



Guidelines for Lutheran Funeral Services

1. Introduction

Lutheran Funeral Services are part of the services which accompany the life of a Christian; from the sacrament of baptism, which constitutes membership, through confirmation service, possibly wedding services up to the funeral service Christians are assured of God's blessing, his guidance and commandments through His word in scripture readings and the sermon and through the sacraments (Baptism and Holy communion). Christians answer to these blessings with words and deeds in praise, thanksgiving and requests in song and prayer. Thus in christian services God serves us just as we serve Him. It is our time of fellowship with our Heavenly Father.

In a Lutheran Funeral Service, the above mentioned understanding applies, so that it must be distinguished from a Memorial Service and/or night vigil, which may have different aims. This has consequences, which should be known by all members of the Lutheran Church/ELCSA, especially those who lead funeral services. This should also be made known to the bereaved family and the person leading through the short program of speeches (MC), if this is not the same person leading the whole funeral service.

2. The main aims of a Lutheran Funeral Service are to:

- thank God for the life of the deceased and for the love which God showed us through the late fellow christian. The congregation of Jesus Christ serves people while they are still alive. All words and deeds in a funeral aim at those, who are alive.
- ask for forgiveness from God, where we failed to show God's love to the deceased in word and deed and to forgive, where the deceased failed us.
- comfort the family and friends of the deceased with the hope found in our faith, the reality of everlasting life for those, who are baptised and believe.
- preach the Gospel to all present at the funeral by reminding them of God's love and yearning for us, by teaching on God's guidelines for our life, by explaining the value of repentance, the gift of forgiveness and the blessing of living life as an active member of God's family of faith.

3. A Lutheran Funeral Service may NOT be used to:

- glorify or vilify the life of the deceased.
- follow non-christian practices like talking to the deceased, ancestral veneration or worship, suggesting, that the deceased have power and influence over the lives of the living, etc.
- compromise on the Lutheran service character of the funeral to accommodate the wishes of members of the family of the bereaved

4. For Whom?

A Lutheran Funeral is held for its deceased members only and not for members of other churches, or non-Christians.

5. Who is in charge?

The Service may be led by:

- the parish pastor,
- any Lutheran pastor after consultation with the parish pastor,
- or any Lutheran lay preacher after consultation with the parish pastor.

If the bereaved family wishes a pastor of another denomination/church to take part in the funeral service, this must be requested during the funeral visit by the Lutheran Service leader. Such a pastor from another church may be given responsibility for one part of the service (prayer, scripture reading, short speech) but care must be taken not to have two sermons in the service.

If the bereaved family wishes to have a master of ceremonies (MC) to lead through the part of the votes of thanks/ speeches in the funeral service, this must be requested during the funeral visit. The MC should preferably be a member of the Lutheran congregation at which the funeral is held. The MC should be present at the funeral visit and should be aware of the aims of a Lutheran Funeral Service and support them in the way he/she leads the speech part. The rest of the service (before and after the speech part) will be lead by the Lutheran pastor/ Lutheran lay preacher.

6. When?

Lutheran Funeral Services may be held on any day at any reasonable time except for Sundays. On Sundays our focus is on the congregational Sunday Service and/or Sunday Services on a parish, circuit or diocesan level. This is a day, set aside for the worship of God, the upliftment of his children, the advancement of church life in general and for resting. Nothing should stand in the way of the Sunday service. In view of this and the third commandment, our church ELCSA has therefore taken the following decision: **No Lutheran Funeral Services may be held on Sunday** – neither in the church building, nor anywhere else. Should the family of a deceased Lutheran proceed to plan a funeral for a Sunday, this will not be deemed a Lutheran Funeral Service, but rather a private family function and as such may not be held in the church building of the Lutheran Church and may not be led by a Lutheran Pastor or Lutheran lay preacher either at the church or at the family home or cemetery. Care should be taken, to inform every Lutheran church member and their families of this fact, so that in the case of a death, everybody is already aware of this practice, which will not be compromised on.

Furthermore, all church members should be aware, that normal church activities will generally be continued in spite of a funeral service. The preaching of the gospel, the teaching on our faith, and mission work is paramount to all other activities. This means, that generally congregational, parish, circuit or diocesan church activities, such as lay preachers workshops, league meetings and conferences, committee meetings, etc. will generally not be postponed because of a funeral. In the case of parallel church functions, groups in the congregation (such as leagues) are encouraged to send representatives to the funeral service and to visit the bereaved at another time.

The family of the bereaved should be made aware of the service character of a Lutheran Funeral and should be encouraged not to incur exorbitant costs regarding possible food catering after the service.

7. Preparing the Lutheran Funeral Service

The following steps should help those involved in a Lutheran Funeral Service:

1. After the death of a Lutheran, the congregational leader should be informed as soon as possible, to pass on the information to other members as well as to the parish pastor, who should be informed of the death of a member not later than 5 days before the planned funeral.
2. The Leader of the Lutheran Funeral Service (Parish Pastor, other Lutheran pastor or Lutheran lay preacher) will make a Funeral visit to console and counsel the bereaved family, praying with them and bringing them the comforting word of God. During this visit he/she will also inform/remind the family of the order of the Lutheran Funeral Service as laid out in these guidelines. Preferably the Leader will be accompanied by other congregation members at this Funeral Visit.
3. During this funeral visit a date, time and venue for the funeral and the burial service will be set – bearing in mind the above mentioned priorities (not on Sundays, mindful of other church meetings, etc.).
4. The Leader of the Service will obtain the relevant information on the life of the deceased which might be relevant for the sermon.
5. The Leader will liaise with the possible MC. The number of speeches during a Lutheran Funeral Service are limited in number and duration, bearing in mind, that the main focus of the Lutheran Funeral Service is the communion with God in the sermon, scripture readings, singing of hymns and prayer. A maximum of three speeches, each not longer than 7 minutes is deemed appropriate. The MC will be assisting the pastor in leading the program of speeches. The Leader of the Lutheran Funeral Service is in charge of and responsible for the program as a whole, as this is a Lutheran church service and not a private family function.
6. The practicalities of the funeral preparations will be discussed at this Funeral visit, such as time and responsibility for cleaning the church building before and after the funeral service, possible flower arrangements, collection baskets, printing of hymn-sheets for guests without Lutheran hymnals, etc.
7. In the case of the funeral of a full active Lutheran church member (active in respect of all responsibilities such as regular Sunday service attendance, regular offering and regular partaking in other elements of church life), and if an ordained Lutheran pastor is available, the possibility of having a Holy Communion Service should be discussed and all the practical arrangements made in time (wine, wafers, etc.).
8. It should be mentioned, that the main time for speeches, words of thanks, testimonies, etc. by family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues at work and congregation members is not at the funeral service, but may be given at a possible night vigil (imvuselelo) and/or memorial service and the date and time thereof should be finalised at the funeral visit. During the Funeral Service the Leader may exercise his discretion in allowing speeches in order to prevent the service from being submerged in speeches which are lengthy and/or contradictory to the basic message of the Lutheran Funeral Service.
9. On the day of the Lutheran funeral service the MC will meet the Leader at the church building or place of Service 15 Minutes before the agreed beginning time of the Service, other preparations, such as possible flower arrangements having been completed 30 minutes before the beginning of the service.
10. The Lutheran Funeral Service will be held by the Leader according to the prescribed Agenda (Lutheran Altar Book). The service itself should generally take between 60 and 90 minutes (including holy communion) and at the cemetery another maximum of 30 minutes (including the closing of the grave).