

## Questions Raised about a Memorial Garden and Columbarium

*Here are questions that OSLC members have raised concerning a report on the possibility of a memorial garden/columbarium at our church.*

**Q** - My husband and I are interested in a niche in the columbarium. The site that has been chosen is very quiet and peaceful. Last week, I wanted to meet in person with a fellow church member after months of just telephoning. We brought our folding chairs to church to find a spot outside. Guess where we chose? The shady, cool area south of the church near the prayer-room door. It was a delightful place to meet. My only concern is future upkeep. We have a very poor track record with maintaining gardens. Just look at the overgrown circle and the weedy path to the front door. Sorry, this is a pet peeve. I don't want my remains ending up in a weed patch.

**A** – The study group's plan calls for some of the money paid for disposition of ashes in the memorial garden or columbarium be placed in an ongoing maintenance fund. We also discussed the need for an ongoing memorial garden committee that tracks the money designated for maintenance (as well as records of who has pre-paid for niches), and makes sure the maintenance fund is used to keep the garden looking nice. The four people on the study group – Joe Murchison, Ellie Ramsay, Rene Stein and Roger Williamson – all have expressed a willingness to serve on such a committee when the garden and columbarium come to fruition.

**Q** - How many urns can be stored in the unit you are proposing to purchase? Will this unit be expandable? How would that process work?

**A** - Each columbarium niche has space for two urns. It could be possible to put cremains of more people in one niche if the family put the ashes in little bags or containers that didn't take up much room. If someone is single, then he or she could buy a niche and just put one person's cremains in it. We propose that the price be the same. If we sell out of the 24 niches in the first columbarium, we could install another 24-niche columbarium. If interest is really high from the beginning, we could opt to install a 48-niche columbarium from the start. The cost of that would be \$15,000 to \$20,000, as opposed to \$10,000 for a 24-niche columbarium.

**Q** - Construction projects require a great deal of planning before the first shovel full of dirt can be moved. Examples of planning that I think will be needed:

- A concept design from an architect/landscape designer (costs in the thousands of dollars and may need Congregational Assembly approval).
- Survey of any conflicting underground piping/electric/low-voltage wiring/gas pipe/sewer/storm drains etc. (could be costly if something needs to be reconfigured)
- Construction documents (costs in the thousands of dollars to an architect)
- Construction Permit submission/county review/potential revisions/resubmission(s) and approval (this takes several months)
- Bidding (may take several weeks)
- Ensure adequate funding is in place to cover costs (may mean a funds drive)

- Contract award
- Mobilization
- Construction

**A** - The study group agrees that it will take time to raise money, complete plans and start construction of a garden and columbarium. The group has learned that a Prince George's County special zoning exception process will be involved. Fortunately, this is a long-term project with no specific deadline. The study group agrees that a garden plan, including the siting of the columbarium, should be drawn up by a professional.

**Q** - Who will manage the maintenance/watering and above processes for the church, now that Rich Libengood is retired?

**A** - That is an open question for all the church's grounds. As for the memorial garden, our study group believes that an ongoing committee needs to be responsible for assuring that the memorial garden is maintained. Our plan calls for establishing a maintenance fund allowing us to rely on paid landscapers to do the work.

**Q** - Who will excavate the burial site during interment of ashes into the memorial garden? If the soil at the church site is anything like the hard clay in my yard, it takes more than a shovel to excavate more than a few inches. If it is hard clay, the soil may need to be removed and replaced with soil that is more manageable.

**A** - One member of the study group has had his parents' ashes buried in their church's memorial garden at a depth of about one foot. To dig a small hole down one foot shouldn't be too hard to accomplish here, even with the thick clay soil of this area. Additionally, we could ask for a landscape plan that allows for disposing of cremains in parts of the garden that have been prepared for planting and are therefore have loosened and ameliorated soil.

**Q** - How will the ground in the memorial garden be divided? Are there lot sections or do the ashes from different people just get mixed together in one area? If there are lots in the garden, who keeps track of whose tract is where? If the church were to move, who moves what soil and what are the limits of the soil relocation? It might be better just to keep this to a columbarium-only project, in my opinion.

**A** - The study group has found that some OSLC members would prefer to bury their loved one's cremains in the ground, and others would prefer placing ashes in a columbarium. We believe both options should be available, and that they don't conflict. We also believe that families that opt for the burial of cremains in the ground will have to understand that there will be no attempt to keep the ashes separate from other ashes, or guard a tract for those ashes. If a family desires to keep ashes separate, the family should buy a columbarium niche. As to the possibility that the church would move, we believe the memorial garden committee should keep track of the bounds of the area where cremains are buried. If the congregation sells our

current property, this area could be dug down to 2 feet and the soil transported to the new church.

**Q** – The burial of ashes in the ground will change the pH level of the soil. Is that a problem?

**A** – We anticipate that the amount of cremains buried in the ground will not be massive, and will be done over an extended period of time. Also, the burying of cremains could be restricted to areas adjoining shrub plantings, covered by mulch, instead of in grassy areas more affected by soil pH.