

## *Through the Valley of the Shadow: Ministry to those Facing Death and Grief*

### I. CHALLENGES TODAY

- A. The medicalization of death. Prior to World War 2, most people died at home. In 1945 only 40% died in the hospital, by 1990 it was 90% (Verhey, 13). The role of the dying person, family, community, clergy is weakened. Verhey: “The dying person is not dying, but only sick.”
- B. The denial of death. Notice how language is used to blunt the reality of death. Thus, “Celebration of Life” has replaced “funeral” (Yes, celebrating the dignity and goodness of the life lived is part of what happens at funeral. But a Christian funeral should point to the hope only God can give in the face of death). More disconcerting, many services are conducted without the body present: “We have arrived at an unprecedented place in history: conducting funerals without the presence of the dead (Long, 31).
- C. The attempt to control death. Medical assisted suicide laws suggest that “When people can no longer deny death, we believe we can control it and thereby come to worship it.” Death becomes the “great deliverer of our suffering” and doctors who participate in Medical Assisted Suicide are the “high priests who can usher the faithful into its fearful presence” (Perry, 30).

*So, how do we recover – through our teaching and practice – a distinctly Christian way of dying and grieving?*

### II. THE CHRISTIAN ART OF DYING

- A. Recovering Christian anthropology. The medieval Art of Dying (*Ars Moriendi*) tradition taught that Christians are “beloved pilgrims whose dignity is not a function of independence (control) nor degraded by suffering. Rather, dignity is received” (Julie Canlis).

i. Robb Moll, *In the Art of Dying*, notes common themes in the *Ars Moriendi* tradition (Moll, 56):

- Death requires preparation.
- The dying process is a deeply spiritual event.
- Death is to be actively undertaken.
- Death is a public and instructive event.
- Death injures the community.

ii. The role of the body

- American anthropology leans heavily gnostic – the mind or spirit over body. Thus, the body is just a “shell”. Or the body is “not really him or

her.” This leads to funerals or memorials without a body or remains. The classical Christian view is that human beings are more than body (a union of body and soul) but not less than the body (Canlis). The ultimate Christian hope is resurrection of the body.

B. Prayer Book (2019 ACNA) Resources. Note the helpful pastoral instruction in the rubrics, especially regarding the Burial of the Dead.

- Rites of Healing: Ministry to the Sick. When this is the regular part of the ministry of the church, it puts the congregation in mind that health problems are not just physical- not just for medical experts. The sick person is reminded they are part of a community.
- “Ministry to the Dying”, i.e. The Last Rite. This beautiful liturgy provides a framework for viewing the dying person as a beloved pilgrim of God, redeemed through the work of Christ.
- “The Burial of the Dead”, i.e. The Funeral Liturgy. This liturgy represents the historic Christian funeral tradition in contrast to the modern, American memorial service. For example, the traditional Christian funeral “does not focus primarily on the achievements or failures of the deceased, but rather calls us to proclaim the good news of Jesus and his triumph over death, even as we celebrate the life and witness of the deceased” (Long).
  - Long says that the traditional Christian funeral liturgy is a drama, containing a script wherein “we all have parts to play in which the church reenacts the gospel symbolically walking with the deceased on the pilgrim path toward resurrection, singing and praying as they go” (Long, 187).

### III. PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

- Annual or biannual church parish workshop on “Christian Consideration for the End of Life”. In addition to a biblical, theological talk by the rector or clergy, invite medical experts, financial planners, medical ethicists, counselors, etc.
- Develop and train a pastoral care team to assist the clergy in ministry to the sick, shut ins, dying, grieving.
- If possible, it is preferable to have the body present for a funeral, prior to cremation. In any case the Burial Service assumes the presence of the body of the deceased, whether in a casket or urn.
- Anglicans for Life has good resources on ethical and spiritual issues related to aging and end-of-life: [anglicansforlife.org](http://anglicansforlife.org)

## RESOURCES

Bergh, Rick. "Shepherding the Dying." <https://anglicansforlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Shepherding-the-Dying-AFL-Version.pdf>.

Canlis, Julie. "The Art of Dying Versus a Good Death." Unpublished document.

Long, Thomas G. *Accompany Them with Singing--The Christian Funeral*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009. Kindle Edition.

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Pauling, Joshua. "Burial Plots: Christian Tradition as Subversive Witness Against Modern Funeral Practices." *Touchstone* 36.6 (2023): 41-45.

Perry, Tim. *Funerals: For the Care of Souls*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021.

Verhey, Allen. *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011.