

Graceful presence: Funeral hospitality

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

Those of us who work in the church know how trivial, vain and self-serving the “institutional” church (as we used to call it in seminary—as if there were any other kind) can be. But we also wonder what we would do without the church. How could you celebrate Christmas without the church? How could you wake up in the dark of Easter morning without the church? Where else would one turn when one’s spirit is assaulted and one’s emotions are raw from loss if not to the church and the people who are the church?

My wife’s father died at the age of 97 in a nursing home in a city where none of his family lives any longer. A real patriarch, he had three children, 11 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren, most of whom converged in Pennsylvania for the funeral, the committal service and, a wonderful byproduct, a brief family reunion.

A major part of the proceedings was the Lutheran church in which he and his wife, who has been gone for almost 30 years, were faithful members. When driving became more problematic and he moved to a retirement facility, he stopped attending the church and became a part of the worshipping community at the Presbyterian Home. After he died everyone agreed that the funeral service should be in Trinity Lutheran Church, even though he had not been back for years and most of his contemporaries were gone.

Could the pastor preside at the service? Of course. Could we have the services of an organist and could we sing his favorite hymn? Yes. Any chance that we could have a light lunch catered for our large family between the committal service and the funeral service? Certainly, and a group in the church will prepare it for you. Might we use the downstairs of the church after the service to meet guests over coffee and cookies? No problem.

So that is how it happened, much the way it happens every day in Christian communities all over the world, unremarkable except for the fact that he was our

great-grandfather, grandfather, father, father-in-law.

The hospitality was, I thought, pure grace, an act of simple, eloquent Christian love. The tables were set, and the napkins were linen, not paper. There were small sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and vegetables, a relish tray, chocolate chip cookies and amazing tiny cream puffs, and coffee, regular and decaf. Five women and two men were responsible. Their minister served as our pastor, and was obviously pleased that the church could serve in this unique, important way.

A similar cadre of amazing people cared for my father-in-law at the Presbyterian Home with great kindness and compassion—for him and for all of us trying to cope with the situation from a distance.

I tried to find words to thank the kitchen volunteers and the Presbyterian Home staff. We will write checks to both institutions. We were deeply, profoundly grateful for the church, and we cannot imagine that 48-hour period without it.