

### **Funeral Context**

My funeral should be held in Richmond, Virginia at Watts Chapel on the campus of Union-PSCE Seminary. The time of day is not important, but an attempt should be made to hold my funeral within a few days of my death, preferably not on Sunday. The friendships my wife and I formed when we lived in Richmond were among the strongest I have ever known. Not only that, the education I received at Union-PSCE was supremely important in my preparation for ministry. There is nowhere on earth that has been more important to me in my adult life.

### **Basic Movement**

My funeral service follows a reformed pattern of worship and draws heavily on the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and the Presbyterian Church of the USA resource, *The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection*.<sup>1</sup> The service begins with music because it is an important part of my life and serves to call the attention of the gathered to the possibility of resurrection joy – even as we mourn death. The song, *In Your Eyes* is especially significant in my personal and spiritual life and relationships. This song should be played from a CD or Mp3 through the sound system.

Next, the lighting of the memorial candle is symbolic of the continual presence of the deceased, who has gone to join that cloud of witnesses after death. There is a scriptural call to worship, followed by a “service of light” in which persons light individual candles in memory of their relationship with the deceased. The service of

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (USA), *The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection*, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 4 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press: 1986).

light includes a reading from the Sermon on the Mount and is significant because of the importance candles play in my life and ministry, as well the importance of light in the gospels. Following another song and a prayer of invocation, there is a confession and assurance of pardon, which are traditional components of reformed worship. I have reformed the traditional language associated with confession and assurance by calling them the “confession of frailty” and “assurance of support.” This language is more in line with the theology that undergirds my ministry, and is more accessible to modern persons. The confession of frailty gives each person an opportunity to acknowledge human mortality and the assurance reminds persons to place their hope and confidence in God Eternal.

The service progresses from the confession and assurance to readings of Scripture from the Psalms, Revelation and Matthew. It is important to include readings from both testaments to maintain the integrity of the whole Bible. Also, it is important that there be a reading from Revelation to lend scriptural support to the witness of resurrection and the coming Commonwealth of God. Next, there is a brief homily to be preached by the pastor of the church of which I am a member – the first minister that I admired enough to emulate in my own ministry, especially regarding her leadership in worship. After the homily, there is a traditional form of the prayers of the people, taken from the Book of Common Prayer. Finally, as is traditional in reformed worship, the service culminates in a service of the Eucharist, for which I request that those in attendance gather around the Table to share the holy meal. After the Eucharistic meal, there is a prayer of thanksgiving and an uplifting closing song. *Get Right Church and*

*Let's Go Home* is a call to those present to live into the Gospel message and to put their hope in the promise of resurrection. This song should be played from a CD or Mp3 through the sound system. Finally, the service ends with a benediction and charge to the community.

### **Physical Arrangements**

My funeral should be held in Watts Chapel on the campus of Union-PSCE Seminary in Richmond, VA. At this seminary, I first experienced the call to parish ministry with the United Church of Christ. I also shared my most prized friendships with members of this community and would ask them to be primarily responsible for the leadership of my funeral service. In addition, Richmond is a central location between my family in North Carolina and my wife's family in New Jersey, which might ease the burden of travels for those planning to attend.



Watts Chapel is semi-circular in shape with a small, elevated chancel area at the front and a balcony that surrounds the entire chapel. I plan to be cremated and do not wish for my body to be present at the funeral. This is contrary to James White who says,

“the presence of the body at the funeral service... [is] to be encouraged as [a way] of testifying to the reality of death.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of a casket and pall, I would like a picture of my family (including my wife, myself and any children we may have by birth, adoption or foster relationship) to be on a stand that makes the picture visible to everyone gathered and placed at the right end of the chancel area. I would like the baptismal font positioned in front of the picture as a reminder that “each of the baptized has already died and been raised with Christ in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4).”<sup>3</sup> Finally, the memorial candle should be placed on a stand next to the picture and the baptismal font.

There should be a pulpit from which the minister and celebrants should speak. The pulpit, if moveable, should be placed at the left side of the chancel area. In the middle of the chancel area, a screen should be raised on which the words to the music, prayers and readings can be projected. Projected words are preferable to the use of hymnals because it allows those gathered to focus their energies on reflection, mourning and celebration, rather than flipping through the pages of the hymnal. Also, everything to be spoken or sung during the service should be projected so that those present may be full participants in worship.<sup>4</sup> Everything projected onto the screen should be expressly useful in worship. Please, no images of sunsets, smiling babies or others of God’s Creation that are far more satisfactorily experienced in real life. The projector itself should be placed as discretely as possible, but in a place from which it functions properly. Sound equipment is installed and available for use in Watts Chapel.

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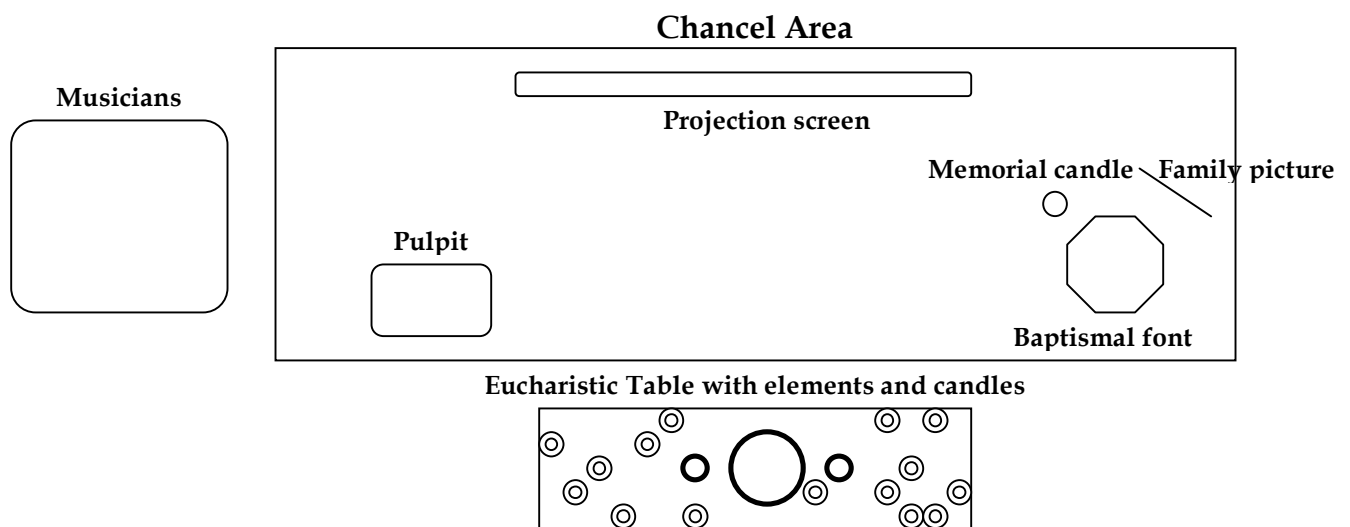
<sup>2</sup> James F. White, *Introduction To Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 303.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>4</sup> John 15:15

I would prefer that the music be led by a band of musicians, rather than a single accompanist. If this is not possible, please hire a skilled pianist to accompany the singing.<sup>5</sup> The musicians, however many there may be, should be placed at the front, far left of Watts Chapel, next to the chancel area but not on it. The musicians should not be elevated nor spotlighted lest they become performers rather than worshipers themselves.

Finally, the Eucharistic Table should remain on the floor, rather than the elevated chancel area, at the front and center of the chapel. On the table, there should be a collection of candles of various shapes, colors and sizes. The candles need not be unused before the funeral service. The candles should be placed all around the Eucharistic elements, bread and diluted port wine, which should be at the very center of the table. The wine should be available in two cups, one for sipping and one for dipping. Between the two cups there should be loaves of bread – enough to serve each person generously.



<sup>5</sup> Attached is a list of musicians and instruments requested.

## **Celebrants**

Should there be any ordained clergy in my family at the time of my death, these ones should not be asked to perform ministerial duties surrounding the event of my death, including any roles having to do with my funeral service. Paul Scott Wilson says, “Many preachers are tempted to conduct the services of their own immediate close family. I believe we thereby deny the function of Christian funerals, and in so doing deny our own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, possibly to personal and vocational detriment.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, I ask that close friends and influential ministers take responsibility for the leadership of my funeral. Attached is a list of the specific persons I would like invited to participate and the roles I request they perform.

It is important to me that as many lay people as possible be included in the leadership of the funeral service. The United Church of Christ requires that an ordained person bless the Eucharistic elements before they are served. Lay people and ordained clergy should serve together in the leadership of the funeral service, and there should be no apparent distinction between them in terms of authority or ability. Ordained clergy should not seek to set themselves apart by lofty language or grandiose displays. Laity should acknowledge their priestly role in Christ and serve with dignity and sincerity – like those for whom ministry is a professional calling. The celebrants should not wear robes or albs.

## **Theological Reflection**

Ultimately, the funeral service is a testament to Christian resurrection. At the same time, the funeral offers members of the Body of Christ an opportunity to mourn

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 288.

the loss of the earthly presence of someone close. “The Christian funeral, then, has two functions: ministry to the living and the dead.”<sup>7</sup> This funeral service attends to the grief that naturally accompanies death through elements such as the Confession and the Prayers of the People. The homily too should include moments of mourning as well as the proclamation of resurrection hope. In this way, members of the immediate family and Christian family are not just permitted to mourn, but understand it as part of the Christian witness. Without death, there is no resurrection. I trust that there will be ample time following the funeral service for friends and family members to gather in each other’s homes, sharing a delicious meal and retelling stories from the life of the deceased.

The Eucharist affords the opportunity for persons to not only remember Christ, but to receive Christ into their midst. In the same way, Eucharist as a part of the funeral service reminds those gathered that when we dine with Christ, we do so in the presence of all who have gone on to Christ in death.<sup>8</sup> Not only that, sharing the Eucharistic meal at the funeral of a loved one forever connects the meal with the deceased. Every time, hence forth, the Eucharist is enacted, the departed loved one will be remembered and sensed in the gathering. This is, at one and the same time, the mystical union of God’s immanence and transcendence. In this meal, Christ and those who are in Christ are both with us and beyond us.

Finally: a word about inclusivity. The people I have included in the leadership of my funeral derive from a vast diversity of age, background and denomination.

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<sup>7</sup> White, 302.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 303.

Inclusive language is not a priority in all of their traditions. However, they will all know that inclusivity has been an integral part of my life and ministry, and I request that inclusive translations of scripture and hymnody be used in every case.

Whenever God is referenced, I challenge the celebrants to appeal to theological imagination by using images and metaphors that present God in a great variety of roles and manifestations. Expressly, God is not to be presented, under any circumstances, as exclusively male, white, violent, American or preferring America. The scriptures, songs and prayers selected for this service appeal to a great multitude of persons and God should be presented in a way that reflects as many as possible.