

The sacred relics of a lifetime of ministry

Marilyn wasn't sure she could stomach the sight of a truck carting 56 years of her husband's work to the dump.

by [Jon Mathieu](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



Sources images: Getty and Unsplash

Two filing cabinets, one with three drawers and one with four. These seven drawers held John Zimmann's 56 years of ministry—30 as a full-time minister and 26 more doing interim ministry and pulpit supply. Seven drawers.

What was Marilyn supposed to do with these rusting, sacred cabinets? Inside were the treasures of a minister's life: wedding and funeral liturgies, prayers, calls to worship, sermons organized by the liturgical calendar. Seven drawers chock-full of papers, yes, but also family sacrifices, neighborhood triumphs, miraculous births, and words her husband had received from on high.

Still grieving, Marilyn had decided to downsize and move from Ohio to be near her daughter in Virginia. She'd already gone through John's other belongings, sorting them into piles to keep, donate, or throw away. But the seven drawers resisted such simple categories. She couldn't keep them, as space was limited and she already had enough mementos. She would be happy to donate them, but to whom? There are so many particularities to pastoral ministry that these files wouldn't be much benefit to rookie ministers. That left throwing them away—but how could she discard 56 years of spiritual friendships? Marilyn wasn't sure she could stomach the sight of a truck carting John's ministry to the dump.

Just before the move, Marilyn heard about a local paper-shredding event. This seemed like her final chance to deal with the filing cabinets before she headed east. So she waited in her car in a parking lot as a volunteer took away the papers for shredding and disposal. She tried not to cry. She repeated the mantra, *It has to be done, it has to be done*. But eventually, alone in the parking lot, Marilyn wept.

A few weeks later, settling into her new place in Virginia, Marilyn eagerly flipped through the pages of the new issue of *Living Lutheran*. She had been told that her husband's name would appear in the magazine's In Memoriam section, and sure enough, there it was—along with 22 other clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who had died that month. Her heart sank as she thought of all those other spouses and children who stared down their own filing cabinets, not sure how to let go of the religious artifacts of their loved ones' careers.

For two years Marilyn kept her eye on the magazine's death notices. Some months there were as many as 45 ELCA clergy who died; the average was more than 30. The numbers shocked her—and this was just one Christian denomination of more than 200 in the United States alone. How were the surviving spouses and children around the world mourning these losses? What were they doing with their drawers and filing cabinets?

The death of a nurse or a Lyft driver or an accountant hits families just as hard as that of a pastor. But not every occupation's artifacts become holy relics. Medical scrubs and Excel spreadsheets are perhaps easier to discard than a prayer book used at a patient's bedside. Furthermore, pastoral ministry has a way of shaping a family's life together, of setting the tone for its values and rhythms. Marilyn could remember her Saturday deadline each weekend—*What will the kids wear tomorrow? What will they eat for lunch after church?* She could remember the night she and

John were awakened by a phone call at 3 a.m. after a parishioner died in a motorcycle accident. Minutes later, John was dressed and out the door. In a way, these shapes and tones had been housed in those filing cabinets. In a way, they had been shredded while she cried in the parking lot.

While Marilyn was glad she had managed to part with John's ministry materials, she couldn't shake the feeling that the process had been rushed, her mourning stymied. She feared that the dozens of other grieving ELCA clergy families each month faced the same risk.

In late 2020, Marilyn received confirmation that at least one other mourner was shouldering the same dilemma. She received a Christmas card from Jean Uhle, whose husband (also named John) had been friends with hers since seminary and had died in 2015. The Christmas card led to a full-scale reconnection, and soon the two were discussing their shared grief.

When Marilyn described her emotional and unsatisfying shredding experience, Jean replied, "I still have five boxes of John's old church things—I don't know what to do with them!" More than five years after her husband's death, Jean's boxes of relics stood tall, an even more persistent totem than Marilyn's seven drawers.

The two began to do some research. They read books and articles and spoke to clergy and denominational leaders. They considered every idea and option they could find or dream up, thinking not just about Jean's healing process but those of clergy families everywhere. The central question that emerged for them was this: How can families get rid of these materials in a way that engenders respect for the deceased pastor's care, relationships, and work?

The two pastor's wives didn't crack the case entirely. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to any of the complicated decisions and processes surrounding grief. But they did compose a list of practical recommendations and factors to consider. Their suggestions include giving selected sermons as gifts, checking with denominational headquarters to see if there is a use for any of the materials, and then—most importantly—inviting family and friends to gather for a time of sharing memories and letting go.

On a chilly afternoon in May 2021, it was time. Family members joined Jean around the fire pit in her spacious backyard. Some hailed from her own neighborhood in Cleveland, while others journeyed from as far away as Alabama. Also joining them

by the fire were five full boxes.

As the afternoon stretched into evening, the Uhle family sorted, read, laughed, and cried together. “Though the project was very difficult,” Jean recalls, “we wanted to do it together while we had the chance. It was an opportunity to relive many precious moments of John’s ministry. Most of us were amazed by the sheer amount of time it must have taken him to prepare 50 years’ worth of sermons! But it wasn’t the manuscripts, notes, or sermons that were important. It was the chance to be together and to hold these memories in our hearts.”

Though there was a blazing fire between them, they did not burn many of the old sermons that night. Each family member selected one or two that were meaningful to them to read, reflect on together, and add to the fire as a token of celebration and release. There were prayers as the pages burned. Afterward one of Jean’s sons took the remaining boxes with him and delivered them to a commercial shredder the next day.

But for Jean, the memories remain alight, flickering like a fire in the dark Ohio night.