

Thomas Long and Craig Dykstra
in Conversation about *Accompany Them with Singing*
as an Example of Practical Theology

Thomas Long:

This project started over a dozen years ago when I was teaching a course in worship and needed to assign some reading on the syllabus. In this particular course we discussed everything: Eucharist, baptism, weddings, and so on. But when I went looking for books on the funeral, the last good book, at least in my view, had been written in 1954. It was by Paul Irion: *The Funeral and the Mourners*. This was a pioneer book in practical theology and really a breakthrough in the literature of that field, but it was dated; it presumed a Christian society and a psychotherapeutic model. And so I thought, well, a book on the Christian funeral would be an interesting contribution to make to the field. There were a lot of books out there on grief, but not on the funeral. I should have seen that as a bigger clue than I did in the beginning. I simply saw a lacuna in the literature.

So I started working on the Christian funeral. It took me a long time to do because there were a lot of twists and turns in the journey. Parallel to my work on this, tremendous ferment was going on in practical theology. In a sense, I see the delay in completing the book as fortuitous. I could have written this book at earlier stages along the way—though it would then have been a very different book, for various reasons—and I sometimes wished I could keep working on it much longer. But at some point you have to pull the trigger on these things. My wife said in the middle of the process that my tombstone was going to read “still doing research,” but finally I got it done.

One of the things I learned was that to do this project in any way right would take me into fields of inquiry for which I do not have portfolio. I had to put on a systematic theologian's hat. I had to put on a sociologist's hat and a ritual studies hat, and those are just a few of the hats that I put on. A kind of foolhardy boldness, I think, is required in writing something like this. You stand somewhere, but you have to venture out into other areas and bring back what you can, and it creates both a sense of indebtedness to the great work that is being done by the people you are in conversation with and a sense of humility as you realize that you bring back only partial awareness of their insights.

This is the first thing that I have ever written that has generated the slightest bit of interest in the larger public. Suddenly, there is a cultural interest in something that Tom Long has written, which is a new experience for me. Fairly early on, a religion reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* found out that I was working on this project and did a story (and sent a reporter to take a photograph, which was of course taken in a cemetery—there are certain clichés in this work). Then an NPR reporter for a local station in Dallas put me on a radio show to talk about this. I thought I was very carefully articulating the argument of what eventually came to be the book for the NPR kind of audience, but when the phones were opened, listeners did not really want to talk about what I had said. Instead they wanted to talk about what Jessica Mitford had said in 1963 in the *American Way of Death*. It was staggering to me how that journalistic piece of muckraking really has established the national agenda for the conversation about a lot of these topics.

Right there something happened that let me see how I wanted to position the conversation that I was having. I wanted to get out in public and talk about *theology*. I had kind of assumed that public theology was some kind of Esperanto where you learn how to speak in a language

that is companionable to the agenda out there; and there is some value to that. But now, I am increasingly thinking that public theology is just getting out in public and doing your theology.

I had another experience where the Op Ed editor of the *New York Times* saw a little review of this piece and asked if I'd like to make my case on the Op Ed page. I did; and what a bully pulpit that was! It used to be that when people read these things they responded in letters to the editor. Now they can find the author's email address, so they email you. Hundreds of emails full of praise, thanksgiving, rage, and criticism arrived.

I would be telling you a lie if I didn't say that I hope you find some strengths in the book. At the same time, I hope that you will not be shy, and I don't think that you will be, in spotting the shortcomings and weaknesses. I think the value of the conversation over the next two days will not be to accomplish a book review or to put me in the position of dissertation defense. Rather, the value will be in improving the genre, because I think it is a very important genre that we are fiddling with here: trying to talk in a public space about an issue of vital importance that also has ministerial and ecclesial ramifications and implications. Thanks for coming and letting me be a part of it. I'm looking forward to this.

Craig Dykstra:

Now we want to begin to articulate some of the specific ways that Tom's book and research shed light on what makes for good practical theological research. In *For Life Abundant*, we worked together to clarify criteria for what makes for good practical theology and also to reenvision what we understand by practical theology, not only in the curriculum of the theological school but in Christian ministry and the life of faith. We are eager to explore today how we can use what was discerned in the conversations that led to *For Life Abundant* to

examine Tom's book and see what's going on there. We'll ask, then, about how he did it, what moves he made, what rhetoric he used, and how he attempted to teach both for public life and for the life of the church. All this is tangled up in his book.

To launch this conversation I want to do a couple of things. First I want to remind us of certain key claims and understandings of what makes for good work in practical theology that are set forth in *For Life Abundant*. Then I want to engage Tom in a conversation about his project in relationship to those claims and understandings. I will ask him questions and he'll respond, and we'll see where it goes. As Tom and I proceed with our conversation we know you will want to get into it. So our format will be for me to pose a question for Tom to give a response and then open it up for broader conversation. Then we'll move on to the next question. The conversation will be structured by four broad questions.

So let me talk a little about what I think is the consensus view that emerged out of the conversations that led to *For Life Abundant*. This view has implications not only for good practical theological research and writing, but also for good theological teaching and wise pastoral leadership and ecclesial imagination. In my summary of this consensus view, I've begged, borrowed, and stolen phrases from various authors of *For Life Abundant* without giving proper citation. I hope that those of you who hear your own words will notice what I have done, be pleased by it, and forgive me for any errors.

Here's the first point. Practical theology portrays actual situations faced by Christians and indeed by humans in the course of everyday life. One of the things that practical theology really is about is focusing on and portraying actual contemporary situations.

Second, more important than just describing situations is this: These portrayals, when they are done well, are crafted to help Christians and others see and understand and interpret and

discern what is actually going on in those situations in the deepest possible ways—and to propose and foster faithful ways of acting in and responding to the demands discerned in those situations. My chapter on pastoral and ecclesial imagination is about seeing and discerning what is really going on, and Kathleen Cahalan and Jim Nieman’s chapter is about this discerning and proposing dimension. Ed Farley wrote about practical theology as interpreting situations. H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self* indicates the first act of responsibility is to see what is going on. Tom mentions this in his book.

Third, in doing all this, practical theology draws on a wider wisdom that offers insight and imagination to discernment. It draws upon sources and resources from a wide variety of disciplines, from life experiences of many people and communities, both historically and globally, and particularly, though not by any means exclusively, from the insights and wisdom of the Christian tradition and experience across the centuries and throughout the world.

Fourth, practical theology, in looking at the life of faith and the life of human beings in the world in particular situations, pays particular attention to the work of ministry in its efforts to build up and provide direction for communities of faith as they seek to live more fruitfully and to the work and dynamics of teaching both for ministry and in and for the life of faith. Communities of faith, actual disciples and those ministers who are responsible for helping shape and nurture communities of faith and the life of faith: that’s who is the focal audience for practical theology. As Tom points out, the church is in the world and the world is in the church, so if you do practical theology well the public will take real interest, because practical theology is about living life and people really do want to know how to live and how to die.

Finally, the fifth point. Practical theology does all this for the sake of life abundant—that is, in response to God’s promise and gift so that the church and its people may be true disciples

of Jesus Christ and embrace a way of life that embodies and fosters abundant life in and for the world.

So those are the consensus views that emerged from the conversations that led to *For Life Abundant* and that you can find in various places and various ways throughout Tom's book. Tom, we think that you have written a book that exemplifies the hopes and expectations for practical theology that I have summarized here, and we want to talk with you about that.

So let's talk first about the fundamental move in practical theology of portraying the situation. The most immediate situation you were addressing, of course, is the moment when a pastor faces and undertakes the responsibility of conducting a Christian funeral. But in order to portray that situation adequately you quickly move to two other levels of the situation. One is the universal situation in which someone has died and the living have to deal in some way with the presence of the dead body. Another level of the situation is the relevant cultural situation in which numerous and varied patterned practices for dealing with dead bodies (including Christians patterned practices) are shaping the assumptions and expectations of the participants. It is not as if human beings come to this cold. They come with whole worlds of patterned thought, patterned practice, patterned custom, and patterned assumption. In your first chapter you guide us into the portrayal of the situation at these three levels by introducing the rubrics of necessity, custom, and conviction. Necessity: here's a dead body, and something must be done. Custom: here are the many ways that many people and communities have dealt and still do deal with this necessity. But then conviction—and when you take up conviction you make it clear that more is going on in this situation at every level than could ever meet the eye if we only look at necessity and custom. You launch off in the rest of the first chapter and the two subsequent chapters on convictions about bodies shunned and bodies raised and the future of the dead in

Christ, thus articulating a Christian theological understanding of what is going on in the situation in which one of our own has died. Our reading of the situation, you seem to argue, must be taken in this way and through these lenses for there to be any hope for a pastor and a congregation to rightly understand what they are doing when they preside over the Christian funeral, or more broadly for the people of God to live life more abundantly in response to the gospel in the face of death.

Tell us about the role that Christian conviction and theology play in your practical theological work here of portraying the situation. It seems to affect profoundly the reading at all three of the levels I have described. Theology and Christian conviction seem to play a descriptive role—not just a normative role about what ought to be, but a lens through which to see what is actually going on.

Thomas Long:

I actually changed my mind and changed direction about that in the middle of the project. I started the project at about the time when most of the major Protestant denominations, in response to reforms of Vatican II, were doing new books of worship. New funeral services were part of that, and so what I thought I was going to write at the beginning was a kind of exegesis of the state of the art in terms of funeral services, so that ministers would have fuller understanding of what they were doing. Theology, then, was going to play the role of a kind of exegesis of what is invested in these rites.

But the more I got into this, the more I realized that the starting place ought to be in the necessity of the thing. That's where human beings are – somebody is dead and something has to be done. What has to be done just as a sheer act of necessity is that the dead body has to be

removed from the living. We can't have a dead body in the presence of the living, so we have to take this body from where this person died to somewhere over there out of the range of the living. But no society has done this in a perfunctory way. Societies have been provoked to say, what does it mean that we just did that? Who are we to carry this person? Who is this person that we are carrying? What is here and where is there? What does it mean that the person who used to be here is no longer here and the rest of us are still here? What does it mean that the person is over there where we rarely if ever go?

The hunger for explanation or understanding of this essential human act is the most compelling starting place for all of this. At that point the Christian faith comes in not with a list of what we ought to believe. Instead, the story of Jesus opens this drama up and gives a valence to each of the people and actions that are involved in this essential human act. It is not something that we could have derived from the necessity itself, but it is something that makes sense of the necessity itself, a certain kind of persuasive sense of the necessity. It renames the person who has died, it renames the people who are taking this person somewhere, and it renames the here and there and the nature of the journey. Thus there is a kind of dramatic proclamatory quality to this, once you invest the signs and movements and actions and persons with what can be seen and therefore said on the basis of the Christian story.

Part of the problem with contemporary attempts to explain this is that there is a tendency to fasten our attention on part of the drama at the expense of the whole of it, so that we get concerned about the living who are left but not about the dead person and the full set of actions. As I began to understand it that way, I began to see some of these partialities eventually distorted some of the Christian responses over the years.

Craig Dykstra:

It does seem to me that in your rendering of what is going on in the situation theologically and through the lens of Christian conviction you name the people in the situation differently. What Christian conviction helps one to see is what could not be seen without that language. As you wrote, in the Roman situation people could look at dead bodies and call them trash. They may see dead bodies, but they don't see them as bodies that must be honored whether living, dead, or raised. But in a theological understanding of what is actually going on here, all of that has to come into play in a way that it won't if you only look at necessity or custom.

Thomas Long:

There's a kind of tension there. I think you are absolutely right. The gospel names the elements of the drama in a way that you couldn't derive simply from the bare necessities of it. That's exactly right. On the other hand there is a certain "oh yeah" once these elements have been named; there is a potential human response to that naming that says "oh yeah, that is not trash, that really is a precious human being that has been with us in an embodied way and that body is still to be honored in this process." Even the best educated Romans knew you should really not throw the body away, but they did not want to fiddle with it. But the gospel has the power to be able to say "that's who we really are. I recognize it now that it is out there." But you could not get it from the sheer necessity.

Craig Dykstra:

There's another aspect of your description of the situation that we have not talked about yet: your claim that a major shift in funeral practices has taken place particularly in the U.S., including in Christian churches, over the past century. This shift as I read you is not just a shift in custom but a more serious shift in our understanding of what a funeral is supposed to do—its purpose and character and perhaps also its participants' fundamental convictions about life and death. Can you tell us a little about what helped you notice this shift and what caused the conversion of your own research that you describe in your introduction?

Thomas Long:

I think a better student would have spotted it more quickly than I did. As I mentioned earlier, I should have realized that the disappearance of literature about the funeral was a major clue. That it had been absorbed into grief and psychotherapeutic literature was a good clue that there had been a shift, but I did not pick up on it. Part of the reason I did not pick up on it is that there is a kind of official story that is told about this shift that is quite compelling but I think finally not exactly right. The official story about the shift is that things were fine until the funeral industry came along in the late nineteenth century. Early in the century, people who owned hardware stores and furniture stores sold equipment for burial. Then with 600,000 bodies on the battlefields of the Civil War, a European technological invention, portable embalming, began to be used on the Civil War battlefields and suddenly got introduced into the repertoire of American funeral practices. Lincoln was our first president to be embalmed. He was embalmed three times on the way from Washington to Springfield. Embalming was not as advanced as it is now.

When they (embalmers) did that they took the funeral away from us (the church). That was the major shift. It was a mercantile shift. There is some power in that story.

But to jump ahead I finally realized that they would never have taken it from us if we had not given it them. If we weren't ready to hand it over, they would not have been able to take it from us. The thing that finally was the figure/ground shift for me was doing the research on the history of the first five centuries of the Christian practice about funeral. I realized that I kept looking for what they did at the funeral. What did they do at the funeral? There was all this about how they would wash and anoint the body and sing and dress it in baptismal garments. They would carry it in broad daylight singing psalms to the cemetery and have Eucharist at the cemetery. Yeah that's interesting, but what did they do at the funeral? And it suddenly dawned on me that that *was* the funeral. The drama of carrying the body to the place of farewell, with tear-soaked psalms of gratitude and thanksgiving, to give it back to God and to gather at the table with the saints—that was the funeral. At that point I realized that what constituted the genre “funeral” for me was a grammatical shift from what constituted funeral in early practice. And at that point things started to fall into place about what was lost and what was maybe gained. It's true that the shift happened in the late nineteenth century and that the funeral industry was right there to accommodate us in terms of what we decided to relinquish. But it was historical research into the earlier period that helped me to see all this.

Craig Dykstra:

So you saw in the first five centuries a consonance of conviction and practice. Has our change of practice also changed our convictions?

Thomas Long:

These two elements certainly work together. I would put a finer spin on the first five centuries; you don't always have consonance of conviction and practice. What you have is a gradual reforming of what was given to the Christian community toward a place that you could identify a Christian rite. They were true to the necessity and the customs that were given to them, including both Roman and Jewish practices, but gradually by the time you get to the fourth century we can actually see the shape of a Christian practice. I made a decision—and I think it is a controversial decision—to let that be a benchmark. To say, okay, there I see something with a coherence of practice and conviction that kept (and here's another controversial place to argue) a steady drumbeat up until the middle 1800s. Along the way, there were some distortions of it and rebellions against it. For example, my own tradition staged one of the great rebellions, because these Calvinists were so nonplussed by what they understood to be the vulgarities of the Anglican funerals of the day. The Westminster divines prohibited ritual of any kind—bury them with as little ceremony as possible—which I see as an over reaction. So yes, you can see people deviating off of the older Christian practice, but there is a kind of drumbeat until you get to the perfect storm that happened in the nineteenth century. There are lots of pieces to this storm: changing views of the self, mobility in the society, and the loss of eschatological conviction, which I think is one of the keys: there is nowhere for people to go. We had so married ourselves in American theology to literalistic views of heaven that when they collapsed, as they should, there was nothing left in their place. Even for evangelicals, heaven became kind of domesticated, like the family breakfast table with brighter lights. And so with the affluence of the industrial revolution, why would you want to go anywhere? *This* life was the place to be. With the rise of a kind of Gnosticism in American theology, all these factors conspired to have

the dead evaporate rather than go somewhere. And when the dead evaporate we are left with our grief and the grammar changes: the ritual begins to take shape around grief management, and it becomes focused on us. So yes, our participation in disembodied, neognostic, noneschatological memorial services is our practice. And this forms our conviction as well.

There is an important thing here that I don't think I gave sufficient account to in the book. If the older rituals were so good, how come people abandoned them? If they have such explanatory power, how come people abandoned them? I've got some responses to that. I think that there was something about the redefinition of the self that the repetition of liturgical patterns was not accounting for. A highly personalized memorial event became the locomotive that drove the train away.

A participant:

I've just been burning with this question. Every parish pastor in the room can tell stories of touching dead bodies. We do it all the time, which is something most people don't. I am struck by the necessity that you talk about. The way we handle that does speak to what we believe. A very good friend of mine died of cancer. Her husband had been physically beside her the whole time. At 3:30 on the morning of her death, her husband and children went upstairs to a spare bedroom while I helped the funeral director wash and place the body in a bag for removal because he said that was not Robin any more. I am just curious that this body that he loved so desperately wasn't her anymore. I would like to hear more about this necessity and conviction.

Thomas Long:

I think there is a reaction many pastors have seen that says the body is just a shell, we can move on. It's hard to know where that comes from. I think it goes back to what Craig was saying earlier, it's what we have been taught, that this was just a shell. But it can also feel like an ethical "ought" not to walk away from the lifeless body. I don't want to push this analogy too far, but in a sense the body bears a relationship to the person like the elements of the Eucharist bear to the presence of Christ. You can make a case it is not the thing itself, but it is our means to the thing itself, the way that we have known this person. I think the wisdom in the tradition is that if you honor this body at the time of death and don't walk away from it as a shell, it will teach us the true nature of this person and will teach us to honor the living.

A participant:

I was very fascinated with the whole cycle we are in: the sense that the loss of conviction leads to our practice, and then our practice informs our conviction. How do you get out of that cycle other than hold the line on practice and hope that the practice will inform the conviction?

Thomas Long:

There is a certain fashion trend to this. If it started that people wanted more personalization and choice, now they are condemned to do that. Now that is what you are supposed to do. In the 1950s, the advertisements of the Batesville casket company were exactly what you would expect for the 1950s. Solidity and permanence. This construction is trustworthy and permanent and sealed hermetically. They changed their tune in the 80s and 90s; they started to talk about choices. I think their advertising spots one of the shifts that are happening: people

don't know what they have to do so they feel like they have to make it up. I have tremendous respect for the pastoral moment where you have to negotiate these things in the midst of cultural stories—when pastors offer an alternative to “you have to make it up.” Some people will back pedal and say “No, I saw Sarah’s funeral last week and that’s what we want.” Others will say “thank you, that’s the vocabulary I was looking for.” The teaching power of one of these events done right, along with the priest that says this was done right, is worth striving for—not always obtainable but worth striving for. This is the way out of the loop: say “think about this alternative.”

The best funeral directors have begun working with clergy on this. It is self-defeating for the industry to have their own vision of a funeral (which they do). They have a civil religion funeral that they will sell to you, but it is not working because people are figuring out that it is cheaper to improvise things on their own. So the church needs to be able to educate people to embrace their own theological traditions.

Craig Dykstra:

You have told us a little about your research on the Christian funeral and the process of inquiry that engaged you. We argued in *For Life Abundant* that practical theology draws on multiple disciples, multiple kinds of experiences, and multiple kinds of engagements with multiple kinds of people. You took twelve years to do this. What took all that time? What all did you need to do to investigate, to consult, to draw on? What kinds of people and fields of study did you engage in order to learn what you needed to learn?

Thomas Long:

I started off reading about funeral liturgies and did a structural analysis of state-of-the-art liturgies and discovered that there were certain basic kinds. One tells the story of memory, which is “he was a wonderful person”—basically a long eulogy with prayer. Others had a counter culturally eschatological thrust to them. I did a literary analysis of those. I got a Luce grant and that allowed me to go all across the country from Florida to Alaska, gathering groups of clergy who would tell me what they were facing and what they were doing and what the issues were for pastors related to Christian funerals. What I found, if you had to summarize that research, was that pastors never feel more valued than at this moment in their ministries—and at the same time they were aware of much confusion about this. They were aware of the swirling changes; they knew that something was not quite right. The best pastors had been able to forge a ministry of great power around the experience of death. Then I started dabbling with the funeral industry itself and saw what was at stake with them. I got into their inner workings. They made me the chaplain for their national organization, representing their clergy and caregivers committee. All the horror stories about the funeral industry are true, and all the wonderful things that people feel about their local funeral directors are true as well. Both of those realities are there in the church too, of course.

Then I began to do historical research which was profoundly interesting. I am not a historian so was not able to do it at the depth and level that I would have liked, but I trusted the authorities who have done this kind of research and got myself acquainted with the history of the Christian funeral. Once I made the figure-ground shift, then I began to go back to trusted sources in the clergy and funeral industry and theology and test out these ideas in writing. Gradually the pieces fell into place.

Craig Dykstra:

There is something about all those pieces that seems to be intrinsic to doing practical theology research well. Just the literary analysis of the rites wouldn't do it, just asking clergy about their experiences wouldn't do it. Being in the shoes of the funeral directors is really important. I suspect the heart of it is this persistent question of "What is really going on here?" I think this is true not only for people who are writing a book but also for pastors and teachers. When the figure and ground shift, or when an alternative pattern to what the conventional wisdom about what is going on here begins to emerge like a magnet under a table with shavings, things get rearranged. You can somewhat see and sort out some of the confusion—and also, on that basis, exercise the type of leadership that helps people see where you are going and go with you and do it in company with one another.

Thomas Long:

About the big shift in what the funeral is about. Even I have doubts about it every now and then, because everywhere I go the assumption is that grief management is what the funeral is about. That is a very powerful thing. I think that grief is accounted for and is part of the story: the great lament happens, but it is part of the larger script. If you wanted to name what the funeral is about, it would be only a partial answer to say that it is about addressing our grief—but still, that answer is very deeply entrenched. I can talk for six hours to a group of clergy, and they will still ask "but isn't it really about grieving?"

Craig Dykstra:

That is a huge theological education question, because that comes from formation in theological education where this is the model taught.

Dorothy Bass:

Isn't part of your claim, Tom, that the larger drama played out in the Christian funeral will more effectively deal with grief than a personalized memorial can do, not because it is a more efficient means to an end but because it helps us see and inhabit the world differently?

Thomas Long:

I think that the most basic need is not to be just comforted but to find meaning.

Dorothy Bass:

I ask that question especially after Ron's comment about holding the line on practices. To have funerals like the ones you advocate in your book, we have to have communities ready to "accompany them with singing." If our communities don't know how to worship in this way, don't sing together, don't know the story that is being evoked in every phrase of the kind of service you represent, then how do we do that? There is a much larger question about formation of faith and the preparation of a community. How do we build up people who are ready to do this?

Craig Dykstra:

I just want to underscore this issue, because I think that one of the wagers in the whole practices movement is that there are communities ready to be educated to carry these things out. There is a tremendous fragility in that, of course. And I almost think that we have to build a kind of ecclesial body of people who catch this vision and are willing to demonstrate this to others in the community. This is our treasure. Watch us as we do it, and participate with us as we do this, and begin to notice what happens when it is done this way.

A participant:

This fits into the larger practices way of thinking about the Christian life and communities of faith. Part of the challenge pastorally is a problem communities face in all luminal moments. How do we do a funeral service that is a completion of baptism when we don't understand and practice baptism correctly, or confirmation, or weddings?

Thomas Long:

That's a great point. We are supposed to rehearse this all the way through. It is not always clear to us that in baptism we are rehearsing for death.

A participant:

I think a shift in our Christian community is a big issue for me, because we don't always have our hands on the people. The formation all along has not happened, and when we come to these moments we have lost our audience. We lose our ability to lead them in that moment because they are not taught to come to the pastor when someone dies, they are taught to go to the

funeral home. The pastor may or may not get a call. We lost some of that contact and therefore do not have the ability to shape how those events look.

A participant:

Funerals as you describe them are long drawn out dramatic pieces, and I think that is indicative that the rhythm of congregational life needs to be at a slower pace. We live in a rapid society. Geography and time have shaped practices. Agrarian societies were lent more to a drawn out dramatization of funerals. In a more urban transient community, people don't come to church as often or as long.

Thomas Long:

One pastor told me I was implying that there ought to be a processional quality to this and said I didn't realize how dangerous that would be in Denver. Actually, I don't have a master *plan* for funerals as much as I have a master *plot* for a funeral. Pastors and congregations have to figure out what to do in the local circumstances in which we find ourselves. You can't avoid the necessity: you have to carry the body somewhere. One of the decisions we have made is that we will hide that and do something else. But we don't have to hide. The necessity stands—but elaborating off that is negotiated in a particular setting.