



## A Free Funeral: Starting a Funeral Committee in Your Congregation

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Throughout history, all major religions have established traditions for caring for the dead, and individual congregations have assumed that responsibility for members. When a person died, the local religious community to which he or she belonged provided the needed support to family and friends, making and carrying out appropriate arrangements consistent with their spiritual beliefs.

In twentieth-century America, the professional funeral industry has chipped away at—and in many cases almost obliterated—the traditional role of religious communities. Funeral homes, with their own “chapels,” have become surrogate for-profit churches, charging enormous fees for the tasks formerly performed by clergy and fellow congregation members.

As we approach the millennium, many religious groups, representing many different faiths, are giving some thought to reclaiming their traditional roles. In the FAMSA office, I receive frequent calls and letters from people asking for practical information and advice on this issue.

In practice, the funeral industry's takeover of the traditional functions of religious communities has never been quite as pervasive as it might appear. Quietly operating—here and there throughout the U.S. and Canada—are church groups that have continued to provide spiritual and physical support at a time of death. Ernest Morgan writes of his responsibilities serving on the Burial Committee of the Yellow Springs Friends Meeting (Quaker):

I discovered that what I had anticipated to be a disagreeable chore turned out to be a meaningful privilege—serving one's friends at a time of profound need.<sup>1</sup>



In some situations, however, it hasn't been a simple task. In 1975, a Minneapolis rabbi, Arnold Goodman, became troubled by the Americanizing of Jewish funerals at the expense of traditional Jewish values. In *A Plain Pine Box* he writes:

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<sup>1</sup> *Dealing Creatively with Death*, 1996, Zinn Communications, Bayside, NY. Available through FAMSA.

The commercialization and professionalization of handling death have removed most of us from really dealing with it. Customs of the past, in which families and friends would assume responsibility for preparing the dead for burial, for making arrangements with—and for—the family, for fabricating coffins and burial garments, have all but disappeared. . . . As people became further and further removed from handling death, a mystique inevitably came to surround it. . . .

Sympathetic to the memorial society emphasis on simplicity and propelled by the rabbinic principle—“In death, we are all equal”—Rabbi Goodman approached his congregation to study the possibility of a Jewish funeral plan. “The response was overwhelming,” he wrote, and a committee was formed. In a statement as to why she joined the committee, one person complained that her wish to bury her mother in a simple wood box had brought the reply: “Are you *that* religious?”

Rabbi Goodman goes on:

A committee member familiar with carpentry commented that a simple coffin consists of six pieces of wood: four sides, a top, a bottom. The cost, he insisted, could not be more than \$40 [1975]. Wouldn't it make sense, he wondered, for the congregation to make such a coffin available to every family free of charge? We decided to explore the issue at the following month's meeting.

The committee met [again] in a private home. A simple wood coffin was brought into the living room. Everyone gasped, for this was the first real object of death to be encountered. Tension was high as the box, which was more than a box, was gingerly inspected. Committee members circled it, and the more hardy touched it.

Then it happened: One of the more daring members offered to get in it and try it “for size.” Once he lay down in the coffin, it was as if the flood gates had opened. And animated discussion followed.

“Yes, it makes sense to offer a free coffin.”

“Why not offer traditional shrouds (*tachrichim*) as well? There are people who are prepared to sew them.”

“Should we not assume responsibility for doing the ritual washing of the body (*tahara*)?”

“Could we offer a full traditional funeral free to every member?”

The last question reverberated. Suddenly everyone realized that this was the logical conclusion of the committee's deliberations. Could it be done? And at what cost?

The “Jewish” funeral home refused to cooperate, so a Gentile funeral home was used. It split the Jewish community wide open. Some continued to patronize the Jewish funeral home, while others were served by the Chevra (Holy Society). In response to criticism from another rabbi in the area, congregation president Esther Katz wrote, “We have responded to

a need within our Congregation. We have fulfilled that need through involvement and with simplicity and dignity.”

Although a Chevra still functions at the Adath Jeshurun Congregation in Minneapolis today, it has become increasingly difficult to find volunteers who can drop everything when summoned. The story of how the Chevra began, however—the dedication of one rabbi and a religious group—is well worth reading in its entirety. I found it truly inspiring.<sup>1</sup>



Catholic teaching specifically provides for church and family involvement. From the *Order of Christian Funerals*:

In the celebration of the funeral rites . . . family members should be encouraged to take an active part. . . . Through the celebration of the funeral rites, the Church manifests its care for the dead. . . .

In countries or regions where an undertaker, and not the family or community, carries out the preparation and transfer of the body, the pastor and other ministers are to ensure that the undertakers appreciate the values and beliefs of the Christian community.

The family and friends of the deceased should not be excluded from taking part in the services sometimes provided by undertakers, for example, the preparation and laying out of the body.

. . . The funeral rites should be celebrated in an atmosphere of simple beauty, in a setting that encourages participation.

I discovered one way in which this was being observed when I stopped in to visit Father Walter Miller at St. Jude's in Hinesburg, Vermont. As we chatted in the vestibule between the social hall and the chancery, he mentioned there had been a visitation there the day before, pointing to a large spacious room on the right. “The casket is waiting there now,” he said, “for the funeral tomorrow.” Discreetly shielded by partitions, one never would have known. The social hall is available free of charge, he said. When he found that an undertaker had added \$100 to the funeral bill for the visitation, he demanded that the charge be removed.

Father Jim Connolly at St. Teresa's in Bellingham Center, Massachusetts allows the funeral directors as far as the front door of the church. The Lazarus Committee and family and friends take over the services from there until it is time to go to the cemetery.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Plain Pine Box*, copyright 1981 by Rabbi Arnold M. Goodman, KTAV Publishing House, Hoboken, NJ. Available through FAMSA.

Father Bob Richardson, St. Mary's Church in Cambridge, Vermont tells of a young widow with two children who anxiously approached him before they took her husband's casket to the cemetery:

“Do you think it would be all right if the boys and I helped fill in the grave?” she asked.

“Of course,” Father Richardson replied sympathetically.

The funeral director frowned severely and motioned the priest off to one side.

“That's not a good idea,” he said. “She might get upset.”

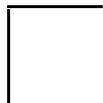
“I've got news for you,” quipped Richardson. “That's what happens when people die, and it's perfectly okay.”

On Prince Edward Island, Father Arsenault—troubled by the high cost of funerals—started a funeral co-op in the early 1980s. By hiring a retired embalmer and using the church facilities, costs were dramatically reduced. Local casket suppliers didn't want to deal directly with the church, however, so another source had to be found.

In the ensuing years, the church purchased a separate building for funeral preparation and visitation. With the mortgage to pay, the cost of funerals began to rise, but it remains less than what it would cost at any of the commercial mortuaries. Industry pressure has made it difficult to find a part-time embalmer, however, for those whose families choose embalming. A new provincial requirement, promoted by the commercial funeral directors, mandates mortuary college and licensing—rather than apprenticeship—for anybody who takes on that task.

Father Arsenault's ideas of almost 20 years earlier are echoed in *The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium* published in 1997 by the National Catholic Cemetery Conference:

To emphasize Church teachings and to promote the universal application of the **Order of Christian Funerals**, the Catholic cemetery may consider operating its own funeral home(s). This would restore its traditional role in funeral ministry . . . . In addition, this would allow the Catholic cemetery to more fully attend to its mission: . . . Fostering an atmosphere more attuned to the spiritual needs of the grieving . . . Ensuring a family with limited



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means that they will be treated with dignity and respect, and accorded a proper funeral and a decent burial.<sup>1</sup>



The Muslim tradition involves active participation of those who know the deceased. In Toronto, a Muslim group took over the death and funeral preparations for members there when the local funeral establishments refused to cooperate. In Pittsburgh, another mosque is preparing to serve its members in death. The simplicity and caring of the Muslim rituals and the focus on a natural return to the earth have universal appeal. The following selections are from the “Preparation of the Deceased and Janazah Prayers” from several internet sites:

Washing the deceased's body is obligatory for Muslims. If some members take the responsibility of doing it, the need is fulfilled. But if no one fulfills it, then all Muslims will be accountable.

It brings much thawab [reward of God] to wash the corpse free of charge. . . . It is not permissible [to demand payment] if there is no one else to wash it free of charge. So is the case with the payments for transporting corpses and digging graves.

### Body-washing (Ghusl)

- A man's body should be washed by men and a woman's body by women, but a child's body may be washed by either sex. A husband can wash his wife's body and vice-versa if the need arises.

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<sup>1</sup> The church has had difficulty, however, living up to such high ideals. In 1981, the diocese built a mortuary on church grounds in Denver, CO. After the bishop died in 1985, funeral prices rose drastically, and the mortuary was turned into a “money-maker” for the church under the ensuing leadership.

Catholic funerals saw the most widespread assault in 1997—targeted for take-over by the funeral giants with the apparent collusion of the church. The Los Angeles diocese signed a deal to lease Catholic cemetery space to Stewart Enterprises for the purpose of building funeral homes. According to consumer price surveys, Stewart funeral prices are among the highest. The church, no doubt, will profit greatly from the rent. Other corporations are targeting Catholics, too. SCI has developed a subsidiary—“Christian Funeral Services, Inc.”—dedicated to the management of funeral homes, cemeteries and related assets for Catholic dioceses throughout North America. In the fall of that year, it took over management of a major cemetery and new funeral home in Montreal. Earlier in the year, *The Pilot*—a newspaper put out by the Boston archdiocese—ran an ad for Forethought preneed funeral insurance heavily promoted by Loewen-owned funeral homes. Return address for inquiries: The Pilot, Archdiocese of Boston, P.O. Box 282, Batesville, Indiana. *Indiana?*

- One person is needed for washing, with someone to help—preferably those people who know the deceased.
- Remove the deceased's clothes, leaving the private parts covered.
- Only clean water may be used; add some scented oils (nonalcoholic) in the final wash. It is preferable to use warm water.
- Wash three times, but if the body needs more cleaning, continue washing five or seven times, but it must be odd numbers.
- Turn the body on its left side and begin washing the right side. Then turn it on its right side to wash the left side. The first and second washes are done with water and soap, while the last one with water and scent.
- Hair should be un-braided, washed and combed. For women, it may again be braided in three braids.
- Dry the body with a clean cloth or towel.
- Add some perfume on the head, forehead, nose, hands, knees, eyes, armpits, and place perfumed cotton on the front and rear openings.

#### Wrapping (Kafan)

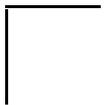
- The cloth used for wrapping the body must be clean (preferably white) and should cover the whole body.
- Add some perfume.
- Do not use silk cloth for men.
- Use three pieces of cloth for men and five for women (each piece of cloth must cover the entire body).
- Tie the open cloth at the head and feet with a piece of cloth from the same kafan in such a way that one can differentiate the head from the legs.

Prayers are said next. Silence is recommended for the funeral procession. It is forbidden to accompany the body with music or crying. A grave should be deep and the body laid directly on the ground with the head toward Mecca. A casket is not recommended, but the head should be raised up with soil or a stone underneath (not a pillow).

- Fill the pit with soil. It is preferable that each one of those present share in this by pouring three handfuls of soil.



When the Buddhist master Rinpoche died in 1987, his body was packed in salt and flown to the Buddhist community, Karme-Choling, in Barnet, Vermont. Seventy days after death, they wrapped the body in silk and placed it in a rosewood coffin. Like the tradition of cremation as practiced in Nepal, an outdoor funeral pyre was built, and the coffin placed on top. The fire burned for three hours, leaving nothing but ashes.





From Atlanta, Georgia, Larry Burkett leads an enormous flock via his “Christian Financial Concepts.” His weekly and daily programs are aired on more than 600 stations nationwide including the Moody Christian Radio. “Christians should not live in debt,” he says, “And that includes funeral debt.” A long-time supporter of the memorial society concept of funeral simplicity, Burkett has urged his listeners to plan ahead. “It would be far better if they could do so with the support and involvement of their churches.” Burkett is himself a long-time member of the Memorial Society in Atlanta.



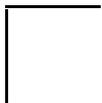
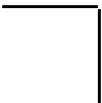
Not everyone understands another's religious customs. When Doris Fletcher's husband keeled over, she called the rescue squad, even though he had been ill for some time. When it was certain that he was dead and there was no hope for resuscitation, Doris asked for help moving him to a bed. A group from the Fletcher's local ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) would be coming to help with the bathing and dressing of the body, she told them. The deputy coroner, however, was sure Mr. Fletcher's body had go to a funeral home. He'd never heard of such a thing. And so, using his police powers, the deputy ordered the body removed. Although the funeral home half-heartedly cooperated with the church group and family members who arrived the next day, Doris is still bitter that the intimacy of home, family, and church was stolen from what should have been a precious final time together.



### **Problems in the Pulpit**

But not all clergy are willing to get involved in funeral issues. Right after my first book on caring for the dead was published in 1987, I offered a copy to a summer neighbor, a Congregational minister who was on the local Hospice Education Committee. He declined the offer saying, “People aren't going to be interested in that.”

Clearly, there are still many clergy who are uncomfortable about dealing with death, who prefer to leave all arrangements to the funeral homes and have services performed at for-profit chapels rather than the churches to which the deceased belonged. For them, “professional” funerals are now the tradition, relieving them of the pragmatic responsibilities that follow a death.



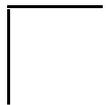
In fact, in many communities, small-scale but effective financial “arrangements” exist between the local funeral homes and the churches or synagogues. Some of these are ethically suspect:

- One Midwestern funeral director buys a side of beef at the 4-H show each year and puts it in a unit at the local freezer for one of the town's pastors.
- Another funeral director makes his motor home available to a vacationing pastor on a regular basis.
- Several pastors in one town receive beepers to use, paid for by one of the local funeral directors.
- Calendars supplied by one—and only one—funeral home will be passed out at church, even though another funeral home has had calendars to offer.
- At a funeral directors' symposium, the speaker suggested sending apples or other fruit to civic servants—police and fire departments—so they'll remember you, and offer church photos to the clergy, something that could be replicated for a fund-raiser.
- One Chicago-area mortician told a family that \$300 cash should be placed in a plain, unmarked envelope for the priest serving at the funeral. When an inquiry was made to the diocese, the woman was told that \$175 was “expected.”
- The General Price List of a California funeral home states that rabbis in that area expect a \$300 honorarium.

Not all situations are so egregious. Many clergy receive no honorarium for a funeral—either because they have refused one, or because it simply slipped the family's mind in the emotions of the moment. And generosity among close and genuine friends, regardless of their respective callings, must be allowed to exist without paranoid scrutiny. But legitimately or not, it is common practice among many funeral homes to provide favors and gifts to help position themselves for profitable business whenever a member of a congregation dies.

Aside from any specific ethical issues, for any congregation that might wish to return the funeral to its spiritual roots in a participatory way, there may be a serious dilemma when there is a mortuary in the same town. What happens to the local funeral director? Chances are that the mortician and his family are all members of your congregation. Chances are, they are well-liked in the community. How can one justify taking over some of the very activities that provide for the livelihood of other members?

I've wrestled with this one, and there is no easy answer; each situation will be fraught with its own peculiarities. The most caring approach I can



envision would be for a committee of the congregation to honestly discuss the considered changes with the funeral-home family.

There will always be a need for a mortuary, even if only a very part-time one, so you will want to reaffirm your appreciation for the role your undertaker plays in the community. But in view of the anticipated changes, would the mortician consider selling home-owner's insurance on the side (assuming no one else in the immediate area is already doing that for a vocation)? If so, the entire congregation might be willing to switch to the new "agent" in town. Or does the undertaker have a hobby and interest that could be converted to a money-making proposition? Loves flowers? A green-house-raising with church labor would be a gift of love and support.

Such issues will, of course, be different in every situation. It will be rare for a congregation to take over *all* funeral arrangements for any, let alone all, of its members. And it is rare for a mortician to rely on one congregation for all of his business. But if a local religious community is considering taking over, on a voluntary basis, some of the activities that would otherwise be done for profit by one of its members, discussion of the impact on the funeral-home family is important.

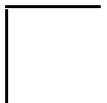


### **Getting a Funeral Committee Started**

**Determine your purpose.** There are probably as many good reasons to start a funeral committee as there are congregations. Your congregation must define why it would be a good idea to have a Funeral Committee. Some suggested purposes:

- By encouraging active involvement of the church members, religious rituals will be preserved and honored.
- By encouraging active involvement of the church, a spiritual focus can be maintained without the distraction or burden of costly material expenditures.
- With the active involvement of those in the larger church family, grieving survivors will find needed support.
- By having something physical to do, the sense of helplessness is diminished.

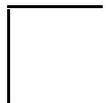
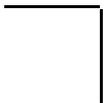
**Decide on your services.** In any group, there are likely to be limits to the time and effort that volunteers are able or willing to provide. The following



are all needed—to one degree or another—at a time of death. You must determine how many of these your funeral committee is able to offer and who will do them:

- **Procure the death certificate and permits.** Requires familiarity with the regulations covering the time and place to file such documents as well as the particulars needed for each document. Are persons available at any hour of the day or night to help with this? Could be done by the transport committee but not necessarily.
- **Transport the body.** Requires a truck, van, or station-wagon, plus two or more people in most cases. Are folks available to be called at any hour including working hours? A list of several should be available from which a parishioner can choose. Are additional people available to handle unique situations such as the death of a 300-lb. person on a second floor with no elevator?
- **Supply a plain pine box or other body container.** Where will you get one? Where will it be kept? Who is responsible for replacing one that is used and who will pay for it? One possibility would be for someone to donate a plain pine box to be stored at the church, to get the project going. When that is used, the family or friends of the family could replace it for the next person to use. You undoubtedly will have local artisans and woodworkers who may be of assistance, especially if a small-sized one were needed for a child, or an extra long or wide one were required. You may wish to check the FAMSA website for casket sources, too:  

[www.funerals.org/famsa/caskets.htm](http://www.funerals.org/famsa/caskets.htm)
- **Bathe the body and dress or shroud.** Where, home or church? Equipment? Who? While this probably would not be necessary in the case of an immediate cremation, it can be a loving ritual in all circumstances.
- **Shelter and care of the body before final disposition.** Is there a place in the church where a body may rest discreetly, without intruding on other church functions if the body will not be kept at home prior to the funeral? Is air conditioning readily available during summer seasons? Would the family appreciate having someone sit in vigil with the body prior to the funeral and final disposition, at home or at the church?

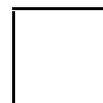


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- **Provide for the immediate needs of the family.** This might include house-cleaning, baby-sitting, shopping, scheduling the delivery of meals, or someone to simply sit and listen or answer the phone.
- **Notify and help others close to the family.** Phone calls may need to be made—to employers, to relatives, to friends. Notify others in writing at the request of the family. Pick up out-of-town guests and relatives arriving on public transportation. Provide lodging for out-of-town guests and local transportation while in town. See that pets of the deceased are being cared for, and that mail and utilities are being handled, if the deceased lived alone.
- **Set up a registry of funeral plans.** Members of the congregation, particularly those living alone, should name family members to be called in the event of death. Final disposition preferences should be explained—body donation, body burial, or cremation plus possibilities for disposition of cremated remains. Then register preferences along with additional information, such as the details for any service. A form—“Putting My House in Order”—can be obtained from a memorial society for this purpose.
- **Let others know in advance!** If caring for your own dead is a new concept in your area, and a funeral director will not be participating, it is important to visit—ahead of time—the hospitals, nursing homes, the local town clerks, and anyone else who might be involved. This will avoid delay from those who may not be familiar with the laws that permit people other than a mortician to care for the dead. Many may be skeptical, but it is usually out of their own concern to be responsible in their jobs rather than an effort to thwart your plans.

Establishment of a funeral committee need not be an all-or-nothing decision. In most states, by law, your congregation, working with the family, can provide all of the arrangements when a member dies, and that may be the ideal. But the involvement of the congregation as a support group can be greatly increased, with much benefit to the surviving family and friends, while still leaving some of the responsibilities to a cooperating funeral home. So be realistic in determining the ability to depend on volunteers in your group on an ongoing basis.

Whatever level of involvement you choose, you can expect great appreciation, not only from the family of the deceased but from the participating members. Perhaps the most useful thing to remember in making a commitment to care for the dead is that those of us who have done so—



without exception—would never choose to do it any other way. It is, indeed, a meaningful privilege.

