

Nazareth Presbyterian Church Funeral Practices

Basic to the Christian affirmation of faith is that death has been conquered by God in Jesus the Christ. The God we worship is the God of life whose power and presence is not circumscribed by the boundaries of death. As followers of the Christ, we share in his victory over the grave and therefore death for us, though painful because of separation, is not the total tragedy it is for those without hope.

We further believe that at death we no longer inhabit the physical body. As Paul suggests: "When you sow a seed you do not sow the 'body' that will eventually be produced. . . It is sown a natural body: it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Cor. 15)

A funeral should witness to our faith for the very reason that it is a critical experience which draws into sharp focus our Christian convictions. A funeral should be a worship service in which God's people witness to their faith and minister to the bereaved in the assurance of God's love and salvation in the Christ.

There are several guidelines for funerals which emerge from the above convictions.

1. Upon death, the minister should be called as soon as possible by the family or funeral home so that he/she can assist the family and funeral home in planning an appropriate Christian funeral service.
2. Except for unusual circumstances, the funeral of active Christians should be in the church building. This is for two reasons. First, the church often has the facilities which enable the participants to be worshipers rather than spectators. Second, this is the place where faith is born and nurtured, where marriage vows are made, where children receive the sign of the covenant and where bread is broken and the cup is shared. It should also be the context where this final witness to the faith is made. When requested by the family, graveside services only are acceptable.
3. Funerals should mark the end of earthly life with dignity and finality. The body should be treated with dignity and gratitude but our witness to our faith is that the Christian dead are now at home with the Lord. Therefore the casket should be kept closed during the religious service so that the attention of the worshiper can be directed toward the Author of Salvation.
4. Displays of relative status in this world are inappropriate. Therefore, lavish displays of flowers and other signs of wealth should be discouraged. Designating a charitable cause for memorial contributions would be particularly appropriate.
5. Fraternal and civil rites should be separate from the funeral service.
6. Cremation is a matter of personal preference. Christian faith affirms that people, after death, return to dust. Whether this takes place slowly or rapidly is not of great Christian importance.
7. Interment with appropriate scriptures and prayers may be properly done either before or after the service. It should be done at the place of interment, however.

8. The funeral service, as stated above, is a worship service. It should recognize the meaning of death in human terms—loss, separation, bereavement and mortality and should never cover over the finality of death.

At the same time it is the Word of God, not eulogies which should be central to the service. The Word should be read and a brief exposition given which bases our hope on the goodness of God and not on the goodness of the deceased. The theme of the service should be witness to the resurrection.

Because the participants are worshipers, not spectators, provision for their participation should be made through the use of responsive readings, hymn singing, creeds and prayers.

- 9 The above criteria are based on the Christian affirmation of faith. It should not be interpreted to mean that the church is inflexible in such positions. Nor does it indicate that the minister is not equally concerned to minister to people who are not active in a church. Through consultation with the minister, a funeral service can be arranged which respects the integrity of both the minister and the family.