

Christian Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Christian Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Christianity and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Christian death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Christianity, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a local minister, pastor, or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Christians experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Christians prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Christianity and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Christians believe that death is not the end of existence, but is rather a transition in which the soul goes to be reunited with God. The belief in Jesus is a critical aspect of Christianity which separates it from other Abrahamic religions like Judaism. The core of their belief lies in accepting Jesus as their savior and acknowledging that he died for their sins, allowing humans to be redeemed in the sight of God. Christians hope that after death, their soul will go to heaven to be with God. The acceptance of Jesus as one's savior is necessary in order to enter the celestial kingdom of God. Christians believe that in heaven, there is no suffering or pain, and that they will be reunited with their loved ones who have also passed on. This can be achieved by living life on earth as a good Christian and honoring certain traditions that are believed to assure a peaceful afterlife. Certain rituals like baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, marriage, and funeral rites are all meant to encourage a person to live a more Christian life which will help them to secure a spot in heaven.

Another important part of Christian theology around death is the belief in resurrection. According to the Christian text the Book of Revelation, a day of judgement will come, when all the souls who have died will be resurrected. They will be judged based on their lives and how well they upheld Christian values. God will then determine whether or not they will go on to enjoy an eternal afterlife in his kingdom. Because of this, some Christians feel strongly about how the body should be cared for leading up to, and after death. However, Christianity is an incredibly diverse religion with many different denominations, which is reflected in how they care for their dead.

Resources For Christian Theology on Death:

- <https://www.christianity.org.uk/article/life-after-death>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/where-do-christians-go-when-they-die>
- <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/core-christian-beliefs/what-happens-when-you-die.html>

Preparing For Death

Because of the diversity of Christian faiths, how an individual should prepare for death is dependent on many factors like denomination, geographic region, family tradition, and personal belief system. If a person has a relationship with a local church, reaching out to their leadership team or pastor may be a good way to support someone nearing the end of their life. A religious leader will be able to help the dying and their family determine what kinds of Christian traditions they would like to honor and they will be able to facilitate any last rites that might be appropriate.

The Protestant tradition usually comforts the dying by reciting prayers at the bedside, anointing the person, and performing a communion. Catholics have a special ritual called the “last rites” or “sacrament of the sick” that is done by a Catholic priest at the end of life. Contact a Catholic church and ask for a priest who can help conduct and perform these ceremonies for a loved one. There are many prayers and hymns which center death and may bring comfort to the dying. Reading the Holy Bible and reflecting on specific passages on death, suffering, and the promise of an afterlife are also ways that families may choose to care for their dying.

Simply gathering close family and loved ones is a good way to support Christians who are facing death. They may wish to express regrets, important memories, fears, hopes, and gratitude when reflecting on their life and on death. It may be helpful to encourage them to focus on their relationship with God and Jesus and to reflect on their personal spirituality. Providing a listening ear and maintaining empathy are often the most meaningful ways to comfort someone facing death, regardless of their specific beliefs.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Christian and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/christianity/>
- <https://www.elizabethturnage.com/death-and-resurrection/living-like-were-dying-how-christians-can-prepare-for-death>

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

After the moment of death, a close family member may close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. Loved ones may want to sit with the body to say prayers, final goodbyes, and to grieve their passing. Often, Christians will wish to make arrangements with a funeral home before the passing. If this is the case, the funeral director can be contacted so that they can arrange for transport of the body. Once the body is transported to the funeral home, they will usually assume full responsibility over the body, and will prepare it before the funeral.

Some families may prefer to care for the body themselves and keep it in a family home until the funeral. This is becoming increasingly normalized and actually dates back to ancient Christian methods of caring for the dead. In the ancient Mediterranean, the family of the deceased would care for the body as a final act of love and kindness. It is also believed that caring for loved ones who have died helps those who are living to process and mourn the loss. If the family wishes to care for the body independently, they may want to make a transport plan ahead of time. For more information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Burials, Cremations, and Other Options

Historically, Christians have chosen to bury their dead rather than cremate them. This is due to the belief in resurrection which requires the existence of a physical body in order for it to take place. Because Christian funerals sometimes don't happen immediately following the death, if the deceased is going to be buried, they are usually embalmed. Embalming is done at a funeral home. Embalming also allows the family and funeral guests to have a viewing of the body if they choose.

In modern times, many Christians wish to be cremated. Cremation is accepted in many Christian churches and allows the family to memorialize the ashes in an urn or other vessel if they wish. There are now many options similar to cremation that Christians may prefer, such as human composting and water cremation. Human composting and water cremation allow the body of the deceased to be converted

into nutrient rich fertilizer. The fertilizer can then be used to grow trees, plants, and gardens or donated to conservation projects. For more information on how to hold Christian funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on human composting and water cremation.

Environmentally Friendly Funeral Practices and Green Burials

If Christians are interested in burial practices that are more environmentally friendly, green or natural burials might be a good option. Many Christians believe that having a natural burial, which allows for the body to naturally decompose and be returned to the earth, is a more Christ-like option, which allows people to enact stewardship over the land. While the body cannot be embalmed for natural burials, there are many ways the body can be preserved until after the funeral. For more information on how to hold Christian funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on “green burials”. Combining green burial practices with the beliefs held by Christians can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202310/have-christians-forgotten-how-to-care-for-the-dead/>
- <https://www.shepherdingthoughts.com/post/how-should-christians-bury-their-dead>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-cremate-their-loved-ones>
- Green Burials
 - <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/green-burial-act-faith>
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/10/13/conservation-cemeteries-catholic-death-burial-243949/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>

Christian Funerals

Funeral Arrangements and Attire

Christian funerals range in their formality, from very casual to extremely official. The kind of funeral depends on the wishes of the deceased, the preference of the family, and the individual circumstances of the situation. Funerals can be held at a church, family home, somewhere in nature, at a funeral home, or graveside. Choosing to have a funeral in a family home honors the ancient tradition of how historic Christians have honored their dead. Finding a funeral home that honors the family's wishes to care for their own dead while providing logistical support around cremation, burials, and transport can be helpful.

Some families might hold a pre-funeral vigil to provide an opportunity for close family and friends to spend time together and grieve the loss before the funeral. They may read poems, share stories, and sing songs. If there is a body viewing, it often happens during this vigil and may be reserved for those who were closest to the deceased.

The funeral serves the purpose of guiding the soul of the deceased to heaven and to provide support for the family. Rituals and funeral practices usually center around faith in God and remembrance of the person's life. The funeral is typically led by a pastor or minister but can also be led by a family member. Immediate family and close friends might share eulogies, stories, and expressions of grief to the congregation. Usually the service will include hymns, prayers, and music. The music might be religiously inspired or songs that are chosen in remembrance of the person who has passed. The body may be present at the service, or not.

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in dark colors like black, navy, and dark blue. Most families accept and appreciate flowers being sent to honor the dead. Other gestures such as cards and donations to charities are thoughtful as well.

Burial Proceedings

If the body is to be buried, after the funeral, it will be transported to the chosen site and the rest of the congregation will gather there. At a cemetery or burial ground, someone may lead another series of prayers or say some final words in

remembrance of the person. Then, the body is lowered into the grave in a casket or coffin unless it is a green burial. A pastor or minister might perform what is called the “rite of committal” which is a final religious offering of peace, comfort, and hope and a promise of eternal life. Some mourners might wish to sprinkle some soil into the grave as a final goodbye.

Alternative Options Post-Funeral

If the body is being cremated, (or something similar), it will be transferred to the facility after the funeral. The ashes will be returned to the family who may wish to memorialize them in an urn or scatter them somewhere that was meaningful to the person.

Resources on Christian Funerals:

- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/christianity/>
- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/christian-funeral/>
- <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202310/have-christians-forgotten-how-to-care-for-the-dead/>
- <https://www.downandconnor.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Rite-of-Committal-Family.pdf>
- <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/fr-ca/memorial-services/funeral-traditions/christian-funeral-hymns>

Christian Mourning Period and Grief

The way Christian families and communities chose to grieve is extremely personal and should be tailored to best serve their individual needs. Some may want to be surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer private meditation and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Christians to mourn their dead, Christian religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

After the funeral ends, some mourners might want to hold a reception or wake to continue grieving in community by gathering in a private residence or home. There, they may read scripture together, pray, and share memories of the deceased. There will often be food and drink at the gathering. The community usually supports the immediate family in mourning by cooking meals or bringing food, helping with childcare, performing daily tasks like cleaning, and offering to listen and be a source of comfort.

Christians do grieve the loss of a loved one, but often find comfort in the hope that they are with God. Although their physical body is no longer on Earth, Christians believe that their soul lives on and is often present with their living family members. It is okay during the mourning process to feel both sorrow and hope. Expressing difficult feelings are helpful in processing the complexity of losing a loved one.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls, visits, flowers, food, and cards are appropriate. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Christian Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://gentlereformation.com/2019/12/20/how-to-grieve-as-a-christian/>
- <https://thevillagechurch.net/resources/articles/learning-how-to-grieve>
- <https://www.thecatholicspirit.com/faith/focus-on-faith/ask-father-mike/how-do-i-grieve-as-a-christian/>

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Christian Theology on Death:

- <https://www.christianity.org.uk/article/life-after-death>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/where-do-christians-go-when-they-die>
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- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-cremate-their-loved-ones>
- Green Burials
 - <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/green-burial-act-faith>
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/10/13/conservation-cemeteries-catholic-death-burial-243949/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>

Resources on Christian Funerals:

- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/christianity/>

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/christian-funeral/>
- <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202310/have-christians-forgotten-how-to-care-for-the-dead/>
- <https://www.downandconnor.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Rite-of-Committal-Family.pdf>
- <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/fr-ca/memorial-services/funeral-traditions/christian-funeral-hymns>

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- <https://thevillagechurch.net/resources/articles/learning-how-to-grieve>
- <https://www.thecatholicspirit.com/faith/focus-on-faith/ask-father-mike/how-do-i-grieve-as-a-christian/>