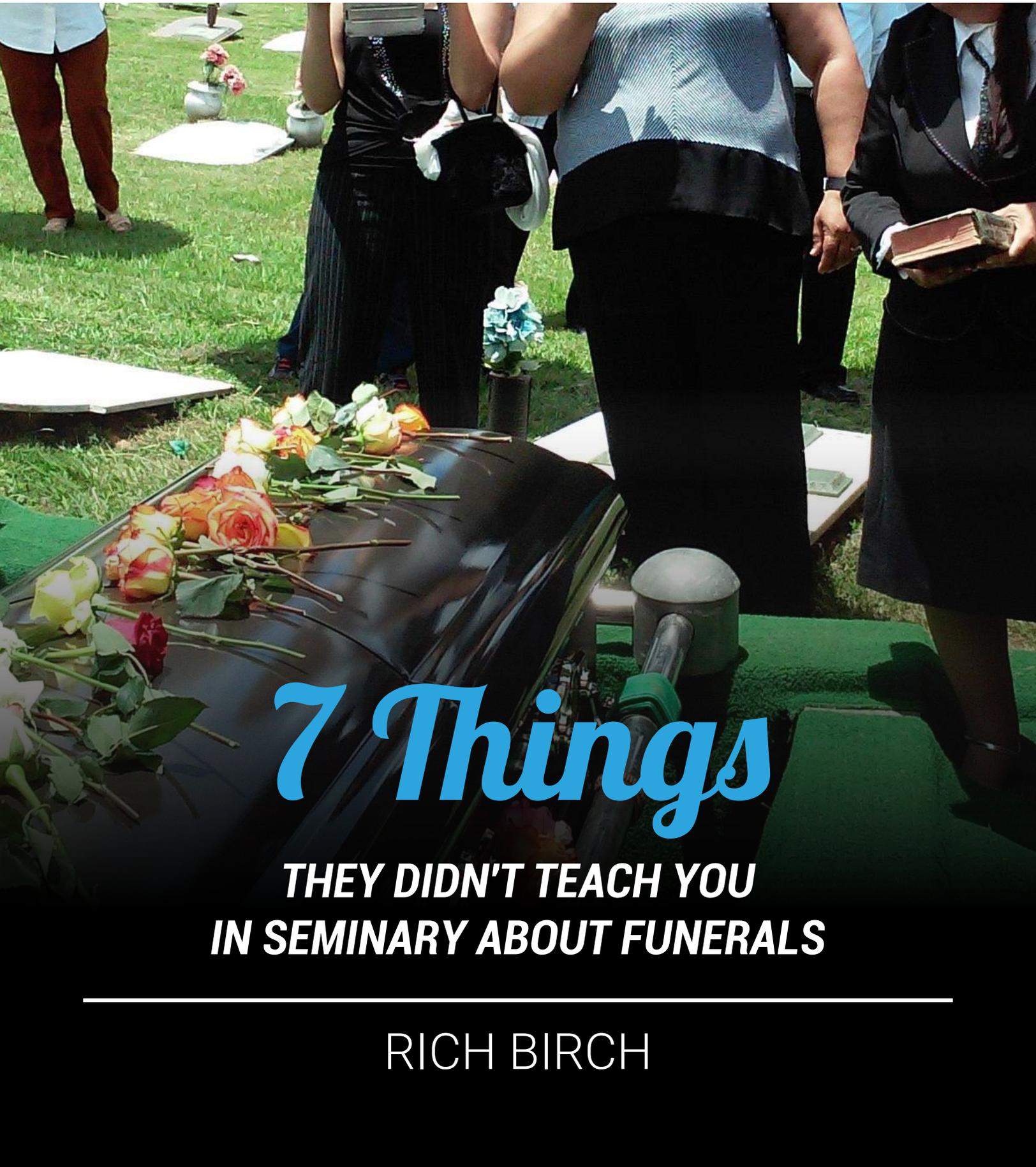


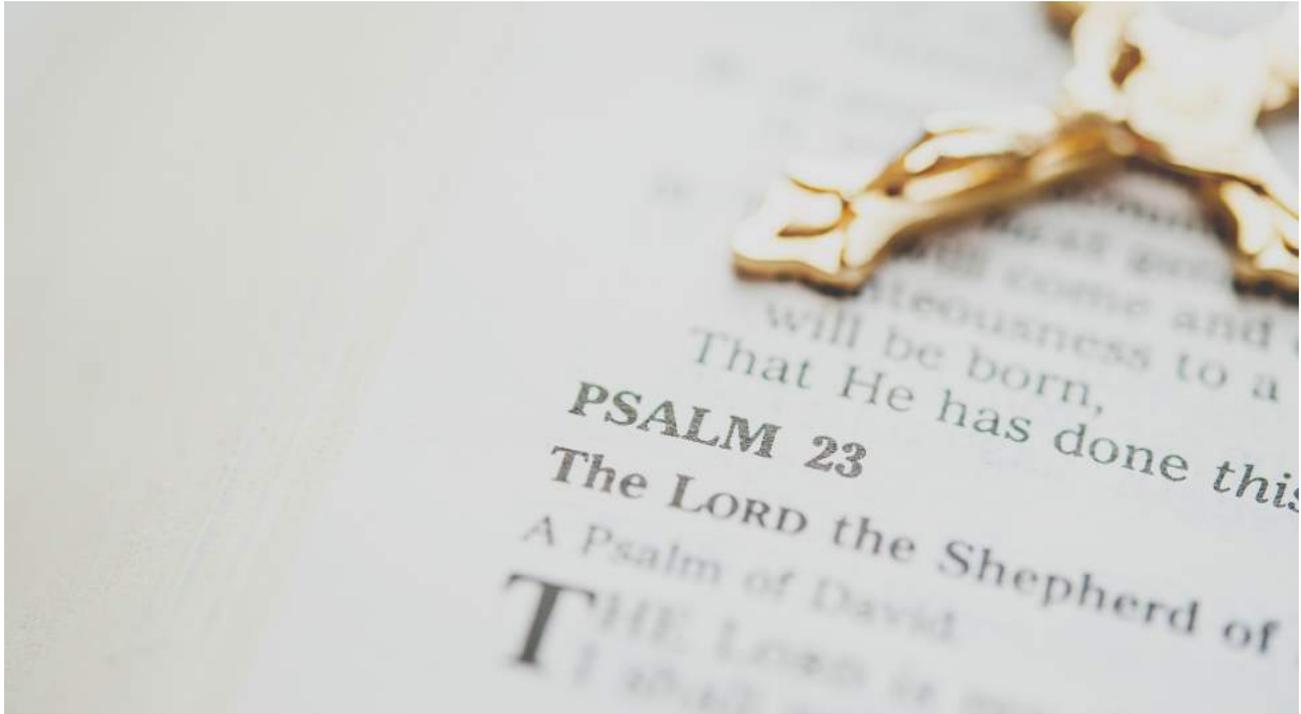
stuff you wish they taught in seminary



7 Things

**THEY DIDN'T TEACH YOU
IN SEMINARY ABOUT FUNERALS**

RICH BIRCH



Performing funerals is a reality of being the pastor of a church of any size and style. Even if your church is primarily filled with young people, from time to time you will be called upon by families to perform a funeral.

These moments, while incredibly touching, can feel somewhat routine for pastors who perform funeral services on a regular basis. **For families, a funeral may be one of the most memorable days of their lives as they say goodbye to a loved one, reconcile with that person's life, or reflect on their own mortality, whereas pastors may view a funeral as something scheduled on a Tuesday afternoon between everything else they're doing ministry wise.**

Chances are you didn't have much conversation during your seminary training about how to guide a family through a funeral. The topic of funerals never came up the entire time I was training for ministry. This is somewhat disorienting when you consider that they will be an inevitable part of most pastors' and ministry leaders' lives at some point, so I want to share seven things they didn't teach you in seminary about funerals.

Ask lots of questions in order to understand the culture.

Funerals are one area where you need to lead with questions.

Talk to the family about what it is that they're looking for. Talk to the funeral directors about

local customs or things you should be aware of in that community. Talk with other local pastors about what they've learned about the regional etiquette around funerals. Be inquisitive in your preparation.

If you're wondering about anything regarding funerals, you'll need to reach out and ask those questions.

Less is more.

I know you may be tempted to build the most compelling message that you've ever made about the life eternal to present to funeral guests; however, it's been my experience that less is more.

Make sure that you honor the deceased and his or her family, and certainly point people to Jesus, but don't add so many extra elements to the service that you risk things going sideways.

Help the family find the most elegant and straightforward service order that meets their needs and gently encourage them to streamline what takes place at the funeral.



You'll be tempted to short the truth.

A theology professor of mine once said that you won't really know what you think about the ultimate realities until you're faced with a difficult funeral. Funerals have a way of both pulling at our beliefs and clarifying what we really believe. It's one thing to talk about what you believe in a seminary dorm room over a Coke, but it's a whole other thing when you sit across the table from a family that's asking real questions of ultimate consequence.

In that moment, you'll be tempted to soften your beliefs or ignore what you have thought for years. Don't punish yourself for thinking this way. Give yourself some grace but seek to declare the truth in the midst of a difficult time. Obviously, you should do this in a loving and caring way, but don't be surprised if you find an internal temptation to soften the truth.

The money thing is weird.

Compensation for your services needs to be addressed. This is one of those areas where having an assistant can be a real gift because your assistant can inform the family that there is a small financial compensation for the pastor performing these services.

If you don't have an assistant to tackle that detail on your behalf, be ready to answer if someone in your church asks you what it costs to have you perform a service. **If you don't plan on asking for something, that's fine and noble; however, if you are planning on asking for a small remuneration for your time, that's perfectly acceptable — just make sure to be clear and upfront about it.** Some churches have policies about these finances.

It would be wise to think about that conversation before someone even asks you instead of being surprised one day when someone from your church suddenly asks you to perform a family funeral.

Expect the unexpected.

A simple search on the internet yields all kinds of shenanigans that have taken place during funerals. In fact, like any aspect of our career, things can sometimes go awry. It's our job to remain cool and calm in the midst of a tough scenario, even if it's slightly comical or emotionally charged, and to continue to facilitate an honest and honorable experience for the family.

This can be true with the local funeral directors who sometimes have an offbeat sense of humor. I'm giving you a heads up that sometimes things can go a bit sideways. Being aware of that potentiality ahead of time will help you keep things on track in the moment if you are faced with the unexpected.

Call three friends to get their plan.

The best thing you could do after reading this article would be to call three other ministry friends who are significantly older or more experienced than you and ask them how they handle funerals. They will, undoubtedly, have a few funeral messages and probably some words of service that they have found particularly helpful over the years.

Having a quick conversation with them can help bridge the communication gap that can happen during your first interactions with families; these families are looking for you to lead in these moments. They assume that you've led a number of funeral services *even if you haven't*. By simply articulating options and next steps with a calm confidence and certainty, you can provide a meaningful service as well as comfort to so many families.

Do for one what you wish you could do for all.

Funerals are one of those times when our schedules slow down, and we get the opportunity to interact with one family. It doesn't take long when listening to people's stories within a church before you hear about a pastor's positive impact during a funeral.



Families will share about how a pastor spent time, effort, and energy to care for them during some of their darkest days. Taking time to love on families in their season of grief can be a wonderful and beautiful way to express Jesus' love for our neighbors.

I'm guessing that if you're like me, what you learned about conducting funerals came from practical application and not the seminary classroom. I hope these few tips about dealing with funerals have been helpful for you.

I'd love for you to leave comments [here](#) on what you found particularly helpful as you've led funerals in your community.

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