

Gathered in hope: In memory of Al Ward

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

One of the difficult decisions, and sometimes compromises, ministers regularly make involves conducting funerals and memorial services for people who are not members of the congregation. It happens fairly often: a telephone call, sometimes from a funeral director, informs you of a death and the family's hope that the service can be in your church and that you will preside. "He wasn't a member of your church, Reverend, but he was a good person. And, by the way, a few of his golfing buddies want to say a few words."

At a time when emotions are raw and so many arrangements must be made quickly, the pastor is likely to set aside misgivings and proceed with the plan. Sometimes something of what we do and say on such occasions becomes the vehicle of God's amazing grace. Often, however, it can be hard to retain the integrity of our ecclesiastical and theological tradition when the deceased and most of the people in the pews are total strangers to the church. We may find ourselves virtually singing a solo during the hymn while the golfing buddies stand in stony silence.

Given this kind of experience, one appreciates all the more attending a service for an intentional follower of Jesus, when the pews are full of other followers who gather not only in grief but with hope in resurrection through Christ. I think we are at our best as Christians and as the church on occasions like that. I read somewhere that the early Christians startled and confounded their pagan neighbors by singing hymns of thanksgiving at their funerals.

It was a privilege to gather for such a service last month following the death of Al Ward, a much loved and respected businessman and community leader and a member of the Christian Century's board of trustees. He served on the boards of a number of organizations that make life more humane and hopeful for people in Chicago and throughout the world. He was a modest but purposeful follower of Jesus.

His death, from a bicycle accident, was devastating, but his memorial service was an event of magnificent hopefulness. We sang “God of Grace and God of Glory” and “For All the Saints.” A jazz quintet played “Precious Lord.” When we received communion, it did indeed seem like a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. And when we prayed the prayer of commendation, “Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant Al . . .” I thought: I’m happy to hand over this part to God, and I’m very grateful for the integrity of the church’s liturgy, the comfort of its faith and the simple goodness of the community that gathers to celebrate the life of one of its own and the resurrection of its Lord.