

Columbaria bring members of church family home for final rest

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DALLAS—Churches became disconnected from death in the last century, but some congregations are seeking to correct that problem.

Historically, cemeteries often were adjacent to the church, and the end of life was just as apparent as the living of it. But in the 20th century, particularly as people moved from rural areas to the cities and suburbs, cemeteries became far-removed from church grounds.

Pastor George Mason (center) leads the dedication service for the columbarium at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

In recent years, some congregations have sought to recapture the sense of the church as the final resting place of its members' remains. But because land is expensive and in short supply, churches are turning to columbaria—places to inurn the remains of those who have died and had their bodies cremated. Niches are sold to hold urns containing the ashes.

The need seems to be increasing. According to the state [Funeral Service Commission](#), Texas had more than 50,000 cremations in 2009, up from 38,000 only two years before.

[Wilshire Baptist Church](#) in Dallas dedicated its columbarium June 13. At the dedication, three urns of three members were placed in the resting places, including two Texas Baptist statesmen—Ed Laux, who served many years

with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and Phil Strickland, who was head of the Texas Christian Life Commission.

Wilshire is not the only Texas Baptist church with a columbarium. [Woodland Baptist Church](#) in San Antonio and [Riverbend Church](#) in Austin have inurnment facilities that pre-date Wilshire's.

Most columbaria have distinctive features, unique to a specific congregation. Wilshire's columbarium is a garden space that includes a water fountain, terrazzo path, landscaping and a prayer labyrinth. The circular labyrinth is an ancient tool for Christian prayer by which individuals walk the serpentine path as they pray.

Nearly 300 niches for inurnment are included in Wilshire's columbarium, as well as a separate wall of remembrance where the names of those buried elsewhere may be inscribed.



In addition to niches for the inurnment of the remains of church members, the columbarium at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas also features a wall of remembrance, where members who are interred elsewhere can be memorialized.

A large disc at the entrance to the columbarium bears an engraved quotation from Psalm 90: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all

generations. ... So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

At the dedication service, Pastor George Mason explained that the church is a natural place to help people think about both life and death. By walking among the remembrances of those who have gone before, believers today may be inspired to right living.

The price for a half-niche in Wilshire’s columbarium is \$1,500, and a whole niche for two urns can be secured for \$3,000—significantly less than the fees for traditional burials, Associate Pastor Mark Wingfield noted.

The columbarium at Woodland Baptist Church contains 60 niches and is situated near a place where children play and where foot traffic is somewhat heavy, said Mary Lynn Lewis, the head of the church’s columbarium ministry team.

Initially, she said, some people were afraid they would not want to walk by the columbarium, but in the two years since its dedication, that fear has faded.

“It’s been well accepted. Some people now walk by and say, ‘There’s our future home or our future apartment.’ And that’s the goal of this ministry for us—bringing our loved ones back to the church where they belong,” she said.

Niches in Woodland’s columbarium initially sold for \$1,000, but that has price has increased to \$1,500. More than half of the niches already either are filled or reserved, and the church soon will consider expanding the columbarium’s size. It was designed with expansion in mind.



The columbarium at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas includes a prayer labyrinth—an ancient tool for Christian prayer by which individuals walk the serpentine path as they pray.

Lewis, a hospital chaplain, noted she is glad to work on the team, because she has seen the need to deal well with the end of life.

Alan Wright, a hospice chaplain at Baylor Medical Center and a Wilshire member, reflected on the message of the columbarium in a recent blog posting.

“I am more proud than ever about being a member of Wilshire knowing that people within our church made the decision to include such a space,” he wrote.

“The church in general, especially the Baptist wing of it, needs more columbaria. I hope we’ve started a trend. We non-Catholics like our churches pristine, void of such reminders.

“I can confidently say from my experience as a chaplain in a hospital, the church has done a disservice to its people by too often choosing what is spiritually palpable over what we so need help spiritually digesting—that

we are temporary. Facing this alone can be quite frightening. Together, however, this knowledge makes us stronger and more committed.”