



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." (I Tim 1:2).

I wrote a book in a former lifetime entitled When Death Touches Your Life: Practical Help in Preparing for Death. (Now out of print). My original choice for the title of the book was For Those Not Planning To Die, but the publisher thought such a title was being a bit too flippant. At any rate, the book was designed to help people think about the reality of death, and to encourage them to make important decisions long before a death has occurred.

Ernst Becker wrote a classic book a generation ago entitled The Denial of Death, which documents how people today seem to have developed elaborate defense systems to deny even the possibility that some day they might die. Human beings, of course, are exceptionally proficient at denying anything which is too painful to accept, and death is a prime example of this. Even the standard line of many a life insurance agent "if something should happen to you" seems to play into that denial.

One of the issues which is at the heart of any discussion about death is that of the funeral and the burial. Because the church has had such a central part in these arrangements, I wanted to explore both the past and future of this issue. In doing research I quickly found that there was an ongoing debate among those in the church, in the funeral industry and in the general population over the issue of burial versus cremation. At the time I wrote the book, I found that only about 10% of people in the Upper Midwest chose the option of cremation, while in other parts of the country the percentages were significantly higher.

I have been curious of late to know if this situation is changing, especially since several funerals I have attended recently have involved cremation. So I was very interested to see an article in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune last week which addressed this important topic. In fact the title of the article quickly caught my attention "Cremation transforming the \$25 billion "deathcare" industry."

The article went on to document how the number of crematories has nearly doubled in recent years, and that funeral homes are now scrambling to keep up with this fast changing phenomenon. Batesville Casket of Indiana,

the nation's largest casket maker, saw its unit sales drop by nearly 10% in the last two years. Cemetery plots are down, as are profits at Service Corp. International and Aldewoods Group Inc., two large publicly traded companies that own funeral homes and cemeteries. Facing declining demand for granite gravestones, some of these companies are expanding into granite countertops.

In other words, it is not a very robust time for the funeral industry, which has done quite well in the past by selling full-service funerals, including a casket and burial. But the article asserts, "spurred by changing cultural, social, spiritual and financial attitudes, America is on the way to joining the many other nations around the world in which cremation is the preferred disposition of the dead."

Nearly three in ten U.S. deaths now result in cremation, a tenfold increase in just two generations. In Minnesota, the rate is now one in three, but climbing to more than 40% in the large urban areas. Churches, cemeteries and funeral homes are adding memorial gardens for scattering ashes and columbariums for permanent storage of urns.

The editor of Mortuary Management is quoted as saying, "the whole situation is changing and continues to change dramatically. It is happening almost faster than we can respond." Funeral industry experts say the cremation trend is reversing the traditional business model, in which funeral homes charged high prices to handle relatively few funerals and made most of their profits on the sale of caskets and other merchandise. Now funeral homes are putting the pricing into their services.

The article says that some cultures, notably Egypt, preserved bodies through mummification, but such efforts were virtually unknown in Western Society, until about 150 years ago. Many historians peg the first widespread efforts at embalming the dead to the Civil War, when soldiers died far from home and families wanted to preserve the bodies for burial in the family plot. President Abraham Lincoln took an interest in embalming and ordered the Army to make it available.

The backlash against modern funeral customs and the high cost of funerals may have taken root in the 1960's when Jessica Mitford published The American Way of

Death, a muckraking critique of the funeral industry. Around the same time, the Roman Catholic Church lifted its longstanding ban on cremation, making the option available to a group which makes up about 23% of the American population.

Another powerful force in the growth of cremation is the mobility of American society. People living far from their roots are less likely to yearn for eternal rest alongside ancestors in the old church cemetery. We move often today, so we are not likely to be buried in the same place where we grew up. It is much less practical today to get the family together around a casket and journey together to a cemetery.

This is one reason why cremation is so high in the western U.S., where many residents were born elsewhere. Nevada cremates 65% of its dead, the highest rate in the nation. Washington State has 61%, Oregon 60%, Arizona 57%. In the Midwest, Minnesota is high at 34%, but trails Wisconsin at 45%. Iowa cremates only 17% of its dead and North Dakota is even lower at 11%, ranking them among the lowest of the states.

Funeral directors say that many Americans have come to view death and disposition of the body as a consumer event that can be planned and customized. Baby boomers want to do what they want to do. This is one of the advantages of cremation. You can choose from many different options. You can bury the ashes, you can scatter them, you can keep them. As the number of cremations goes up, so do the options.

One funeral home listed in the article offers dozens of urns, ranging from simple brass or wood models which sell for less than \$200 to a cast-bronze urn that retails for \$1700. Gardeners can be interred in the base of a \$900 sundial, while golfers can choose a replica of a golf bag for \$995.

Traditional funeral homes are scrambling to keep up with changing customer preferences. Old line funeral directors have always looked scornfully at cremation. It was seen as a lesser service, and it didn't make the same kind of revenue that full service did—and still doesn't.

For instance, a traditional funeral, with embalming, casket, service and cemetery burial can easily cost \$10,000 or possibly much more. Even the most elaborate cremations often cost less than half this amount and the basic plan of the crematory is often under \$1000. Usually the best price for a cremation is available to members of a cremation society.

In summary, when I wrote my book I summarized my thoughts, "I believe that most Christians today accept the fact that cremation is not against the teachings of the Bible, nor somehow unchristian. From a Christian perspective it is as fully acceptable as an earth burial. Some people may find cremation to be distasteful for one reason or another, but there is no validity in giving this personal dislike any theological justification.

Cremation does not interfere with the resurrection of the body, as some might fear. In resurrection we will receive an entirely new body. The ultimate results of both burial and cremation are the same, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Thus the decision about funerals and burials should be made by each family based on the wishes of the deceased, on the tradition and values of the family, and a consideration of the costs involved. I encourage these decisions to be made together by a family, long before death is on the horizon. Making decisions well in advance is always better than leaving it to survivors after a death has occurred.