

## Last rites

I read Tom Long's reflections on "The good funeral" (Oct. 6) with interest because ministry at the time of death has always been one of the most satisfying aspects of my work and because Long has been an influential voice in my ministry. But I can't understand why he takes issue with the emergence of new rituals surrounding death.

Long seems to dismiss new developments as moves toward "a reflective, disembodied, quasi-Gnostic cluster of customs and ceremonies." But it's hard to imagine a more banal practice than that which dominated in the early years of my ministry in the South.

During that time, even longtime church members felt that the only socially acceptable send-off was a service in the chapel of the funeral home. The family would be separated from the rest of the congregation by a screen, and the corpse would be on display in an open casket in the front of the room. The odor of the floral arrangements lining the walls was overpowering, and the music was provided by the funeral home organist, who played the instrument like a calliope. The only person who spoke was a minister—sometimes one who had never met the deceased.

Luckily, the stranglehold of the funeral industry has been broken, opening the door to a variety of options. Long may decry the quasi-Gnostic character of some of these options, but I breathe easier for the change. A theologically sensitive minister who is willing to exercise quiet authority can usually steer the bereaved away from the schlock and drivel that bubbles up from popular culture. And he or she will understand that even "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" may have profound importance in the life of the departed

saint and for the grief process of those left behind.

Long prefers having the corpse present to having a jar of ashes or nothing at all. He hastens to add, though, that he's no fan of "burdensome funeral practices" that add nothing to the theological integrity and serve only to line the pockets of the local funeral director. Without a body present, Long opines, how can those gathered perceive that the saint departed

has completed the journey to be with God? Is he serious? Is death the completion of baptism or is resurrection? Do we truly need the corpse before us to imagine resurrection?

Resurrection is our hope, and, as Long says, it is worth our most intense efforts to find a way to dramatize the richness of our faith around the time of death. I'd just hate to

limit that to "recovery and reformation" when we can have "innovation and improvisation" as well.

*David Cameron  
Rockfish Presbyterian Church,  
Nellysford, Va.*

Long's article reminded me of the gap between traditional Christian ritual and the reality in which we do ministry. Over 70 percent of Oregonians have no official church affiliation, so when they come to our Presbyterian church and ask me to conduct a service for one of their loved ones, I see a grand opportunity. In my planning stages of the service with the family, accommodation is an active and important dynamic in our negotiations. So we talk about the constants in a service (the pastor's eulogy, prayer, scripture and a Christian homily), as well as options (special music, PowerPoint presentations, readings, others who will eulogize the deceased). We often recommend that the family have a private buri-

al prior to the service in order to have a time of fellowship after the service with friends and travelers who have come a great distance. Most families find the casket distracting, so we suggest that it not be present.

At times I sense that I am the guest invited by the family to help them in a time of grief, and it is an honor to share Christ with (often) three or more generations who have little if any awareness of how to get to heaven or the reason for Jesus Christ. So it's curious that many of the ways in which we have ministered in these settings would be considered by Long to reflect a "corrupted understanding of the Christian view of death."

*Jim Hazlett  
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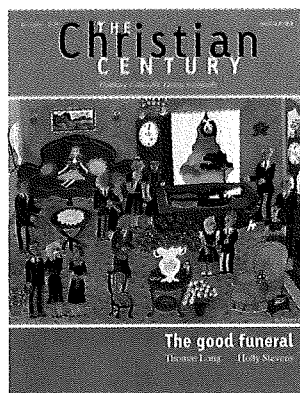
I agree that there has been a rapidly emerging shift in Christian funeral practices that is not entirely to the good. I see this shift as part of a wider trend in the way Christians regard the church's sacramental rites.

As an Episcopalian, I believe that the sacraments are "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." Many of my fellow Christians, however, would differ and say that sacraments and attendant rites are ceremonies primarily designed to celebrate life's milestones—e.g., birth, marriage and death.

In this paradigm, the church becomes a sacramental service center with its erstwhile members as consumers who call the shots. Baptism is a naming ritual followed by a family party. Funerals, as Long notes, are celebrations of life.

Accordingly, at funerals, clergy are solemnly warned that the deceased didn't "believe in all that religious stuff," so go lightly and don't even think of including the Eucharist because that would be so "exclusionary."

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## LETTERS

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Despite all this, funerals are still a clergyperson's best chance at conveying the Christian message to those who don't hear it as often as they might.

John Farrell

St. James Episcopal Church,  
Queens, N.Y.

Long misses the point of why some individuals have chosen to discard the morbid, old funeral traditions in exchange for celebrations of life. These celebrations are at least as Christian as the old customs, which were started by early Christians who believed that the body, and not the soul, was the essence of a person.

If Long thinks that the old way is better, then he can make those choices for himself and his family, but he shouldn't criticize others for how they wish to say goodbye to their loved ones.

Lloyd H. Littlefield  
New London, N.H.

### Tom Long responds:

I have read the thoughtful criticisms of my essay on funerals with great empathy, since most of them arise from ground I myself once occupied. It took me a long time, over a dozen years actually, to finish my book on Christian funeral practices, mainly because I changed my mind so dramatically in the process. When I began writing, I held, in the name of good pastoral care, many of the views expressed by my respondents, but historical and theological research eventually steered me toward a more radical view about what constitutes a Christian funeral.

David Cameron's letter displays his fine pastoral instincts, but he misunderstands some of the key points of my essay. For example, he is mistaken when he says that I prefer earth burial to cremation. Earth burial and cremation are both perfectly acceptable forms of disposition of the body. My complaint rather is with Christian memorial practices that banish the body of the deceased altogether, mostly out of embarrassment, aesthetic revulsion or a

quasi-Gnostic spirituality. Death rituals, Christian and otherwise, have historically been about what we do with the body of the deceased, namely, taking the body from *here*, the place of death, to *over there*, the place of disposition. In the process, humans do their best to make sense of what this action means about life and death.

Ours is the first society that has tried to hide this essential human necessity, the first generation for which the presence of the deceased at the death ritual is optional, or even undesirable. In her splendid book, *Bodies in Society*, Margaret Miles reminds us that early Christians shocked polite Romans, for whom human bodies were "bags of dung," precisely because they cared for bodies, living and dead. "They understood," she says, "that the Incarnation of Christ had once and for all settled the issue of the value of human bodies." I believe we are called to honor the bodies of our dead and to accompany them all the way to the place of farewell, whether it be a cemetery, a crematorium or other.

Cameron also seems to imply that we have only two liturgical choices: on the one hand, vulgar, impersonal and industry-dominated funerals, heavy with floral tributes and bad music, and, on the other hand, the more personalized, free-flowing and improvised rituals many observe today. He admits that the latter often exhibit a measure of pop culture banality, but on balance he nonetheless finds them to be a breath of fresh air and an arena where he can introduce a measure of pastoral grace. When the choices are posed this way, who wouldn't agree? But to see ourselves trapped between the hearse and limo extravaganzas of yesterday and the theologically thin, open-mike "celebrations of life" of today, both of which are parodies of Christian death rituals, is to be forced to choose either vulgarity or vapidness. This is a false choice, historically short-sighted and, finally, a failure of our theological imagination.

I applaud Jim Hazlett's desire to be an agent of the good news and to negotiate a hearing for the gospel in the always volatile and unpredictable environment of an "unchurched" culture.

A good pastor is always weaving the best garments possible out of the yarn at hand. When he says, however, that "most families find the casket distracting," I would challenge him to ask "distracting from *what*?" If he means that caskets as commodities can inject class and economic distractions into Christian funerals, I would agree and would urge both education aimed at simpler, less expensive funerals and the use of palls placed over coffins to provide equality and baptismal symbolism. If, however, he means that the actual presence of dead bodies at Christian funerals distracts by confronting us with the embodied character of humanity, distracts from people's desire to have spiritualized and disembodied memorials, or distracts our imaginations from death-denying fantasies, then I would say that we should be distracted.

Lloyd Littlefield appears to imagine that persons can be divided into bodies and souls and then assumes, in defining the "essence" of a person, that I would choose body, whereas he (and Christ) would make the presumably more spiritual choice of soul. Actually, I would refuse to make such a division at all, seeing human beings instead as unities of body and soul. Indeed, allowing ourselves to think of persons as vaporous souls is probably one main reason the funeral got into trouble in the first place. Second, he thinks that I am in favor of something he calls the "old way," which Littlefield calls "morbid, old funerals traditions."

In truth, I do not think that there was ever a good "old way," a pristine time when Christian funerals were performed in purity. Instead, I think that the Christian community has been given, on the basis of the story of Jesus, a powerful understanding of what it means to die in Christ, namely, that baptized saints are traveling on toward the hope of the resurrection and the Christian community is accompanying them along the way. This is the "ancient tradition" that is imperiled and, I think, worth recovering. It is incumbent upon each generation of Christians to figure out how to express this truth in ever-changing and always-reforming rituals of death.