People are mortal. They die. And unless this mortal nature puts on the immortal we as the church have nothing to say: To paraphrase another letter, if Christ has not been raised then we misrepresent God, and we are still in our sins. Let us eat and drink for our time is coming.

The basic doctrine of the Christian faith has been given over to mumbling some innocuous stuff about a natural process of reincarnation or soul migration. When we say of the dead that they are finally with God one wonders where they were before? If we are going to preach resurrection then soul migration is not an option. When we finally stop denying death maybe the church will have something unique to offer this world: If we live we live to Christ, if we die we die to Christ, so whether we live or die we are in Christ. Perhaps this is as much as faith in Christ can offer. Is it enough? I don't know. But it is our only defining reason to make disciples of all nations or of praying "thy kingdom come."

Al Milligan

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Congratulations on the September/October 2005 *Circuit Rider*. Your treatment on ministry to the dying and their loved ones is very helpful.

Beyond that, we often deal with the traumatized for whom we seldom have training. While doing my part for local flood victims, I was introduced to the forty-page *Emotional and Spiritual Care: an introduction on basic concepts*. It was published in 2004 by National Voluntary Organizations Assisting at Disaster (VOAD).

Material is based on mass-disaster experience. Contents are suggestive for the one-on-one situations often faced in the parish: Death, illness, family/economic crises, etc. The influx of severely wounded and disfigured casualties from today's combat is just beginning to be felt within our communities.

Contents of the manual include the initial trauma, ongoing treatment, and self care. Volunteers trained by UMCOR in case management who took my further course based on this text comment favorably. That final section on self-care is something most clergy could use in a fulfilling ministry to avoid burn-out, a topic you have addressed in previous *Circuit Rider* articles and of concern to conference leadership.

Emotional and Spiritual Care: an introduction on basic concepts may be downloaded at no cost. I encourage all our colleagues to make use of it.

www.nvoad.org/documents/title

Bill Hunter

Kingston, NY

Thank you for the issue Standing in The Circle of Grief. I think some of the points made might be more regional than universal—like a funeral director actually directing the funeral. Here in the North Country of New York State, and in Western NY as well, the old school funeral directors are quiet and unobtrusive; pastors conduct services without inter-

ruption, and the trip to the cemetery follows with a minimum of fuss.

I don't preach a sermon at a funeral. My practice is uncommon, so I share it here. I absolutely hate generic funerals, so I developed this way for my first funeral, and I have used it successfully for 25 years.

When I first hear of a death, I then telephone the family at home and ask for a time when I may meet with as many family members and friends as care to do so; I use that time, usually in the home of the deceased, to gather remembrances of and anecdotes about that person. I often "prime the pump" asking for details about vacations, favorite hobbies, mannerisms, holiday observances, and other topics to get the folks talking.

When I return to my computer, I take all the information given, plus the material from the obituary, and I write a remembrance of the person, usually in free verse, usually in chronological order, earliest remembrances to latest. I start with an acknowledgment of the feelings and thoughts I heard at the remembrance-gathering session, saying that it is appropriate to name these thoughts and feelings in our worship service.

The final section of each remembrance I devote to the hope we Christians have in Jesus. I state the basic gospel message as clearly as I can, and I try hard to make the Christian faith attractive to those who may be hearing it for the first time. I clearly state that God's grace through faith is our way to eternal life in heaven. If the person has lived a virtuous life, it is especially important to point out that we don't earn our way into heaven.

Then I simply commend the deceased into the mercy of God.

If a family member has indicated a concrete image of heaven (such as "a parade of saints") I use it. If a child makes a picture or wants to share a story, I incorporate it within the comfort zone of the child.

When I conduct the funeral, I use many of the readings in the Book of Worship; favorite sacred songs of the deceased are played or sung. If the family requests open microphone, I honor it; its place is after I read the remembrance. At the end of the service, when I am shaking the hands of the immediate family, I give my copy of the remembrance to a family member, for photocopying and giving to those who could not be present at the service.

I have yet to find a mourner who doesn't like this style. I share the idea freely with all.

Frances Hemstreet
Beaver Falls, NY

I have just finished reading the September/October issue on "Standing In The Circle of Grief." Your magazines are usually very helpful, but this one is just above excellent! I have been a pastor for over fifty-seven years, and have read a lot of books, magazines and articles during that time. This is the finest presentation on this theme that I have ever read. It should be required reading for seminary students and all those entering the ministry at other levels.

Carroll W. Lewis
Effingham, IL

Mr. Schaller's comments [on the itineracy] are well considered and thoughtful, but rather shocking. It is not the role of the Christian church to "meet the expectations younger generations of American Protestant churchgoers bring to church today." It is the role of a congrega-

tion to live and proclaim the good news. Nor is it the role of the church, or a denomination, to be part of "the American religious scene." It is a scene, as noted by Bob McKibben in a recent article in *Harpers Magazine* (7-27-2005) that is itself deeply mired in sub-Christian and anti-Christian beliefs and behaviors. Mr. Schaller confuses leaven for starch. There is little if any evidence in history of the transformational value of bulked up ecclesial bodies. If, as Mr. Schaller suggests, we are going to abandon the itineracy, would it not be equally valuable to abandon a highly paid, professionalized (and specialized) clergy and the vast hierarchy necessary to financially sustain United Methodism as it is currently conceived? This would equally free congregations from their most significant financial burdens so that as small, flexible, and disciplined communities they could embrace a rapidly changing society with God's love. Or maybe we should embrace a plurality of models of congregational life if we are to be faithful to God's calling. Mr. Schaller's narrow focus on money, power, and consumer satisfaction mirrors much of United Methodism and American society, but it won't take us where we need to

go along the journey toward God's reign.

Robert Hunt
Southwest Texas Conference

The issue on "itineracy" and the letters to the editor in the subsequent issue all were marked by a significant omission, namely the absence of any expression of the concerns of the laity. The articles and the letters were pretty much all centered on us – pastoral clergy, district superintendents, and bishops. The laity have major concerns as well, because they often feel left-out of the process, and yet see themselves as the real sufferers in itineracy, their only hope being the fulfillment of the hope that "this too shall pass away." In the small church I am serving as a DS Hire, and in the small churches which are our neighbors, angst abounds. I think that the discussion about itineracy needs to be opened to the laity. It is not enough for us to declare that this is our system, as though there were no alternatives to itineracy. How about a follow-up edition with total lay correspondents?

Carroll R. Gunkel
Baltimore-Washington Conference

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FREE Bulletin Insert on Choosing a Bible

What Bible Should I Use?

Choosing a Bible, for study and/or devotional use, can be quite an adventure. It is easy to become bewildered by the many different versions of Scripture available. There are "old" King James (KJV) and "new" King James (NKJV) versions, plus RSVs, NRSVs, NIVs, NABs, NASBs, NEBs, and numerous other editions. One can get lost in such a perplexing maze, a virtual embarrassment of riches.

"What Bible, then, should I use?" you ask. Well, a lot depends on what you consider your goal or purpose in purchasing a Bible. Is it mainly for serious Bible study, or for use in Sunday school classes and other worship services, or for personal meditation and private devotionals?

For the sake of convenience, we might divide the many versions of Bible translations into three categories:

- "literal" editions, which are more or less, "word-for-word" translations from the original Hebrew and Greek languages
- dynamic editions, which occupy a kind of middle ground between the two
- paraphrases, which concentrate on presenting biblical truth in a fresh, down-to-earth, contemporary language.

Verbal Translations

- The King James Version (KJV)
- The New King James Version (NKJV)
- The Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
- The New English Bible (NEB)
- The New American Bible (NAB)
- The New American Standard Bible (NASB)
- The New International Version (NIV)
- The New International Reader's Version (NIrV)
- The New International Version (GNB/TEV)

Dynamic Translations

- The Good News Bible/Today's English Version (GNB/TEV)
- The Contemporary English Version (CEV)
- The Jerusalem Bible (JB)
- The New Testament in Modern English, by J.B. Phillips

Paraphrased Versions

- The Living Bible
- The Message, by Eugene H. Peterson

Suggestions on Purchasing a Bible

1. Do your homework. Seek to determine which Bible best suits your personal needs. Compare different versions of some of your favorite biblical passages and see which ones "speak" to you.
2. Ask your pastor, fellow churchgoers, and friends which versions they use and find helpful. Your friendly sales representative at a local Cokesbury store or in the Cokesbury call center (1-800-672-1789) will be delighted to give you guidance in your selection.
3. Check the Internet for information on Bible translations in which you are interested. Some websites also provide the "reading level" (ranging from Grade 4 to Grade 12) of each version. Visit online at Cokesbury.com. Click on the Cokesbury link, then the Biblefinder link.
4. Buy more than one version. (Most clergy recommend at least three.) This will allow you to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the different translations.

Which Translations Are Highly Recommended?

The following versions are especially worthy of your consideration:

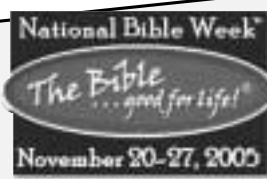
- The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and specifically The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, with excellent study notes, introductory essays, and a self-pronouncing text.
- The New International Version (NIV)
- The Message
- The Living Bible


Various "Parallel Bibles" are also available (editions that print three or four versions of Scripture side-by-side on facing pages for convenient comparison).

For more information on choosing a Bible or other biblical references or commentaries, contact Cokesbury.

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