

CHRISTIAN FUNERAL PRACTICES  
in a Changed Time and  
Culture

By  
John McFadden and James M. Donohue, C.R.

*Wipf and Stock Publishers*  
199 West 8<sup>th</sup> Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401  
2005

## **Christian Funeral Practices in a Changed Time and Culture**

By John McFadden and James M. Donohue, C.R.

Pamphlet 13 in the *Renewing Radical Discipleship* series of Ekklesia Pamphlets, edited by Dan Bell and Joel Shuman

Copyright 2005 by The Ekklesia Project

*Printed by Wipf and Stock Publishers*

*199 W. 8<sup>th</sup> Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401*

All Rights Reserved.

*To become involved in The Ekklesia Project,  
or for more information, please contact:*

The Ekklesia Project  
Brent Laytham, Coordinator  
North Park Theological Seminary  
3225 West Foster Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60625-4895  
laytham@ekkleksiaproject.org  
(773) 244-6221

The Ekklesia Project maintains a web page that includes resources, announcements and news regarding our activities and work. You may find it at <http://www.ekkleksiaproject.org>  
This site includes printable versions of earlier pamphlets, and two online pamphlets in the *Studies in Radical Discipleship* series.

Reports citing the religiosity of contemporary Americans notwithstanding, ours is an increasingly secular and individualistic society. Among its most significant characteristics is the fact that few persons understand their lives to be shaped by participation in the life of a religious community. Because of this, many rites of passage (weddings and funerals in particular) deeply rooted in the life of Christian community are being observed in secular settings, their content stripped of all reference to God. Instead they offer sentimental content based on consumerist notions of what gives meaning and value to our lives, our relationships, and our deaths. At a secularized wedding the focus is upon the hope that the marriage will make each person happier and more fulfilled. At a secularized funeral, mourners are comforted by thinking that the deceased enjoyed his or her days on earth. Disturbingly, such consumerist and sentimental notions are finding their way into the life of the Christian church, whose clergy and congregations experience growing pressure to incorporate secular elements into such services, displacing sacred meaning. Certainly this is true of funerary practices.

Should churches authorize their clergy to officiate at funerals or memorial services in settings other than the church? Can a church host and a clergyperson in good conscience conduct a service for a person who is not a member of his or her church? What about those persons who cluster at the margins of all local churches – the “Christmas and Easter Christians,” the non-practicing sibling of the cherished active member, the former member removed from the rolls twenty years ago who still considers the congregation to be his or her church? How does a pastor say “no” to a family in grief when they request she conduct services for a relative who displayed no evidence of holding or practicing faith in Christ? How does a pastor raise questions when family members have made all the arrangements at the funeral home for a life-long parishioner

and have only come now to ask for his or her participation? How do we ground funerals and memorial services in the overall life of the community of the faithful?

Some denominations provide clear standards concerning such difficult matters, but in many cases matters of discernment are left to the local congregation, which in turn often defers to the instincts of its clergy. Given the diversity of perspectives on the issues surrounding funeral and memorial practices, we cannot speak definitively to or on behalf of all Christian congregations. But we will argue that every congregation, no matter what its denominational identity, needs to ponder prayerfully its understanding of and standards for such services if it is to fulfill its calling as the beloved community called together as Church. Indeed, unless this work is accomplished, congregations will be hard pressed to provide ongoing pastoral education for their members, leaving them to make uninformed decisions at a time of great crisis.

## **DEATH DENYING CULTURE**

While secular, individualistic, and consumerist trends continue to make inroads in the lives of Christians, influencing expectations in funerary practices, our “death denying” culture also has an impact on the celebration of funeral rites. Exposure to death unremittingly inundates us in the violence depicted in our daily news and in the “entertainment” of our movies, television shows, music, and video games. Paradoxically, our familiarity with death through these venues has not made us any more accepting of our own mortality. A case could be made for the opposite: surrounded by death and reminded of its constant presence, we strive to keep it at a distance. In the case of funerary practices, this effort manifests itself in tendencies to omit wake services or vigils, to limit or exclude visitations by mourners, to have private funeral services

and burials, to prefer a closed casket, to compress all grieving into one ritual moment, and to sanitize anything that might remind us of our own mortality.

These contemporary tendencies have moved us a long way from the historical roots of Christian funerary practices which understood that the passing from this world to the next was a journey—begun in baptism and strengthened through the Eucharist—where we left behind the old self and became a new creation in Christ. Just as those who accompanied the newly baptized on their journey were reminded and renewed in their own commitment as followers of Christ, so too, mourners who participate in the rites for the dead were challenged to assess the living of their own baptismal vows in light of our common mortality and God’s faithful love.

Funerary practices throughout the centuries contained a number of rites devoted to the preparation, waking, and burial of the dead that were marked by stages or stations and joined by processions. The rites included the responses prayed at the moment of death, the washing and clothing of the body, the procession of the body to the place of vigil, the vigil for the deceased, the funeral service itself, the procession to the grave, the prayers at the graveside, and final prayers for the mourners. The genius of these rites is their attendance to the transience of life and the need to mourn the loss of a loved one over the course of some time. The movement of mourners, embracing the different stations of preparation, waking, and burial, served to remind Christians of their own pilgrimage in this life. Moreover, the rites mirrored the re-ordering of the deceased person’s relationship with this life, as well as that of the mourners who live now without the physical presence of their family member and friend.

Regrettably, funeral homes have taken over most of the preparation rites devoted to the care for the body. Yet Christians should not be excluded from taking part in these

preparations, and they can still avail themselves of rites for when the family gathers in the presence of the body, when mourners keep vigil for the deceased, and when the body is transferred to the church or to the place of committal. Over the course of a few days, the celebration of these rites, in addition to the funeral service itself, provide the spiritual, theological, and psychological support for those who journey in grief and sadness. For instance, many Christian churches have maintained the practice of keeping vigil in prayer and song with the family and friends of the deceased between the time of death and the funeral liturgy. Here, members of the Christian community assist the mourners to express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation through faith in Jesus Christ and his resurrection to eternal life. As with all the funerary rites, the central focus of the vigil is the proclamation of the word of God that enkindles trust that “life has changed, not ended,” and brings hope that, in the end, God will gather all into God’s kingdom.

### **FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE?**

Funerals and Memorial Services are both Christian services of worship in which a deceased member of the church is commended to God’s eternal care. In a funeral, the body of the deceased is physically present during the service, while in a memorial service it is not. The theological perspective of the congregation may determine which form of service is normative. Some argue that the physical presence of the body affirms a belief in bodily resurrection or serves as a reminder that as God’s creatures we pass from “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Others counter that the presence of the body places too much emphasis on a mortal life that has now ended and not enough on the glorious mystery of eternal, spiritual union with God. Often it is the tradition of the faith community or preference of the family that makes this determination.

## **BURIAL OR CREMATION?**

In this matter there are clear differences among various strands of the Christian tradition. Some, especially those whose doctrines and teachings emphasize bodily resurrection, call for burial in all but the most unusual circumstances (while not limiting God's ability to accomplish bodily resurrection in the absence of mortal remains). Others, citing environmental stewardship among other concerns, hold a preference for cremation.

An associated need is for surviving family and friends to have a sense of "place" they can visit to commemorate the deceased: to pray, to remember, to give thanks. One thinks of solemn Memorial Day services conducted in cemeteries, but also of an individual standing by a gravesite with bowed head on the anniversary of a loved one's death, or the ritual of placing fresh flowers on a grave. Some churches favoring cremation have memorial gardens where the remains of members are buried or scattered and which serve a similar purpose. Those who choose to scatter the ashes of the deceased to the winds or waters surrender this special sense of "place" but find comfort in affirming that the deceased has returned to the fullness of God's good creation. The less common practice of placing the ashes of the deceased in a container on the mantle or similar site is more problematic, suggesting an unhealthy desire to cling to the departed. The funeral industry, catering to consumerist culture, now offers all manner of "specialty containers" for ashes, some of them whimsical and some just plain peculiar (having the ashes of a departed spouse made into jewelry, for example).

The immediate shock and grief of an unexpected loss creates the worst possible circumstances for persons to sort out these questions. Such matters therefore need to be regularly placed before members of the congregation and addressed as part of an ongoing education in the practices

of Christian life together and the theological perspectives of the Christian church.

### **SETTING**

A funeral or memorial service is an act of worship by a congregation, and therefore its proper setting is in the church where the deceased person shared in the worship life of his or her faith community. Increasingly, these services are being conducted in other settings, most commonly funeral homes, even when the deceased was a committed and active member of his or her congregation. Clergy and church leaders need to understand and respond to the issues and concerns that are leading to such choices. Among them are:

“Mother was in her nineties and most of her friends are either already gone or too frail to attend. In all likelihood the service will be attended only by immediate family and a very few friends: it would feel empty and sad to hold her service at the church.”

Many congregations with large worship spaces also have smaller chapels that provide a more intimate setting for such a service. But there is also an argument to be made for holding the funeral in the setting where “mother” praised and worshiped God all of her life. The congregation can be seated closely together to enhance the sense of community (Too often those who come to worship scatter themselves widely, giving a sense that they are spectators rather than participants). A funeral home, no matter how well and caringly managed, constitutes a “rented hall.” One of us has recently both presided at and attended services in funeral homes that were inadequate to accommodate the number of people who gathered. In the first case, as a presider, I felt a great disconnect with the people who sat in overflow rooms, watching a video feed. In the second this unpleasant experience was intensified



when, as a mourner, I was shuttled to an overflow room myself, watching a fixed camera provide video of what was happening in the main chapel. Holding the service in such a setting disconnects the deceased from her life of faith and the Christian community that sustained and guided her through her life.

“Many friends coming to Dad’s funeral are of non-Christian faiths, and religion has been a source of contention in my husband’s family. It feels easier, and safer, to hold the service on ‘neutral turf.’”

A faithful congregation is schooled in extending genuine hospitality to all who worship with them, including non-Christians. A thoughtful pastor will structure the service to be welcoming to all who gather, even while affirming the shaping belief in Christ’s gift of salvation that formed “Dad’s” faith. True ecumenism and interfaith hospitality rest not on watering our faith down to the lowest common denominator or moving to “neutral turf,” but rather in proclaiming our faith clearly without denigrating the faith of others.

“Aunt Bessie always insisted that she did not want any fuss when the time came for her to die and she kept going back and forth on whether there should be a service at all. A simple service at the funeral home or even a few words at the graveside would be more in keeping with her wishes.”

It is natural and commendable for surviving family members to wish to honor a loved one’s wishes, even if those wishes were not entirely clear. But in a very real sense the funeral or memorial service is an act of praise and worship by the living who wish to joyfully remember a cherished friend or family member before God. Even when

the wishes of the deceased are clear it is not a given that “Aunt Bessie” should have the sole vote in this decision.

## **THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION**

Local churches vary tremendously in their size, their style of worship and common life, and in their practices and traditions. Some are blessed with a sense of community so strong that church members truly feel like a family gathered in Christ, while in others (particularly larger parishes) members frequently experience little more than a passing acquaintance with one another. But in any congregation, the death of a member, a fellow saint of God, is a loss to be grieved by the community – even as members of that same community rejoice in their brother or sister’s passage into eternal life. Through Baptism, God calls out of the world into the body of Christ, and it is a fellow member of that common body whom we have surrendered to death. Certainly that person’s passage from this life to the next should be prayerfully observed during the service of worship on the Sunday following his or her death. Indeed, many congregations provide an annual service to remember the deceased members of the parish, providing ongoing pastoral care for those who continue to grieve the deaths of loved ones.

But members of the congregation, most especially those who have been called by God to positions of leadership in the church, should also make the effort to share in the funeral or memorial service when possible. Too often Christians make the decision to attend such a service solely on the basis of whether they shared a significant social relationship with the deceased without giving thought to the relationship they shared as fellow members of Christ’s body. In many cases even when the service is conducted at the church only a small minority of those who gather to worship are members of the

congregation: the worshipping community is made up primarily of family members, co-workers, neighbors and social acquaintances. The absence of fellow church members becomes a sad commentary on the relationships we most value: the bonds of the marketplace are seen as more meaningful than the bonds we share as Christ's body of baptized believers. Participating in worship services in which a fellow member is commended to God's eternal care is one of the ways in which we school ourselves in the discipline of being church together.

### **HOSPITALITY**

There is also an important role for the congregation to play in extending the hospitality that surrounds a funeral or memorial service. In many cases members of the deceased person's family will arrive at the church an hour or more before the service begins, in order to greet friends who have come to worship and give thanks. Many of these friends will come from other Christian or non-Christian religious traditions, while others may have no religious convictions at all. Church members, called to the discipline of hospitality, should do all that they can to see that these guests are warmly received and welcomed.

A funeral or memorial service is almost always followed by a fellowship meal. This time of sitting at table and breaking bread together is an important part of grieving a loss, celebrating a life, and affirming both God's promise of life eternal and our calling to Christian community. Stories of shared experiences are related, good times are remembered, and the weight of grief shared. The ideal setting for such a fellowship meal is in the church building itself. In some congregations there is a group of members – a fellowship organization, guild, auxiliary, or committee – that routinely prepares and serves meals for such occasions. Even in churches lacking such a group, a catered meal offered in the church building with members helping to

serve provides a warmer sense of Christian fellowship and hospitality that is lost when the meal is served in a restaurant or banquet hall.

## **CONTENT OF THE SERVICE**

While each Christian denomination provides its own liturgical structure and elements for the funeral service—ranging from a full Roman Catholic funeral mass to a simple memorial service in the Protestant Reformed tradition—there are components of the funeral service that are common to all of the members of the Christian tradition. Perhaps, foremost, is the need to celebrate the liturgy in a manner that speaks to the needs of people gathered in sorrow and grief, needing to hear and enter into the consolation of God’s faithful love and the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ. If our funeral liturgies do not meet these needs, we should expect even more intrusions of the secular components that people seek to fill the gaps.

Like all liturgies, the funeral liturgy is an opportunity for us to encounter Christ in silence, word, symbol, and gesture. Baptism provided us with a different worldview to embrace and live, and each liturgy invites us to renew and deepen our commitment to Christ, by allowing him to transform us, so that, like Paul, we can say, “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2: 19-20). In this light, the funeral liturgy stands as a unique grace, because in the face of death, people in their unsettled state are often open to hear God’s word of faithful love, consolation, peace, and hope with new ears. Each person comes with his or her own story in the face of death—despair, doubt, fear, guilt, grief, thanksgiving, hope, faith, love, forgiveness—but the funeral liturgy invites each person to be caught up ever more fully into the story of Christ: his life, passion, death,

and resurrection. A good liturgy will engage each person fully, actively, and consciously in order to enter more fully into the story of Christ and be transformed both individually and corporately.

Ministers need to be attentive to the gathering of the community for the funeral liturgy. Recognizing that the mourners arrive as a disparate group, there is a need to facilitate the gathering of the many into the one body of Christ so that, united, the assembly may manifest the mystery of the Church gathered together and prepare itself to listen to the word of God. In the invitation to pray and the silence that follows, each member of the community recognizes that they are in God's presence and, guided by the Holy Spirit, tries to find the words to express the loss and the hope that have drawn them to this place. Often the presider concludes with an opening prayer or a "collect" expressing the prayers of the silent assembly, which then gives its assent by the acclamation, Amen.

In the proclamation of the Scriptures, the saving word of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes living and active in the minds and hearts of the community. The Scripture lessons should provide the family and the gathered community with the opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears, and hope. Biblical readings speak of God's abiding love and promise of life eternal for those who live in Christ, proclaim to the assembly the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, encourage Christians to faithful lives, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, and teach remembrance of the dead. Whenever possible, ministers should involve the family members in selecting the readings for the funeral liturgy. They can provide liturgical and biblical insight to ensure that the passages selected are meaningful and appropriate. In addition, a particular biblical verse that sustained the deceased in life or was a favorite passage of the family might be included. The

family may desire to include a non-biblical reading, but regardless of its quality, it robs the funeral service of an essential access to faith in God's word. The prayer service or vigil with the family might be a more appropriate time for a non-biblical selection.

### **THE PROCLAIMED WORD**

A funeral or memorial service is an opportunity to lift up God's promise of eternal life to those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ. The thoughtful preacher will resist the temptation to reduce the ineffable mystery of eternal life to simplistic images of halos and harps or to offer personal perspectives upon who qualifies for this inheritance and who does not. One author of this pamphlet had the experience of squirming through the funeral sermon of a fire and brimstone preacher who opined that the deceased was doubtless burning in hell for his many sins, where he would eventually be joined by many of those who had gathered to remember his life. Beyond the obvious pastoral insensitivity of such preaching it also usurps the judgment that belongs to God alone. A funeral service is an occasion when Christians are called to be mindful of God's judgment, but also of God's love and mercy.

The sermon or homily should bring God's message of hope and healing to a worshiping community that has gathered under the weight of grief, a grief that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. On another occasion the same author attended the memorial service of a little girl who had died from severe burns suffered in a fire that also claimed the lives of her parents. The beaming clergyman leading the service proclaimed it a day of glad rejoicing because the little girl was now with Jesus. The shell-shocked congregation was essentially told that their burden of pain and grief was the result of their inadequate faith.

Those who gather to worship God in the midst of death and loss bring with them the core questions of human existence. What is the meaning and value of a human life? What difference can that life make? Does death have the final word? Can God's promises be trusted? They come open and receptive, eager to hear words that will place their loss in a greater perspective that offers courage and hope. They come to hear the Good News of the Resurrection of the Son of God. To this end, the homilist should help the members of the assembly understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased, and these mysteries are active in their own lives as well. Attentive to the grief of those present, members of the family and the community who have gathered should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God.

## **MUSIC**

In his fourth homily on the Letter to the Hebrews, John Chrysostom instructs his hearers that the appropriate hymns and psalms for funerals should be joyful, unlike the dirges of pagans who have no hope. He encourages Christians to make choices in hymns and psalmody that praise and thank God because God "has crowned the departed and . . . has taken him away from fear and has him with himself." While pagans looked upon death as an evil, Christians approached death in triumphant faith and in hopeful confidence in the salvation offered by God, who would deliver them from all things, including death itself. Music, hymns, and psalmody, whether led by a choir, or sung by a congregation or by soloist, serves to console those who mourn and strengthen the unity of those who have assembled in faith and love. Musical selections, related to the Scriptures chosen, express the paschal mystery, Christ's

triumph over death, and God's unfailing love. Because music has strong emotive qualities, care should be taken in the choices made. Congregational participation is always optimized when familiar hymns and acclamations are chosen.

### **SILENCE**

In the midst of our busy world, we can often feel most awkward and uncomfortable in silence. However, prayerful silence at appropriate times during the liturgy permits the assembly to reflect upon the word of God and the meaning of the celebration. Moments of silence also allow for the recollection of personal memories, the bonding of a community in silent prayer, and the opportunity to give personal thanks to God for the gift of the deceased and those who have come to offer consolation.

### **RITUAL ACTIONS**

The unity of the assembly and its sense of community is re-enforced by the common movements and postures observed by all who gather at the funeral liturgy. When celebrated, the Eucharist, the commendation of the deceased, and the rite of committal are carried out in the midst of a caring community which expresses its faith in God's promises and its hope in resurrection to new life. The ritual actions of sharing the Eucharistic meal make present the service and sacrifice that led to Christ's saving death and resurrection. In the context of the funeral liturgy, the assembly can proclaim: "Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life!" Within this context mourners are both consoled by the saving action of God and conformed more closely to Christ in love and service. For their part, the rites of commendation and committal provide the opportunity to acknowledge the reality of separation and to commend the deceased to God.



## **THE KNOTTY QUESTION OF EULOGIES**

People also gather in worship to remember and give thanks for the life of the deceased. In far too many cases this eulogizing, whether done by the presiding minister or by family members and friends, is done at such length that one begins to question who or what the object of worship is. It is a growing practice for the person leading the service to “open the floor” to anyone present who has a story or memory to share, leading to a string of anecdotes more appropriate for a retirement roast than a funeral service.

As more churches incorporate video technology into their worship settings, visual presentations depicting scenes from the deceased person’s life are becoming more common. Add to this the growing expectation that “artifacts” from that person’s life – photographs, craft projects, bowling trophies, and pennants representing a favorite sports team – will be prominently displayed during the service. Establishing limits and boundaries in these matters has become a critical issue that congregations and clergy need to address.

It is in the eulogizing that the pressures to secularize the service are most apparent and pervasive. Family members not shaped and formed by Christian faith want to be told that the deceased’s life had value and worth not because Jesus died for his or her sake, but because of the deceased’s string of earthly accomplishments. They wish to be offered hope not because God raised Christ from the dead, but because those accomplishments will live on and he or she will be fondly remembered for many years to come. They want to be told that their loved one was special and, by extension, that they are special. Like King Ozymandius of Shelley’s celebrated poem, they wish to hear the deceased boom from beyond the grave, “Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!” The sentimental desire is to make the deceased person rather than God the object of worship.

In response, some strands of the Christian tradition have clear policies that prohibit any references to the deceased beyond his or her name during the worship service. In some cases, a podium is provided in the fellowship hall so that personal remembrances may be shared during the meal that follows the service. But in most congregations people gather for a funeral or memorial service with the expectation that it will be “personal” rather than “fill in the blanks.” They have gathered to give thanks to God for the life of a specific person who has shared in the fabric of their own lives. The congregation and the clergyperson serving it must make the determination of how to integrate this legitimate need with the integrity of the act of divine worship.

At a minimum, the person leading the service must make certain that personal remembrances be presented within a theologically coherent framework rather than as a random series of anecdotes. It is appropriate to remember and give thanks for those things that made the life granted the deceased by God joyous and meaningful: the love of family and friends, the satisfactions of career, the service offered to God and community. To offer such examples from the person’s life can be an affirmation of the goodness of life God offers to each beloved child. It is also appropriate to give thanks for the gifts that those who have gathered to worship have received from God through the cherished companion who has now passed on: his or her faith, kindness, dedication, etc. A funeral or memorial service is not only an occasion to proclaim the promise of life eternal, but to lift up the goodness of God’s creation and our place within it. The focus of all personal remembrances should be upon our gratitude to God.

The meeting the clergyperson holds with the family to plan the service provides an opportunity to gather appropriate stories from the life of the deceased (and often to hear others that are less appropriate) in a setting that is

intimate and pastoral. This meeting itself can be a very rich time that brings gifts of healing to those who are mourning. It also allows the clergy person to discuss the importance of maintaining the appropriate focus of the worship service and ask the family to assist in doing so by sharing in the selection of personal remembrances which best speak of their gratitude to God for the life of their loved one.

### **SHOULD OTHERS BE PERMITTED TO SPEAK?**

Unless a congregation has an inviolable policy in this matter, this decision will need to be made on the basis of the unique circumstances surrounding each service. There are occasions where a family member or close friend feels a strong sense of calling to share a few words at the service and the clergy person officiating believes that calling should be honored. This person should be asked to write these remarks in advance – very few of us are good extemporaneous speakers – so that the clergy person can review them for length and content. This request can be put in the form of a helpful offer rather than a stern demand. If such remarks are offered they should generally be limited to two or three minutes.

It is all but impossible to maintain a spirit of divine worship if person after person comes to the lectern to share “just a few words,” even if those words have been carefully prepared in advance. The even more regrettable practice of inviting anyone who is so moved to speak inevitably results in unfortunate consequences: “I can top that one!” anecdotes more suitable for the locker room than the church or displays of raw emotion that are painfully difficult for immediate family members.

### **ARTIFACTS**

There are now funeral homes that offer “stage sets” in which services can be conducted: “Dad’s Den” features a

reclining chair and a large television tuned to a sports channel, “Big Mama’s Kitchen” offers pots of food cooking on the stove. The deceased is reduced to a mere function. It is increasingly common at funerals for teens, especially those who have died violently, for tee-shirts displaying pictures of the deceased to be distributed before the service begins. Perhaps seeing the sea of tee-shirts gives family members an emotional boost, but one wonders how those same family members will feel when the tee-shirts move to the back of a drawer and ultimately to the rag-pile.

Churches that permit video presentations, photo displays and other artifacts from the life of the deceased within the worship setting risk similar reductionism as well as an inappropriate focus on the human rather than the divine. Assembling photographs and selecting artifacts can be quite meaningful for family members, but Christian symbols, such as the Book of the Gospels, are more fitting for liturgical celebrations.

### **“I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.”**

A thoughtful funeral director interviewed for this pamphlet lamented the trend towards the service of divine worship giving way to a “celebration of one’s life” even in services conducted in churches. Trust in God and faith in Christ’s resurrection is too often replaced by the modest affirmation “he had a good life.” In death, as in life, we wish to make ourselves the measure of all things. In a secular, individualistic, and consumerist society, it is hardly surprising that this should be the case.

But the Church of Jesus Christ has a different framework in which to place the meaning of life and death, and a greater hope to offer than “he had a good life.” We acknowledge that we are God’s creatures, finite and limited, called to use the gift of our lives to give glory to our Creator. We proclaim the Good News that neither life

nor death can separate us from the love of God and give thanks for Christ's promise that "I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also."

Christian congregations need to pray and ponder how our funerals and memorial services can be sensitive to the grief of those who mourn while still affirming the Good News in ways that offer abiding hope and transforming faith. In life as in death, we belong to God: members of Christ's own body and the communion of God's saints. If our funerals and memorial services fail to make these joyous affirmations in ways that shape, form and sustain those who gather to worship, we will have served them poorly.

*John T. McFadden is a founding member of The Ekklesia Project. He is serving in his 23rd year as Senior Pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin.*

*James M. Donohue, C.R. is a Roman Catholic priest in the Congregation of the Resurrection. He is the Chair of the Theology Department at Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, MD and provides weekend pastoral assistance at St. Bernadette Parish in Severn, MD.*

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador and David Cloutier, eds., *Growing Old in Christ*, (Grand Rapids: 2003).

Richard Rutherford with Tony Barr, *The Death of the Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*, rev. ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990).

Richard Rutherford, “Funeral Rites” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson-Gale, 2003), 6: 30-33.

Richard Rutherford, *Honoring the Dead: Catholics and Cremation Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

Wolfgang Steck, Viorel Mehedintu, John Mbiti, James Donohue, and Frank Senn, “Funeral,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Brill, 2001), 2: 365-371.

