

Dear Grieving Ones,

I am profoundly honored to lead your loved one's funeral. It is one of my great joys to shape a service that testifies powerfully to the goodness of God's love in Jesus Christ and honors the life of your loved one.

It may be that you have no specific suggestions for the service and that you would rather leave everything up to me. That is fine. I am very willing to take the lead, well aware that shaping a service can seem daunting. I do look forward to the opportunity to speak with you to learn more about your loved one, their joys and sorrows, and who is likely to be present at the service.

It may also be that you have very specific suggestions for the service. As a pastor, I am eager to respond thoughtfully to these, including suggestions that your loved one may have made directly. Often these are wonderful, and I can work well with them, weaving them into the central practices of a Christian funeral service. But sometimes plans were made that need to be reconsidered. Upon reflection, we might realize that these previously designed plans do not do what they were intended to do, or even that they do not fit well into a Christian funeral. Adjusting those plans might be the best way to honor Christ and respond well to the emotions of the moment. If this happens, I will be eager to work with you to be thoughtful, sensitive, and responsive to the context.

As our conversations unfold, here are a few especially important topics I look forward to discussing together.

1. **SCRIPTURE.** I am especially grateful to learn about Bible texts that were especially meaningful to your loved one and to you, and to hear, when possible, any memories you have about why those texts are so meaningful. Once I receive suggestions, one of my privileges as a pastor is to weave those texts, along with other texts that complement them, through the entire funeral service.
2. **EMOTIONS.** Funerals involve such complex emotions: sadness, sometimes anger or regret, gratitude, hope, even joy. Some families insist on having an entirely upbeat service. Some families are wary of superficial happiness. As a pastor, I marvel at how the psalms model for us the whole range of human emotion, and at how Jesus, at the death of his friend Lazarus, exhibited tears but also a confidence in the resurrection as he brought Lazarus back to life. I have found it wise to begin a service by saying something like "The God of all comforts, welcomes our tears, and prompts our gratitude." That creates space for both lament and gratitude.
3. **NAMING THE SERVICE.** Many families recently have insisted that we call the service "a celebration of life." This is a fitting choice. We gather to celebrate God's gracious gift of the life of their loved one, and we celebrate the life that ultimately made possible—so beautifully—by the life of Jesus Christ. I also think there is wisdom in the honest name

“funeral.” There is no denying death, and holding a service with the casket present helps us to confront death and declare that Jesus’ resurrection overcomes death. But I also want to suggest another title: “A Service of Witness to the Resurrection.” This is not my idea. It’s a classic Christian title. And it announces that when we gather in the face of death, what we do as a community bears witness to the power of Jesus’ resurrection and to the sure and certain hope that we too will rise with Christ. This focus on the bodily resurrection of believers in Christ is so compelling, so beautiful, so timely. And it confronts some mistaken assumptions that people often have about a Christian view of our future life with God in Christ. Very few families come up with this suggestion. But it’s a suggestion that many families, in retrospect, are glad I made.

4. **REMEMBRANCES.** Many families are eager to have a time for remembrances or eulogies in a funeral service. This can be a beautiful way to honor God’s gift of the person we are remembering. Yet these can also be a challenge. It can be difficult for speakers to respond to the powerful emotions that such remembrances can evoke. Sometimes attempts at humor can fall flat. Sometimes these remembrances can go on too long—even with good intentions. We may well discern that sharing of remembrances is a good choice. As a pastor, I want to offer you an alternative. I would be grateful for the opportunity to interview a group of people of your choosing to share remembrances. We could even record the conversation for you to replay later. Then I would be honored to put together a remembrance from what is shared, either weaving those memories into my sermon or including them at a different point in the service.
5. **CONGREGATIONAL SONG.** So many funeral services include music. That’s fitting, for music is one of God’s gifts to us. I encourage, when possible, the entire congregation to sing together. Not everyone will be able to sing or want to sing. That’s okay. But for those who do sing, it offers such a tangible, bodily way to participate. It invites us to breathe together and to take onto our lips words of profound comfort. It is tempting to limit song choices to just the favorite songs of the loved one. Perhaps those songs will be appropriate, but it’s also quite possible that their favorites are not that singable, and that trying to sing them together will be awkward in ways that can’t be predicted. In several funerals I’ve participated in, families have later been grateful when I suggested that instead of singing a song like that, I could weave a reference to it into my sermon or reflections, freeing us to sing something together that would better in that moment.
6. **NAMING SALVATION IN JESUS.** Some families are very eager to have a service that doesn’t speak too much about Jesus. They don’t want to offend family members who are not believers or who have rejected invitations to join a church and profess faith in Christ. Perhaps they remember earlier family funerals that included an overemphasis on divine judgment and an underemphasis on divine mercy. As a pastor in Jesus’ church, I can’t in good conscience lead a service without mentioning God’s grace in Jesus Christ, reading Scripture texts that convey Christ-centered hope, praying in Jesus’ name, and conveying

God's gracious invitation to each of us. What I can promise is to be as thoughtful and sensitive as possible to context, well aware of the diversity of perspectives present. I can say something like "we gather here in this place with very different religious commitments and perspectives on faith in Christ." I could introduce a prayer by saying "what follows is a prayer offered to God in Jesus' name. As I speak this prayer, some of us will be praying along, others may be listening in." Often I have found families very grateful for how these gestures of awareness create space for all to be present, without sacrificing the integrity of a Christian funeral. In contrast, some families have told me "we'll have stubborn non-believers present. Be sure to explain what rejecting Jesus leads to." I can hear in this the cry of the heart about a lack of faith in people they love. I also know that the witness of Jesus has frequently suffered from being too coercive, too judgmental. We wisely invite people to faith "for the joy set before us," eagerly and passionately praying that the Holy Spirit will do what we can't do—work deeply within people to change them.

As we prayerfully listen to each to other and to Scripture's powerful message about Jesus, I look forward to how God's Holy Spirit will be at work, comforting, instructing, and guiding us every step of the way.

In Christ,

Your Pastor