

# A family undertaking: Caring for our dead

by [Holly Stevens](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

When Harriet Ericson died in January 2007 at age 93, she went to the grave in the same manner in which she lived her final years—lovingly tended by her son Rodger Ericson of Austin, Texas. A former U.S. Air Force chaplain and Lutheran pastor (ELCA), Ericson bathed, anointed and dressed his mother's body, then laid it in a casket he had built himself and named "hope chest" to reflect the family's faith in the resurrection. The next day, with the help of his daughters and grandsons, he lifted her casketed remains into the bed of his pickup truck and secured the precious cargo for a road trek to Minnesota, where a family grave plot was waiting.

Except for the preparation of the grave, Ericson took care of all the details that would usually be handed to a commercial mortician. Ericson was, in effect, his mother's funeral director—and it was all completely legal.

Referred to as home funerals by most who practice them, these homespun arrangements are protected by law in 44 states. "A home funeral can help people gently integrate the death into their lives and faith," says home funeral educator Donna Belk, who helped Ericson prepare for his mother's passing. "When the body stays at home for up to a few days, family and friends remain connected to the entire process; the gradual changes that occur in the body over this time frame coincide with the family's adjustment to its loss." Even in the six states that require the involvement of a commercial provider—Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska and New York—some families have been able to work with morticians so as to participate more fully in the process.

The term *home funeral* does not mean that a funeral ritual is necessarily held in the home. It refers to an approach to the entire process from the moment of death to final disposition:

A home funeral is a noncommercial, family-centered response to death that involves the family and its social community in the care and preparation of the body for burial or cremation and/or in planning and carrying out related rituals or ceremonies and/or in the burial or cremation itself. A home funeral may occur entirely within the family home or not. It is differentiated from the institutional funeral by its emphasis on minimal, noninvasive care and preparation of the body; by its reliance on the family's own social networks for assistance and support; and by the relative or total absence of commercial funeral providers in its proceedings. (From *Undertaken with Love: A Home Funeral Guide for Congregations and Communities*, by the Home Funeral Committee Manual Publishing Group.)

A home funeral can include a religious ceremony in a church. The family may choose to have the body present at the ceremony or not, and may have the casket open or closed. For Christians, a home funeral can address the same religious purposes served by other funeral arrangements carried out within a religious setting: to treat the body with reverence and honesty, to proclaim the hope of resurrection and our risen life in Christ, to commend the deceased into God's care, and to mark our common bond with all who are alive with us and who have died before us.

A home funeral protects the sanctity of the process by removing the material pressures that have shaped American funeral etiquette since the Civil War, when affluent families began paying embalming surgeons to find their fallen sons on the battlefield and inject them with enough arsenic for the body to be preserved for the trip home. At that point a commercial industry began to grow, one that was beholden less to the precepts of the church than to the material and seemingly insatiable whims of consumers—even at life's end.

Is it any wonder that common funeral myths point back to an industry that makes its profits by catering to and encouraging material impulses? In my work as a funeral consumer advocate, families tell me time and again that they had no idea that embalming rarely is required by law or that they can buy an inexpensive casket from a source other than the funeral home or even construct their own.

"I have no problems with people requesting and using the services of funeral homes as long as morticians are not pushing or deceiving the grieving family into expenses

that are not necessary,” Ericson told me. He said that an employee of Service Corporation International, the nation’s largest funeral home chain, told him that every cemetery in America requires an outer liner for cremated remains. When Ericson responded that he knew that was not so, the salesperson qualified his answer: “Well, not every cemetery, but yes, every cemetery in the country that SCI owns.”

Religious leaders are often lured into complacency by the promotional favors they receive from funeral directors. In his book *Does This Mean You’ll See Me Naked?* (Rooftop Publishing), funeral director Robert Webster recalls that a former boss, also a funeral director, would welcome a new minister to town with a pen and pencil set. On the next visit, the funeral director would deliver tickets to Cincinnati Reds games; at other times, he’d press a crisp \$100 bill into the pastor’s hand or send a fruit basket. “These people help us to stay in business,” Webster’s boss told him. “Go out of your way to treat them well.”

In a home funeral involving a parishioner, the pastor can take the lead in helping families integrate the care of the body, the funeral ceremony and the interpretation of the death into a religious context. By contrast, in a typical arrangement with a funeral home, says Ericson, “It was not uncommon for me as a pastor to receive \$75 for my services—visitation of the family at the time of death, arranging the religious service with the family, preparing the bulletin, getting the church in order, preparing a personalized yet theologically sound sermon, and conducting the burial/committal service—while the mortician charged an extra \$75 to have the service at my church.”

In my faith community, New Garden Friends Meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, a committee assists families in our congregation that want to care for their own dead. We’ve identified our legal rights and responsibilities in assisting with home funerals. We bring the simple, noninvasive skills involved in caring for the body at home. We bring ease and acquired wisdom to the process, offering families an option for spiritual and emotional closure at life’s end.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, the Islamic Burial Society of North America teaches groups of Muslim men and women to care for their dead in keeping with the precepts of the Qur’an. Because Muslim and Orthodox Jewish burial practices are similar, the project has fostered friendships between members of the two faiths as they work together to return death rituals to their religious communities. Death care

has a way of reminding us both of our mutual human limitations and of the place of faith as a source for hope and sustenance in the face of great loss.

Granted, even if most families knew that in most states they may care for their own dead without the involvement of a licensed funeral director, home funerals would be unlikely to put any professional undertakers out of work anytime soon. Americans have become so removed from their dead that even in a home funeral they hesitate to touch the body. The practice requires more involvement from the family, although the support of an experienced congregation can greatly ease the load. Occasionally, circumstances prohibit a vigil and make a home funeral impractical.

Most people who have experienced home funerals tell me that they found the process to be enormously healing; it enabled them to participate creatively in honoring the one who died and to integrate the experience into the context of their faith in ways that commercial funeral homes and crematories cannot replicate. As Ericson says, "Home funerals mean less traipsing behind the undertaker, who is geared toward efficiency and profit."

I see more faith communities embracing home funerals and other less commercial practices at life's end. Some church-owned cemeteries have dropped vault requirements to allow ecologically minded parishioners to simplify their return to dust after death. In the Pocono Mountains, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church leases a portion of its forests to an organization that creates family burial sites for cremated remains at the roots of selected hardwood trees.

For the first time since embalming surgeons began to set up shop on Civil War battlegrounds, Americans are reassessing how funeral practices relate to congregational life. The growing interest in home funerals and other natural end-of-life practices offers religious institutions the opportunity to support alternatives that are embedded more deeply in community and resistant to commercial culture. The home funeral movement calls on religious leaders to honor an etiquette that is simpler, more affordable and ultimately more sacred.