

Graveside: The best and worst of ministry

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

The articles in this issue on funerals set me to thinking about my own experience and the changes I have witnessed in funerals. In my first two congregations I never conducted a funeral in the church itself. Every funeral was held in a funeral home, and every funeral was followed by a graveside interment and committal. That meant taking a ride in the front seat of the hearse, making small talk with the funeral director, and being part of a long procession of cars led by a county sheriff on a motorcycle. Now the funerals I conduct are in the church, where they belong. Only rarely is there a casket present or a graveside committal. In downtown Chicago the last funeral home closed several years ago.

I'm not the first minister to observe that presiding at funerals represents both the best and worst of ministry. There is no greater honor than to be with a family during the sickness and death of one of its members, to pray at the bedside, to talk with people about life and death and to help a family plan a funeral service. The church is never more authentically the church than when it gathers to give thanks for the life of one of its own and commend his or her life to God's eternal love in the promise of the resurrection.

Ministers encounter many other approaches to funerals. In my study not long ago, adult sons and daughters began planning their father's funeral service by saying to me: "Let's keep the religious stuff to a minimum, Reverend. We just want to give him a good sendoff."

All ministers have stories about bizarre (and, after the fact, funny) experiences. I recall the time a funeral assistant, playing the requested recorded music, set the player at 78 rpm for a 33 rpm record and startled the mourners with a version of George Beverly Shea singing "In the Garden" that sounded like Donald Duck. I remember the woman who never forgave me for not agreeing to place a Cincinnati Reds cap over the hole where her father's ashes were to be deposited while the

cemetery carillon played “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” I recall the unspeakably sad argument that turned into a full-fledged fight at the open casket between the deceased’s wife and ex-wife.

Reading the articles in this issue, I realized that my own mind has changed about funeral directors. It was fashionable a few decades ago to view them as greedy purveyors of products and services that no one needs. My experience has been different. I am grateful to have known a funeral director who conducted his business with dignity and integrity, who saw his job as a ministry and who treated grieving families with compassion, patience and kindness. I have discovered that there are many like him.