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**"It's all about death—and life!"** (page 14)

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## Study guide

### "It's all about death—and life!"

By Robert C. Blezard

"Nobody gets out alive," the old quip goes. And like many wisecracks, it expresses well an underlying truth: All of us are born, all of us live and all of us die. Does that sound bleak? Put another way, we see hope and possibility: We come from God, we live in God and we go back to God. It's a common destination of humanity. Why, then, is death so scary and the dying avoided? Many Christians are working to recapture the sacredness, the promise and the deep spirituality that can accompany our death and those of our loved ones.

#### Exercise 1: Ash Wednesday

Many Lutherans will be reminded of their mortality on Ash Wednesday, when a pastor makes a cross-shaped smudge on their forehead and says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 254). That ancient formula, echoing Genesis 3:19, simply tells us the truth: We are mortal.

- What does Ash Wednesday mean to you? How does it help you and your congregation enter the season of Lent with a proper attitude? (And what, exactly, is a proper Lenten attitude?)
- What has been your emotional reaction to Ash Wednesday? Positive or negative? Why?
- For you, which description best fits Ash Wednesday's message of mortality: a. No big deal; b. I'd better get busy; c. OMG! Explain your response.
- How does Ash Wednesday's message contrast with those you receive from our culture on an everyday basis?
- Interestingly, in 2018 Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day. How does the match-up of this holy day and holiday present a clash of messages? How is the clash representative of our culture's mixed messages on life and death?
- Knowing we will die, how are we to live, then?

#### Exercise 2: Death in the media

- Run through the list of movies playing at your local theater. For how many does the plot involve violence and death? (Too many?)



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## Study guide: “It’s all about death—and life!” *continued*

- What is the last movie or TV show you watched in which two or more people died? Can you describe what happened? Were the deaths conveyed in a realistic fashion? Explain. How did the deaths make you, the audience, feel? Were those feelings appropriate for death? Why or why not?
- Generally speaking, how do TV and movies help us understand death and dying? Is that generally healthy or unhealthy?
- Is there too much death in the media? Why or why not?
- How could media do a better job of helping us understand death in a realistic and healthy way?
- How does our faith help us counter these messages and images? How can our congregations do better in preparing us?
- For extra discussion, explore these questions by looking at the most popular video games on the market today.

### Exercise 3: Death-denying

All of us will die someday, yet many of us avoid talking about death or even thinking about it. Discuss:

- Some say that ours is a death-denying culture. In what ways is this true?
- What evidence of death-denial do you see in our culture?
- How would you describe the stigma that death has in our culture?
- Is it healthy or unhealthy to deny death as a culture? Explain.
- Is it healthy or unhealthy to deny death as an individual? Explain.
- Why do people deny death and put the topic out of mind?
- How have you, personally, dealt with death? What is the good and the bad?
- What experiences or coping strategies make it easier to talk about death?
- How would our culture be improved if we had a better attitude toward death? How could we make that happen?
- How would our lives be improved if we had a better attitude toward death? How can we make that happen?

### Exercise 4: Life-affirming

The counter argument about our culture being death-denying is that we are actually “life-affirming.”

- In what ways does our culture affirm life? What evidence can you cite?



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- Is our culture mostly life-affirming? What arguments can be made for “yes” and “no”? As a study group, divide participants into groups and ask them to argue for one side and the other.
- If our culture denies death, does it necessarily follow that we affirm life? Why or why not?
- Does affirming life necessarily mean that we have to deny death?
- Can awareness of life and death be separated? What happens if they are?
- What would be a healthy way to look at both life and death together?

### Exercise 5: Death vigil

A “death vigil” happens when friends and loved ones stay with a person who is approaching the end of life. Many people who accompany someone who is transitioning from life to death say the experience can be holy and personally transforming.

- Have you accompanied anyone in death? Can you describe the experience?
- What were the emotions you (and others, if you weren’t alone) experienced?
- Was it scary? How? Why? If not, how and why?
- In the hours or days following the death, what thoughts went through your mind?
- What lasting effect did the experience have on you?

### Exercise 6: Near-death awareness

Hospice chaplains and those who work extensively with the dying report that as death approaches, many people have visions of angels or departed loved ones, or perhaps just a deep and palpable sense that God is present—a sense that family members in the room might feel as well.

- In the “Nicene Creed” we confess to believe in God, the maker “of all that is, seen and unseen” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 104). What does this mean to you? What “unseen” realities do we believe God has made?
- What experience or understanding do you have concerning angels or “heavenly beings”? What leads you to believe they exist?
- When have you sensed in a clear and convincing way that God was with you, pouring grace and comfort into your soul?
- Have you been with a person who passed from this world to the next? Did the person have any visions or a sense that God was present?



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- Do you believe such things are possible? Why or why not?
- Do you believe, as Karen Minnich-Sadler says in the article, that such occasions take place when God pours grace upon the person, when “the veil is lifted between this world and the next and the dying are in between.”

### Exercise 7: “Peace at the Last”

Lake Chelan Lutheran in Chelan, Wash., has developed a ministry that involves the congregation accompanying dying people and their families in the transition that death brings. They gather for a vigil, sing hymns, pray, assist the families with household chores, and make death a community experience. The congregation has developed a resource, *Peace at the Last: Visitation with the Dying* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016), for others to use.

- In our culture, death is often a solitary experience, and the dying pass away alone, in a hospital or nursing home. What elements of this seem unhealthy? How can we do better?
- How does support from the congregational community—spiritual, emotional and practical—assist a dying person and the family? How can it be helpful for participants, as well?
- How might your congregation begin a ministry with the dying and their families? Prepare an action proposal and submit it to your congregation council or pastor.

### Exercise 8: We are the Lord’s

Paul sums up our lot as children of God well:

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14:7-8).*

- What does Paul mean when he says that we neither live to ourselves or die to ourselves?
- Is this easy to understand? Does it come naturally or easy? How do we do this?
- What does it mean to live to the Lord? What does it look like in every-day terms?
- What does it mean that we die “to the Lord”?
- We are the Lord’s. How does this reality make you feel? How do we live into it?



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He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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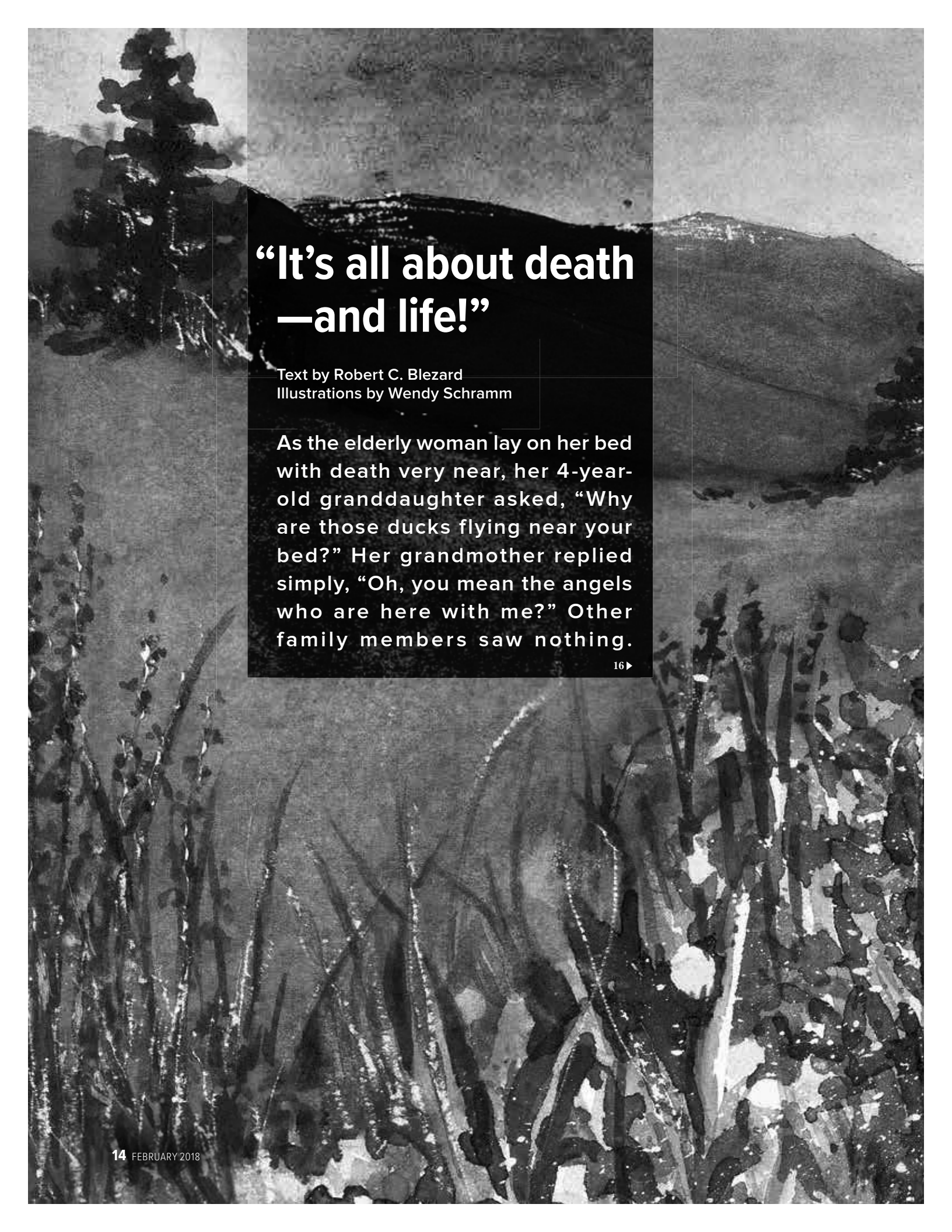
## Study guide: “It’s all about death—and life!” *continued*

### Exercise 9: For exploration

Read, study and pray over our denomination’s service of “Commendation of the Dying” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care, page 211; or Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship, page 103).

- What understandings of death and life are expressed?
- How do the words and prayers frame our lives in terms of God’s love and care?
- How do the prayers help you to live with the certainty that you, too, will die?
- Where is the hope? Where is the promise? Where is the urgency to live fully?



The background of the page is a black and white artistic illustration. It depicts a landscape with rolling hills or mountains in the distance. In the foreground, there are tall, dark, textured elements that look like grass or reeds, possibly reflecting in water. The style is painterly and somewhat abstract, with a focus on light and shadow.

# **“It’s all about death —and life!”**

Text by Robert C. Blezard  
Illustrations by Wendy Schramm

As the elderly woman lay on her bed with death very near, her 4-year-old granddaughter asked, “Why are those ducks flying near your bed?” Her grandmother replied simply, “Oh, you mean the angels who are here with me?” Other family members saw nothing.

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**DUCKS? ANGELS?** What were those things that were visible only to a dying woman and her toddler granddaughter?

“Heavenly beings?” suggested Beth Walch, a pastor of Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Bismarck, N.D. The dying grandmother was Walch’s Aunt Patty, and for years the story of ducks and angels has stirred family curiosity and faith.

“I have no doubt that there are heavenly beings attending us in our transition,” said Walch, who in seminary was trained as an “end-of-life doula” to accompany the dying and their families. Some dying people experience what hospice workers term “nearing-death awareness,” with visions of angels or departed loved ones, voices from the past, a powerful sense of God’s comforting presence or a glimpse into paradise itself.

“Those are God events,” said Karen Minnich-Sadler, a former hospice chaplain who now serves Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Ephrata, Pa. She describes nearing-death awareness as a special outpouring of God’s grace, when “the veil is lifted” between this world and the next as the dying are in between.

“I think these things happen so people are not so afraid,” Minnich-Sadler said. She recalled serving a woman who was over 100 and had been blind for

“I do believe that when we  
leave this life we simply  
leave this dimension and  
go home to God”

many years. On the day she died, “all of a sudden she opened her eyes and she said, ‘Oh my word! It ... is ... so beautiful,’ ” said Minnich-Sadler, who is convinced, as is the family, that the dying woman was given a heavenly vision.

“I do believe that when we leave this life we simply leave this dimension and go home to God,” she added.

Death comes to us all, and for many people and the loved ones who accompany them on the journey from death to new life, end of life can be a profoundly spiritual and holy time. After ministering to dying loved ones, friends and family often find their own faith strengthened and their lives renewed.

Despite this, in our North American culture, death and dying often remain widely feared, mostly avoided and generally misunderstood. But a growing number of ministries is hoping to educate and equip Christians to reclaim the holiness and common humanity of end of life, and help vanquish the fear.

### **Freed from the fear**

“We’ve always been frightened of death in the same way that we’re scared of the dark,” said Victoria Larson, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Steelton, Pa., who led a monthlong emphasis on end-of-life issues last November. “It’s the unknown, and there’s something inherently frightening about that for us.”

For worship in the weeks that culminated with Reign of Christ Sunday (Nov. 26), Larson wrote liturgical pieces that highlighted themes of life, death and grieving. She also stressed those elements in preaching from the appointed lectionary readings. After services, over coffee and refreshments, there was a time of learning with special guests (including a funeral director), sharing and exploration. Larson planned the series after sensing a need.



"Death is not something we talk about enough in the church," she said, adding that it's a shame. "Our faith does have something beautiful and strong and powerful and life-altering to say in the face of death, and we deserve to get to talk about that without fear because Christ did die for us, and that releases us from our fear of the power of death."

A similar sense that there was great interest in death and that the church needed to address it more intently led Shauna Hannan to teach an interdisciplinary class, simply titled "Death," at Pacific Lutheran Seminary in Berkeley, Calif.

"People want to have that conversation about death," said Hannan, associate professor of homiletics. The class exposed future church leaders to end-of-life issues from a variety of cultural and religious viewpoints, as well as diving deep into the practical pastoral aspects of working with families in times of loss.

"It was just eye-opening to hear how different people interact with death," said Brandon Peck, a second-year student at Pacific. The 24-year-old didn't have much experience with end-of-life issues but said he now feels comfortable with the topic.

Peck now sees clearly the negative implications of our culture's discomfort with death: "I wonder

if we let our fear of death get in the way of taking care of each [other] as a community." For instance, because people don't know what to say to someone who is dying or has suffered a loss, we tend not to say anything, he added.

In addition to exploring death by visiting a funeral home, cemetery and other sites, the seminary class also spent time with a "Death Café" group that met in a library. Death Café is an international nonreligious grass-roots movement that gathers people interested in talking about issues of death and dying.

"It was really just an informal group to make it less stigmatized to talk about death," said Jennifer Matas, a second-year seminarian at Pacific who signed up for the class to prepare her for a career as a church pastor. "It just opens up space for people to talk about death."

Such conversations, Hannan agreed, are not only necessary but something our church should lead. "We need to get in on it as Christian faith leaders," she said. If the church doesn't educate and talk about end of life, God's people may be left with our culture's misleading or harmful understandings about death—something Hannan calls "embedded theology."

For example, Hannan remembered a family that lost a child. One family member clung to the belief that it was God's will, not in a general sense, but that God specifically wanted the child to die.

"What's our role as a faith leader?" she asked. "Just to let them have those thoughts?" A better approach would involve faithful conversations and education in church about who God is and God's role in the day-to-day events of the world.

## Healthy closure

Hannan became interested in our culture's and our faith's reluctance to talk about death as a young pastor in Moorhead, Minn. To model herself as someone willing to think and talk about death, she joined a workshop in which she built her own casket. Serving as a bookshelf until it's needed for its intended purpose, the casket is a conversation starter that can get people thinking and talking about their end of days.

"When I see my casket on a daily basis, I'm reminded of my death first thing, and it actually sort of tells me to embrace life as I have it right now," Hannan said. "To talk about death and to reflect on death, it changes how we live."

Although making her own casket raised eyebrows for many in Hannan's circles, not everybody was surprised. "My Dad said, 'Oh, our family used to do that all the time, and then we'd have the funeral



viewing in the parlor,’ ” she said. “That’s what parlors were for.”

The comment serves as a reminder that only a few generations ago, deaths at home, as opposed to a hospital or nursing home, were the norm. Families then were intimately involved with the dying process, both as caregivers and witnesses.

That may be one reason our culture has developed a fear about death and a reluctance to talk about it. When people approach death, we send them away to a hospital or nursing home, and then when they die their bodies are taken to morticians.

“We kind of put people away, don’t we? ... Out of sight, out of mind,” said Paul Palumbo, pastor of Lake Chelan Lutheran Church, Chelan, Wash.

When families accompany a loved one intensively through the end of life, they not only witness that death is a natural part of life, they also can “say goodbye” and put healthy closure to the relationship.

Moreover, facing end of life can be terrifying for a dying person if they are all alone and away from home, in a sterile hospital room lit by fluorescent lights and filled with equipment that continually blinks and beeps.

“It’s the aloneness that’s frightening,” Palumbo said. “I don’t see that fear when there’s 10 people around them singing.”

In fact, gathering people to sing—and pray and watch and wait—at the bedside of a dying brother or sister is precisely the approach that Lake Chelan takes in its ministry of accompaniment at end of life.

The ministry took off after the congregation experienced an unusual number of deaths and serious illnesses in 2007. As the congregation dealt with the losses, Palumbo said, leaders discovered that many members felt anxious, awkward and unprepared around dying friends and their loved ones. They needed help with the practical aspects.

“People were afraid of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing,” he said.

But the more that Palumbo and other leaders worked with members on accompanying the dying and their families, the more comfortable the congregation became. “They found that it wasn’t a horrible thing,” he said. “It really was a blessing to be there.”

### **A shared journey**

To help other Christians in their ministries to the dying and their families, Palumbo and members of Lake Chelan, including musician Rolf Vegdahl and artist Wendy Schramm, created a liturgical resource, *Peace at the Last: Visitation with the Dying* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016). It contains artwork, prayers, Scripture, music and rituals to help family



“I wonder if we let our fear of death get in the way of taking care of each [other] as a community.”

and friends accompany a loved one at the end of life.

"It was Pastor Paul's focus on how we could accompany the dying and how we could accompany families of the dying," said Kathy Schuldt, a member of Lake Chelan. The congregation now goes all out to surround the dying and their loved ones with support, care, prayer and assistance with daily chores and meals.

Schuldt's family experienced that accompaniment firsthand with her 94-year-old mother-in-law, Effie Lois Schuldt, in 2016. Sensing that her death was near, the family kept her at home, and for 10 days they experienced the love of the congregation, which looked in on them, helped with household tasks and stayed overnight, if needed. Around six members also gathered in the home several times for the *Peace at the Last* service.

"Mom really enjoyed when they came, and it was always some songs and some prayers, and that was good for her. That was important, but it was also important for us," Schuldt said. "After she passed away, there was a group of ladies from church who came and stayed and helped wash the body, and we did that service again."

Looking back, Schuldt said the congregation made it possible for her mother-in-law and family to experience the at-home death. "It would have been so hard to not have had that support, to not have the caring, when you were so tired you didn't know what to do yourself," she said.


In caring for the dying and their families, Lake Chelan is simply reclaiming what faith communities ought to do, Palumbo said. Whether people die at home or in a hospital, their brothers and sisters in the faith have a responsibility to make the journey easier. The shame is that too many people die alone and afraid, especially when they are in institutions.

"The church has these incredible gifts that we can offer," Palumbo said. "We have a lot of things that we can do, but we have to just say, 'Yes, we're going to do that.'"

Accompanying the dying and their families helps not only those facing end of life to experience the beauty, joy, sacredness and natural wonder that death can bring, but also those who minister to them.

"It certainly encouraged me and helped me in my journey," said Walch, the pastor who had worked as an end-of-life doula. "I wanted more people to know that God loved them."

*Peace at the Last* contains a ritual of marking—anointing—the body of the dying or dead loved one that is reminiscent of the anointing done at baptism. The ritual helps bring closure to life and fulfillment of God's greatest hope and promise to us.

"It's all about death—and life!" Palumbo said. 



"Our faith does have something beautiful and strong and powerful and life-altering to say in the face of death, and we deserve to get to talk about that without fear because Christ did die for us, and that releases us from our fear of the power of death."

To learn more about *Peace at the Last* and to purchase, go to [augsborgfortress.org/peacelast](https://augsborgfortress.org/peacelast). Download a study guide by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab at [livinglutheran.org](https://livinglutheran.org).



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