



What We Lived For

A pastor recently commented on what he sees as a growing trend among his parishioners. More and more obituaries end with the words, “in lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the XXX Society”. The organization mentioned is usually a charity named after a disease or body part: cancer, heart, arthritis, kidney, etc. Bemoaning the fact that many of the obituaries described people who were tremendously dedicated members of his church, he asked “Why do people want to be remembered for what they *died of* rather than what they *lived for*?”

We could look at his comments in a purely practical way. The church needs donations as much as any other charity. A memorial donation to a Lutheran congregation may do as much good (or more) as money contributed to any of the disease foundations. So why couldn't our congregation be suggested “in lieu of flowers” to those who want to donate in our memory?

The same question could be asked of planned gifts. It is natural – and good – to include in one's will a gift to a charity that has helped us cope with a debilitating disease. But why not remember the church in the same manner? Think of how the church's sacraments and ministries have embraced us throughout our life: in baptism and Holy Communion; through Sunday School, confirmation, Luther League and marriage; in celebration and consolation; in health, sickness, infirmity and death. Is this not a relationship worth remembering with thanksgiving?

But there is a deeper dimension to the pastor's question. Memorial gifts are about *memory*, the things for which we want to be *remembered*. How many of us have taught Sunday School,

served on the altar guild, provided volunteer janitorial service, sung in the choir? Or been the church's organist, treasurer, lawn-mower, assisting minister, secretary, youth group leader? Made quilts for CLWR, worked a shift in the out-of-the-cold program, helped to sponsor a refugee family? How often have we volunteered for the Congregational Council or a committee, sometimes against our better judgment, because no one else would step forward? How many fund-raising events, pot-luck dinners and funeral lunches have we cooked and baked for?

In short, how much of our identity is found in the opportunities for serving others that our church represents? *That* is what many of us have lived for, what has given meaning to our life. Do we want to be remembered as someone who committed their life to serving God and God's people, or merely as another person who died of heart disease?

Douglas John Hall, the great Canadian theologian, explored this theme in his marvellous book *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. Hall said, “Stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being – the very life – of God's people. Deeds of stewardship arise out of the being of the steward.”

The document that expresses our final wishes on the disposition of our worldly affairs is called a last will and *testament*. In it we *testify* about who and what has mattered to us; we give *testimony* to our most cherished values.

As we make our plans for the future, whether they are financial, estate or funeral plans, let's remember what we lived for and help others remember us for who we really are.