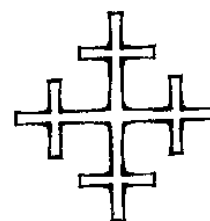


TOTENFEST

IDEAS FOR REMEMBERING ON ALL SAINTS DAY



Throughout Christian history, the church has and continues to remember and celebrate the lives of faithful people who have died. Totenfest is a distinctive practice that grows out of the Evangelical tradition of the United Church of Christ. Although the name Totenfest is unknown to many in the UCC, its importance as a special time of remembrance continues not only in our Evangelical heritage, but for all. It is a way of remaining related to deceased loved ones, as the process of grieving and remembering are vital to our spiritual health. To this day, Eden Theological Seminary, with Evangelical roots, has a memorial service to remember friends, faculty and students of the seminary, who have died in the previous year.

This resource both briefly describes the history of Totenfest and suggests ways a time of remembrance might be included in your own worship for All Saints Day.

What is the Tradition of Totenfest?

Totenfest is a German word that means “Feast of the Dead” or “Festival for the Dead.” It was established in 1816 by Prussian Emperor Fredrick William III as a day to remember that nation's soldiers who had died in the recently concluded Prussian War. Obviously it became an important observance in the Evangelical Church in Prussia (established by the same emperor in 1817) as a day to remember not only the war dead, but also church members who had died in the previous year. It was observed on the last Sunday of the church year, right before Advent began. This was also the time of clearing gardens and fields of the summer's growth in preparation for winter. To this day, Totenfest in parts of Germany is the day families visit the graves of loved ones to clean off the summer flowers and cover the graves with evergreen boughs for the winter. In Lutheran traditions, “Totensontag” or “Death Sunday” became the preferred term to Totenfest.

The term fell into disuse in America as churches of German heritage started substituting English words for German ones. In fact, by the 1916 Evangelical Book of Worship published by the German Evangelical Synod of North America, the term Memorial Sunday had been substituted for Totenfest. That service included an opening sentences, invocation, opening prayer and closing prayer. Whatever else was done in this service was left up to local customs.

This memorial has roots in All Saints and in All Souls days from the medieval church. All Saints Day was begun by Pope Boniface IV in 609 to remember the virgin Mary and all the martyrs. It was officially designated on the church calendar in 837 to be celebrated on November 1. Alternately, All Souls Day was a time to pray for the souls of those in purgatory. This day was first observed in

You may follow the litany with a prayer that mentions the first names of those being remembered and of others who have died. If a general “prayers of the people” is used, the one petition might be “Remembering all who have died, especially (*names of those who have died*) and all the faithful saints.” Instead of “prayers of the people,” you might adapt “A Litany for Evening,” found on page 879 in *The New Century Hymnal*, by omitting the last petition regarding sleep.

Additional Ideas for Totenfest

Send a letter of invitation to survivors.

Approximately a month before the service, a letter inviting persons to attend the service might be sent to all known survivors, spouse, partner, children, or grandchildren of those being remembered. The best time to collect these addresses is at the earlier memorial or funeral service. Sometimes family members are not as in contact with one other as might be assumed, and a church cannot rely on one family member necessarily to inform all others. If asking a member of the family to be involved in the service, arrange for this in the letter of invitation.

Present or dedicate memorial gifts.

Some churches use a percentage of the memorial gifts received in the past year for a special project at the church. A Worship Committee is the appropriate group to make this selection. The Chair of this committee could announce the gift at the beginning of the Service of Remembrance, or it could be printed in the worship bulletin. This might also be an appropriate time to dedicate any memorial gifts.

Light a candle.

Have an acolyte or a family member light a candle at the front of the church as the name of each person is read. If family members are asked to do this, special places should be reserved for them to keep the service moving, especially if there are a number of deceased members to be memorialized.

Present flowers.

Some churches present a flower to the closest relative present. Often white roses are used. The family members might place the flowers in a vase, making a bouquet of remembrance. Each family would take their flower with them at the conclusion of the service. Remember that the intent of this presentation is not to make a ‘public spectacle’ of anyone’s grief, however. That is why it is not a good idea to ask the family members to read their loved one’s name.

Ask worshippers to add other names.

Invite worshippers to include the names of others they wish to remember who did not belong to the church. Names could be solicited before the service and included as a group at the end of the list, or some other way found to include them.

A Litany and Prayers of Remembrance

One: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in Christ.

People: They will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.

One: We do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died,

People: So that you may not grieve as others who have no hope.

One: For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,

People: Even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

One: But someone will ask "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"

People: When you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed.

One: But God gives a body as God has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

People: It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.

One: For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality.

People: For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

One: Jesus said "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you.

People: I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.

One: The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I said to you.

People: Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

One: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

People: "And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

One: For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of God's own eternity.

People: The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and no torment will ever touch them.

One: "They are at peace and their hope is full of immortality"

People: "Because God tested them and found them worthy." Amen.

the seventh century as a private day of remembrance for deceased loved ones, and by the eleventh century was in common practice in monasteries. Different countries began celebrating the day on different dates, but St. Odilo, the Abbot of Cluny, France, established it in the eleventh century as November 2 (the next day if this was a Sunday). By the thirteenth century it was a fixture on the church's calendar.

Evangelical churches started moving this observance to either Memorial Day (Decoration Day) Sunday or to the first Sunday in November, as those Sundays were preferred in the wider Christian community. Other faith traditions have similar observances. In the Jewish tradition, for instance, there is a service at the one-year anniversary of a death. The term "Totenfest" is also used in Indonesia and Japan.

A Service of Remembrance

A time of remembrance is easily incorporated into regular morning worship on the first Sunday in November. It is appropriate near the end of the service before the final hymn and benediction. Introduce the time as one to remember and celebrate the lives of members of the congregation who have died since the last time of memorial and remembrance. Perhaps state a bit of the history of "Totenfest", "All Saints," and "All Souls" days, and the appropriateness of remembering those "whom we have loved and lost but for awhile".

Opening your official registry or membership book at the altar or communion table and reading names makes visible the presence of the "communion of saints." Even if you don't actually read from a book, but from a list you have created, the book becomes a symbol not only of those remembered on that day, but all who have gone before and even those worshipping on that day.

Listing the names in the bulletin (usually by dates of death, not alphabetically) helps people to remember those individuals being commemorated. Read each name, one by one, in the following way: "James Michael Jones, born to life April 30, 1925, born to life eternal August 5, 2005, at the age of 80 years, 3 months and 5 days." After each name is read, a brief silence may be observed. An actual bell may be tolled or such a sound may be available on your church's organ. Be aware that a bell's tolling clapper is different from the one that chimes the bell. The toll is appropriate; a swinging 'clang' is not. Should a large steeple bell, or organ stop, not be available, a soothing chime could be used.

When all the names of church members have been read, a litany as the following may be shared. It is based on Revelation 14:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:35, 37, 43, 53; 2 Corinthians 5:1; John 14:2, 18, 26-7, 11:25-26; and Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-3:5. It is revised from a liturgy in *Flames of the Spirit* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1985) edited by Ruth C. Duck.

Pray for all who have died.

In the morning prayer, it is important to remember all who have died, and all who grieve. Do not forget the feelings of families who may still be missing a relative who died many years ago.

Consider traditions other than your own.

In Mexico, the “Days of the Dead” are celebrated from October 31 to November 2. Marigolds are considered the flower of the dead for this remembrance. Candles are placed in the windows of homes to guide the souls of the dead, and an empty place is set at the dinner table. Remember, too, that many Asian cultures revere the graves of relatives, and celebrate religious rituals at the gravesites.

Remember new life.

Some churches add the reading of the names of those who have been born in the same time period, to recall that, even as those we love die, so new life enters the church community.

Sing a variety of hymns.

Hymns appropriate to this day include several from *The New Century Hymnal*. See the section of hymns for use during “Burial and Memorial” on pages 365 to 368, for “Communion of Saints” on pages 374 to 385 and for “All Saints Day” on pages 295 to 299. Other hymns are also suggested under these categories. Most appropriate among them for a Totenfest Service would be “For all the Saints” on page 29, which William Walsham wrote for an 1864 collection called *Hymns for Saints’ Days and Other Hymns by a Layman*. The rousing and victorious tune by Ralph Vaughan Williams was written in 1906 as an alternative for “Sarum”, a tune included in the 1941 Evangelical and Reformed Hymnal but which has now fallen out of use.

Focus your preaching.

Today’s Lectionary Texts are good starting places for sermons on the subjects of death, grief, and the continuing process of grieving by those family members who are present at worship. This is a time to remind those who grieve that it may be a long, prayerful, sometimes unbearable, sometimes healing process. Remind those who grieve that healing does not mean forgetting those whom they love, but that the bond of love is the one thing that death cannot break. Refer to Paul’s thoughts in Romans 8: 38–39, “There is nothing in all creation. . . that can separate us from the love of God.” Remember that even those who lost loved ones long ago will be remembering their loss on this day. The challenge of the sermon is to turn tears of grief into tears of and hope in remembering the love and lives of those memorialized.

Draw upon the lectionary lessons for the day.

Revelation 7:9–17 contains a vision of the saved (All peoples, angels, elders) before the throne of God, worshipping. The passage contains promises from God that are often heard at funeral services (as “there will be no more hunger” and “God will wipe away every tear.”). Psalm 34:1–10, 22 is a psalm of praise for deliverance from trouble. Although it does not relate directly to the occurrence of death in our lives, it does include the promise that “the Lord will redeem the life of his servants.” This passage makes us contemplate what kind of redemption this will be, and whether this promise extend even beyond this life. 1 John 3:1–3 names us children of God, and reminds us that what we will be (that is, in life beyond death) has not yet been revealed to us.

A sermon could easily be built on the promise Jesus gave us of “You will be with me in Paradise” but how he fails to fill in the details. Many make the theological error of seeking to describe that life to come in exacting detail, when Jesus said only to trust in the promise and hope in God.

Matthew 5:1–12 is the Beatitudes. Perhaps the most relevant one is number four “Blessed are those who mourn.” Might the Beatitudes be a vision of the time of present suffering and future glory? This could easily be used for a responsive reading, dance presentation or as a statement of faith during the service. A service based on the Beatitudes text is available in the *Worship Ways* archives. See “The Blessed Ones: A Celebration for All Saints Day” on-line at www.ucc.org/worship/ways/pentecost/34The%20Blessed%20Ones.pdf



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