

Best Practices in Pastoral Ministry

Our District Newsletter will be featuring a section that shares "best practices" in pastoral ministry. Each pastor has a passion for something they do that is unique, cutting edge, and successful in bringing people to Christ. This is a section of newsletter where we share resources, experiences, stories, practices, ways of addressing recurring issues and problems. There is always something new to learn and bring into our pastoral ministry that is effective, life-changing and draws in new disciples.

Celebrating Funerals



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The Changing Culture of Funerals

Many Pastors, especially those in ministry 20 years or longer, would readily recognize that the current culture of how funerals are planned and celebrated has changed dramatically. It is now a rare occasion when a family will have a Wake service, a formal funeral service in the church the next day, followed by a Committal Service at the cemetery.

A case in point: When Marjorie, age 94, died in a nursing home the staff immediately notified her daughter Julie in Maine. Julie was the only sibling who visited her mother once a month. Julie had her mother cremated, and retained the ashes in her home, and then placed an obituary in the local newspaper. A month later, Julie scattered the ashes in Long Island Sound where her mother loved to go boating when the children were young. A week later a memorial service was held in the church where Marjorie had always kept her membership for over 60 years, although her health and nursing home stay prevented her from attending in recent years. On the table in the narthex were memorial cards and a guest registry alongside a homemade collage of photographs of Margorie and her family through the years. During the Service, Julie read a poem, some cousins read a poem and told a few stories about Marjorie. The Pastor read the 23rd Psalm and spoke a few words about Marjorie's faithfulness to her church. The hymn Amazing Grace was played, and all quietly left at the end.

We all appreciate how the celebration of funerals in the context of our pastoral ministry provide a unique and exciting opportunity to engage the unchurched and those who have drifted away so that we can reconnect them to their friendship with Jesus and to the practice of their faith.

The question remains for us: How to best celebrate a funeral, minister to our congregants and evangelize new disciples when our exposure to the family and loved ones is limited by contemporary cultural shifts from costly and traditional funerals to simpler, shorter and less formal gatherings.

Engaging the Current Culture with Christ

There are within easy reach ways in which we can engage each funeral as a powerful tool for evangelization making a significant impact on the faith life of those who come to the funeral and need Jesus but don't know it yet. While there are many, I would like to share three of these "tools" that help me reach more people for Christ.

Before the scheduled funeral service, we pastors typically gather with the family members for a time of prayer, worship planning, hymn selection and getting a sense of the deceased person's personality. This can be transformed by completely shifting this meeting's focus and purpose.

After praying together, think about leading everyone into an extended time of storytelling. Family members and friends of the deceased are encouraged to simply tell stories about the deceased rather than just list attributes or personality traits of their loved one. This works equally as well when the relationship between the deceased and bereaved was complicated and negative. No story is a bad story, it simply reflects the family's truth. The Pastor during this time listens carefully with an ear finely attuned for theological reflection. This conversation is guiding the pastor's choice of Scriptures as well as writing the sermon. It is a remarkable way in which to connect the Gospel to the family's lived experience with their loved one and to allow them to experience God's closeness in a way most would never expect when attending a funeral or memorial service.

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There are times when the pastor's participation is limited to coming at the end of the appointed calling hours and then to preside over a 15-20-minute funeral service. Even in this case, there are rich resources at our fingertips that we may never have thought of, used before or perhaps believed would be impractical outside of the traditional church setting. This may be the only time we have to touch the hearts of everyone present and to give them Jesus.

Our Book of Worship provides rich options and suggested Christian symbols which serve to connect people to our faith in the resurrection and hope for eternal life. These can be found in that small red print. A good example of one of these, is the use of a funeral pall. The word pall derived from the Latin meaning "coat" or "garment" makes a clear reference to our connection to one another as baptized faithful as we read aloud the words of Galatians 3:27: *"All who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ like putting on a new garment."* Inviting family members to gather and place the pall on the casket rather than the funeral director, makes a powerful statement about our baptismal covenant and our certain hope in the promise of eternal life. After having placed the funeral pall on her father's casket, a woman remarked afterward how powerful that action was in reminding her of the gift of her own Baptism and how she felt connected to her father in a new way as in life they were not very close emotionally.

Lastly, most would agree that the most important "best practice" in evangelizing and making disciples in the context of funeral ministry would be in following up with the family. To make a phone call a week after the service. To send a note one month after the service and then to commit to touching base from time to time thereafter. Each year on the first Sunday of November all the families who lost a loved one in the preceding year are invited to the Worship Service where the names of the deceased are read aloud, their names and photograph are displayed on the monitors in the Sanctuary, and a special time of fellowship is held. So many times, we hear from loved ones following a funeral service, "You know, Pastor, I really have to get back to church." While this may be an emotional utterance that comes from grief or the discomfort from having been away from church, the follow up is essential in letting them know you share the same sentiment and care about their life with God.

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Connecting with families in a meaningful way, making use of the rich symbolism offered by the church and ensuring a thorough follow up with our families are just three ways in which we can powerfully evangelize and re-connect our folks back to Jesus, and bring them back into the fold where their newly ignited faith can be nurtured and sustained.