

A Pastoral Letter on Columbariums, Funeral Directors, and Planning

It is rare for me to use my position in this way but I feel compelled to share some pastoral perspectives with you.

Columbariums. My first parishes were with churches that had cemeteries around them. The churches faithfully maintained the cemeteries as part of their familial and baptismal covenants. Never once did the church, however, become a funeral director. The families that were visited by death did not bypass the funeral director and deal with the church and its cemetery association. When the columbarium gets built at First Lutheran it will not be doing a new thing but it will be participating in the whole life of its members as churches have throughout the Church's history. And First Lutheran will not become a funeral director.

Funeral Directors. It might be my Lutheran Theology of Vocation but I think Funeral Directors provide a unique and valuable service that serves an important purpose. Even the most highly functioning family is thrown into chaos by death. Funeral Directors help guide the families through that chaos. Death notices, posting and publishing obituaries, insurance claims, government benefits, service organization, veterans' organizations, the bureaucratic paper trail, the cemetery or the columbarium, the visitation, coordinating the religious rites, printing, the burial or the inurnment, the meal, the monument company, etc. There are a lot of details that can be daunting and frustrating that the funeral director walks the family through. This allows the family to be what a family needs to be – loving. All funeral directors offer cremation. Now my experience with Cremation Societies is that though they are less expensive than funeral directors they also provide far fewer services. When those services are not met by the cremation society it is not unusual for the family to think that the church then will pick up the slack. The church doesn't nor will it. I, as a pastor am a spiritual guide, an interpreter of theology, whose role is to walk the family through the valley of death with the promise of Christ. I cannot do that if I am the funeral director, too. Now I cannot tell people how to spend their money, but you get what you pay for, and having a funeral director handle your cremation will provide you with a great many services that cremation societies do not offer. Know that.

Planning. There has been a distressing number of people that have died and nothing has happened. No services, no notices, no nothing. This is a recent phenomenon. The two reasons I see for this are because the deceased left behind no plans or wishes and because the family feels no love or connection for the community in which the deceased lived the final years. Everyone deserves to be grieved and everyone who loved or was loved needs and deserves closure. The best way for this to happen is for you to make your wishes plainly known and to pay for them ahead of time. This can be done with a small insurance policy, some savings, whatever. Now I recognize that there are times when the person dying doesn't want anything but we must remember that funerals and memorial services are for the living, not the dead. These rituals serve an important purpose that helps us walk this strange journey of mortal life, love, and eternity. Do not assume that War Memorials are for the dead only. Those memorials are extremely important for the living as well. The combat veterans experienced great friends being unceremoniously zipped in a bag, thrown in a helicopter, and taken away. No prayer, no scripture, no ceremony, just gone. The memorials, especially the Vietnam Memorial, allow closure for veterans and allow them to acknowledge that those lives mattered and deserved to be formally and religiously grieved. One of the best gifts you can give your family and your community is to plan.

Pastor Joel