

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Course Profile

Course # and Title M-420 Dust to Dust: Ritual and Theology of Human Earthboundness

Instructor: Benjamin Stewart **Semester/Year:** Spring 2014

Course **Rationale** and Description

(Why do we offer this course? Which of LSTC's degree program learning outcomes does it address?):

Some Christian funeral practices embody unity with the earth ("earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"), while others suggest a trajectory away from earth ("set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," toward "a heavenly home"). This course studies ritual practices at death as centrally embodying convictions about human relationship with the earth and with God. The course traces a number of themes toward their intersection at funeral rituals: theology of the cross, incarnation and embodiment, ecological theology, and liturgical theology. The course especially focuses on the emerging natural burial movement: placing it in historical context, analyzing it theologically, and equipping course members to be leaders in articulating and introducing its practices for the church and the wider community.

This course contributes to a number of LSTC's identified learning outcomes at the master's level, including 1 (inspiring others to grow in faith); 2 (scriptural religious heritage); 3 (traditions of religious heritage); 4 (cultural contexts); 5 (ministry leadership).

Course Learning **Outcomes** (Learners will be able to):

(What *difference* will this course make to students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices?)

Upon successful completion of the course, members will be able to:

- Identify and describe current and historic North American funeral practices, especially including natural burial practices
- Interpret death and burial practices theologically
- Analyze various approaches to death and burial in the Christian traditions
- Employing theological and ecological rationales, evaluate the church's funeral rites and ritual conventions
- Formulate theological/homiletical reflections and liturgical rites that are deeply informed by incarnational and ecological theology and the theology of the cross.

Strategies for Learning):

(How shall we go about achieving these outcomes?)

- After some introductory sessions that engage the questions of human earth-identity in the funeral rites and in the ecological crises, the course examines some specific funeral practices and their associated theologies: caring for the body (before and immediately after death); carrying the body (coffins, shrouds, urns); burning the body (cremation); burying the body (returning the body to earth); tending the land of the dead (conservation burial). The course concludes with sessions that explore major Christian theological approaches to death, including class contributions to emerging theological and practical approaches.

- Course member projects include:
 - Attendance at all class sessions, completion of all assigned readings, and the preparation of a short discussion paper (1/2 – 1 page double spaced) for most course meetings
 - Conduct and write an account of three interviews on the topic of death and funeral practices: what are their wishes for what happens when they die (funeral/care for the body/burial)? what is their theological understanding of death? After explaining to them natural burial and sketching a theology of natural burial: what are their questions about and responses to natural burial?
 - Write a funeral sermon employing scriptural eco-theological imagery and the theology of the cross
 - Construct a front web page (with a significant essay) for a church-related conservation burial ground web
 - Develop a web page or brochure for a church describing options for natural burial vessels, including actual prices, instructions, and theological interpretations
 - Construct an annotated leader guide for a funeral at a conservation burial ground

Assessment :

(How shall we know if we—students and instructors—have been successful in achieving the outcomes?)

Feedback from the instructor (comments and grading) and course members (discussion and critique):

- Attendance and participation (10%)
- Short discussion papers (10%)
- Interviews and analysis (10%)
- Web page or brochure for natural burial vessels at church (10%)
- Funeral sermon text (15%)
- Annotated leader guide for funeral at conservation burial ground (20%)
- Web page (with essay) for church-related conservation burial (25%)

Bibliography:

Text Title	Author	ISBN# (Required)
<i>Grave Matters: a journey through the modern funeral industry to a natural way of burial</i>	Mark Harris	9780743277686
<i>The Mystery of Death</i>	Dorothee Sölle	9780800638917
<i>The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology</i>	Jurgen Moltmann	978-0800628222
<i>Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral</i>	Thomas Long	9780664233198