

Starting a Funeral Committee in Your Congregation

All major religions have established traditions and rituals for caring for the dead. In days past, the religious community was the focal point of activities at a time of death. Unfortunately, as we became a more dispersed society, we witnessed the emergence of for-profit “chapels,” and the funeral industry took over creating new “traditions.”

A few congregations, however, have continued their participatory heritage, and there appears to be a growing interest among others to return to active involvement. Spiritual beliefs can be readily honored while providing emotional support in such closeness.

“Caring for the dead is our final act of love.”

Lisa Carlson, author of *Caring for the Dead*.

The Jewish Burial Society in Chicago offers members the opportunity to have a traditional Jewish funeral for about \$1,400.00 excluding the grave plot. This includes ritual washing and caring for the deceased, a hand-sewn burial shroud, simple wooden casket, prayer books, candles, acknowledgment cards and the services of a licensed funeral director who has agreed to participate. This group has taken the stressful “arrangement conference” scene— where consumers may be pressured by the funeral home to buy all sorts of merchandise and services they may not want—and formally brought back the temple as the entity in charge.

“In death, we are all equal.”

Rabbi Arnold Goodman, author of *A Plain Pine Box*

Muslim tradition invokes the active participation of those who knew the deceased. In Toronto and Pittsburgh, local mosques took over the funeral preparations for members when they found their area funeral homes refused to accommodate their needs. Ritual washing of the body, and wrapping in a *kafan*—layers of white cloth— precede the quiet funeral procession to the cemetery, where the wrapped body (preferably without a casket or burial vault) is laid with the head of the deceased oriented toward Mecca.

*“It brings much *thawab* — reward of God — to wash the corpse free of charge. So is the case with payments for transporting corpses & digging graves.”*

From the *Islamic Preparation of the Deceased*

Christian teaching encourages church and family involvement. From the *Catholic Order of Christian Funerals*: “In the celebration of the funeral rites, the family members should be encouraged to take an active part. In areas where an undertaker carries out the preparation and transfer of the body, the pastor and other ministers are to ensure the undertaker appreciates 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 the undertakers, for example, the preparation and laying out of the body. Funeral rites should be

celebrated in an atmosphere of simple beauty, in a setting that encourages participation.”

“Christians should not live in debt—and that includes funeral debt.”

Larry Burkett, Christian Financial Concepts

How do you start? Finding a core of interested people is the first step. Then your group will need to decide on the level of help it can offer and the amount of time and work volunteers can provide. Will your group offer a free funeral, assisting the family in handling arrangements entirely without the help of a funeral director? What about during work hours? Or will you need to approach a mortician who won’t feel threatened by sharing at least some tasks with others.

“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.”

Ernest Morgan, Author, and member of the Yellow Springs Friends Meeting Burial Committee

Join your local Funeral Consumer Alliance affiliate. If there is no funeral consumer organization near you, consider joining Friends of FCA. Information is on the web at <http://funerals.org/> or call 1-800-765-0107.



The following list of tasks and services may help you decide your degree of involvement:

- procure the death certificate and burial-transit permit
- transport the body
- supply a simple wooden or cardboard casket
- provide a cloth “pall” for the casket (to diminish “show” and emphasize that we are all equal in death)
- bathe and prepare the body
- shelter and care for the body before final disposition or sit with the family as they do so
- provide for the family’s needs, including childcare, food preparation, cleaning, answer phones, etc.
- notify and help others close to the family; pick up relatives at the airport; offer a guest room to travelers
- participate in the service at the church, temple, or mosque
- dig the grave by hand
- establish a “scattering garden” on church or temple grounds for cremated remains
- offer workshops on end-of-life issues
- maintain a registry of funeral plans
- negotiate with funeral homes on behalf of the congregation
- conduct price surveys of area funeral homes, crematories, and cemeteries

Whether your group takes on all aspects of a funeral or just a few, all who participate will find that it is an opportunity to serve others in a loving way and a meaningful expression of their faith.

Resources

Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love by Lisa Carlson. Upper Access, 1998. 640 pages of funeral law for the consumer, including explicit and practical information for do-it-yourselfers. \$29.95

Dealing Creatively with Death: A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial by Ernest Morgan. Upper Access, 2000. 160 pages, with excellent suggestions for simplifying and personalizing services. Has plans for building a simple plywood casket. \$14.95

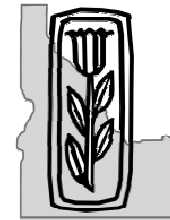
A Plain Pine Box: A Return to Simple Jewish Funerals and Eternal Traditions by Rabbi Arnold Goodman. KTAV Publishing, 1981. 123 pages, describing the project at a Minneapolis temple where members were offered a free funeral. \$8.95

Simple and Cheap, My Father Said by Josephine Pesaresi, daughter of Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black. A delightful and charming account of how the family was finally able to arrange for a plain pine box at the time of the Justice’s death. Pamphlet also on-line under “For Your Personal Information.”

All materials are available through Funeral Consumers Alliance, with a discount for members. Check our on-line bookstore: <http://www.funerals.org> or call 800-765-0107.

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**FUNERAL CONSUMERS ALLIANCE
OF IDAHO, INC.**

*PO Box 1919
Boise Idaho 83701*

telephone 208-426-0032
email fcai@fortboise.org
web: fcai.fortboise.org
www.funerals.org