

Burial and cremation services in Sweden

Introduction

The first of January 2000 marked a significant change in the relationship between the Swedish State and the church of Sweden. The state church system that had been in existence since the 16th century was abolished. Furthermore, as a result of the reform, parishes and associations of parishes were no longer afforded local authority status and the rest of the Church of Sweden also left the public sector.

Society has a fundamental responsibility to provide efficient burial and cremation services (funeral activities/burial administration) for everyone who is registered as resident in Sweden. The Church of Sweden has been the principal for the greater part of the country's burial and cremation system for a long time. The state-church reform has not led to any changes in this respect, indeed the Church of Sweden parishes and associations of parishes still bear the major responsibility as principals for the system. This means that the Church of Sweden has been assigned a very important public service. Burial and cremation services are regulated by legislation, primarily by the Act of Burials (1990:1144). Provisions can also be found in the Act concerning Ancient Monuments and Finds from 1988 (1988:950), the Planning and Building Act of 1987 (1987:10) and the Ordinance of Burials (1990:1147).

Chief responsibility as principal

As far as burial and cremation services are concerned, Sweden is divided biographically into a number of administrative districts. Within each district, there should be a burial/cremation service principal. The parishes and associations of parishes of the Church of Sweden are still, despite the reform, the principal for the greater part of burial and cremation system throughout the country. However, the government may decide that the local authority should be the principal. Such decisions have been made concerning the local authorities of Stockholm and Tranås.

The principal shall provide and maintain public burial-places for all those who are registered as resident within that particular administrative district. Special grave plots are to be provided for those who do not belong to a Christian denomination. In the event of the deceased being registered as a resident of the administrative district, the principal shall also provide the services described below free of charge to the estate of the deceased.

A grave plot or equivalent at a public burial-place for 25 years. After this term has elapsed, the principal may levy a fee for renewing the title to the grave. Each principal shall provide special grave plots in his own or a neighbouring

administrative district for those not belonging to a Christian denomination. The principal is also responsible for producing a map of the graves at burial-places or establishing a grave register, which includes information on the deceased such as name, date of death and domicile.

Interment including opening the grave, refilling it and preparing the opened grave. These measures are implemented in conjunction with the interment of new remains or new ashes.

Certain transportation of a deceased's remains from that time the principal takes over responsibility from, for example, a medical care establishment, until the time of interment.

Cremation of the remains. Cremation may only be carried out in crematoria. Crematoria may only be run by those responsible for public burial-places or by a parish that is not the principal. The crematoria keep a record of cremations carried out.

Premises for storage and showing of the remains. This responsibility applies from when the deceased has been handed over to the principal from. For example, a medical care establishment, and up to the time of interment.

Premises for a funeral service to take place without religious icons.

Registered residents who do not belong to the church of Sweden

Special rules have been established to safeguard the interests of people who do not belong to the Church of Sweden. For instance, the county administrative boards shall appoint special representatives with the task of monitoring the burial and cremation services in the parishes/associations of parishes who are the principals for the system. This representative has the right of access to all documentation concerning the burial and cremation system and the right to participate in meetings at which burial/cremation issues are discussed. As mentioned above, special grave plots shall be provided for those who do not belong to a Christian denomination. Parishes/associations of parishes who are the principal shall consult with the in form representatives of those who live in the administrative district but who do not belong to a Christian denomination regarding issues concerning the administration of these special grave plots. Furthermore, premises unadorned with religious icons shall be provided for funeral services. The burial fee, see below, are to be fixed by the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency.

Burial fee

All those who are registered as resident in Sweden must pay a fee to cover the costs of burial or cremation (a burial fee). The fee is income-related and varies depending on the costs incurred by the principal for the burial/cremation service. When a parish or association of parishes is the principal for the service, it stipulates the burial fee for those who belong to the church of Sweden, whereas the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency fixes the rate for those who do not belong to the Church. On the other hand, when a local authority is the principal, it always stipulates the burial fee itself. The fee is intended to cover the principal's costs for the service but not those of the fee-payer's own burial.

Private denominations or foundations may, after being granted permission from the county administrative board, establish their own burial-places. A nationwide clearing system reimburses such denominations for the costs of the services that are covered by the burial fee.

Death certificates and written attestations as to the cause of death

Upon a person's death in Sweden, a doctor without delay shall issue a death certificate and a written attestation as to the cause of death.

Burial and cremation customs

Both earth burial and cremation occur, but cremation is the most common custom in Sweden. In both cases, the site of burial is often marked with a memorial stone or cross bearing the name, date of birth and year of death of the deceased. In addition to these customs, somewhere in the burial-place there might also be so-called "urn graves", where cinerary urns are buried but without any cross or stone above ground, and/or memorial graves, where ashes are spread. Cinerary urns may also be stored in columbaria.

The remains or ashes of a deceased person may only be buried or spread at public or private burial-places. Other customs may occur, however, in exceptional circumstances and after a decision by the county administrative board. Spreading ashes at sea is an example of such a custom.

If the wishes of the deceased to be cremated or interred are known, they should be abided by as far as possible. If the deceased's family cannot agree, the principal may, upon request, act as mediator between the parties in disagreement. If consensus cannot be reached, the principal must refer the matter to the county administrative board.

Before interment can be effected, the tax authorities must issue a certificate authorising the interment or cremation of the remains of the deceased.

The removal of interred remains

Remains of ashes buried at a burial-place may not be moved from their burial-site and buried elsewhere. The reason for this is out of respect for the wishes of the deceased and out of respect for the sanctity of the grave. Authorisation for removal may be granted if there is particular reason and as long as it has been made clear where the new burial-site will be. The burial service principal adjudicates the issue of removal on.

Export and import of remains of ashes

Remains and ashes may be taken abroad for burial. To transport remains, a pass or permit is needed issued by the tax authorities and to transport ashes abroad, a copy of the relevant excerpt from the cremation records must be submitted to the customs. When the remains of a person who has died outside the country have been brought into Sweden, the burial organiser must request permission to inter or cremate them. The police authorities in the district where the remains are to be interred or cremated deal with the permit application.

Burial-places for still-born babies

A grave plot for a still-born baby who has died after the end of the twenty-second week of pregnancy shall be arranged at a public burial-place, provided the mother is registered as resident within that particular administrative district. A grave plot shall also be organised for still-born babies who have died prior to the twenty second week of pregnancy if the mother requests it and a death certificate signed by a doctor is submitted to the principal.

Title to a grave

A title to a grave is the right established when the administrator of a public burial-place puts a determined plot of land at the disposal of someone for interment. The state of the deceased person decides who will own the title to the grave. Only in exceptional circumstances may the title to a grave be granted to a legal person such as a foundation. A title to a grave may be time-bound, at least 15 and no more than 50 years, or may be unlimited, i.e. for ever. A person who has acquired a title to a grave, had a right to the grave plot for as long as she/he is prepared to be the titleholder. When the title period has expired, the title may be renewed. It is incumbent on the titleholder to keep the grave plot in good order.

Funeral ceremony

The funeral ceremony, whatever forms it may take, and the costs for it are responsibility of the individual. The ceremony can be of a religious or secular nature.

The 1988 Act concerning Ancient Monuments and Finds (1988:950)

The country's burial-places often possess a certain cultural historical value and frequently constitute an important part of the ecclesiastical cultural environment. The above mentioned act provides for the care and maintenance of burial-places so that their cultural historical value does not diminish or become distorted. This protection also applies to burial-places such as individual gravestones, grave ornamentation etc. A burial-place that was established before 1940 may not be extended nor substantially changed in any way without permission from the county administrative board.